

**making it  
happen**

*a toolkit for Youth Dance*



# HARROGATE YOUTH DANCE

Written by Ruth Johnson

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Ruth delivered Harrogate Youth Dance alongside fellow Dance Artist Katy Hewison.



Image Credit: Matty Joplin

## WHAT DREW YOU TO THE RURAL STEPS PROJECT?

Initially I came to the project as I knew I wanted to ignite some Youth Dance activity within Harrogate. I had seen that, although there are many private dance schools offering more traditional dance classes, there wasn't a youth dance scene present in the town or the surrounding areas of Knaresborough and Ripon. Dance still felt somewhat elitist and perhaps formal and I was interested in providing dance for all, not just to those with previous experience.

## GETTING STARTED

We began the project through marketing and delivering taster sessions in February 2019. Our initial work began by tapping into the contacts we already had in the area. Luckily both Katy and I had worked or studied at quite a few of the local high schools and the college. Providing taster sessions to those organisations seemed a good place to begin. It is always good to consider who you already know in the arts community and hopefully, if you have delivered good work, had integrity and generally been a nice person, then these people will want to help you, if they can, when you set up a new venture. I also met with a contact who had successfully run a big youth group in North Yorkshire in the past and she gave some useful and practical advice about her understanding of how to start up a new group in the area.

We contacted as many people as possible both by email and phone and tried to make appointments to chat to relevant people involved in the arts in the local area. We secured tasters in two high schools who offer dance in the curriculum, the college who have a performing arts department and also had great support from North Yorkshire Council Youth groups in the more underprivileged areas of Harrogate.

One notable point is that, even though we tried fairly extensively to offer free dance workshops out to schools and community groups, it wasn't an easy sell. We naively thought schools would love the idea of a free workshop with professional artists but they didn't all jump to book us in! I think this is mainly because, although schools do want to offer interesting and diverse activities to their pupils, they are busy and deadlines for curriculum work are tight and rigid. I think another issue is it is difficult to get past the office admin email addresses and find the right person. I think email marketing works but it is a slow job and schools are nervous about letting in a newly formed group they have never heard of. Consider how to make your marketing material direct, eye catching and clear about what you are offering. A long-winded letter (which I think ours was looking back!) would get pushed aside. We set up Facebook and Instagram pages and an email account for the group and met a few times in this initial period to plan and delegate tasks.

## TASTER SESSIONS

The Ignite sessions were between 1.5 – 2 hrs in duration. The structure varied depending on the group and level of previous experience. We delivered a more technically challenging dance session for the school who delivered GCSE Dance and made it simpler and used more popular music for the youth club. The college session was more task based as they were predominantly on acting courses and do not dance. Consider who you are delivering to; one size does not fit all for taster sessions. You must be ready to adapt and reconfigure during a session based on who is there.

The main focus is to ensure participants are enjoying it and that they understand what you are offering after this one-off session. I just took every session as an opportunity to be nice, meet some new people, have a chat about Youth Dance and what that might be and leave them with the details of how to contact us to attend further sessions. The overriding message was that this was an exciting new opportunity, it included them and that the focus was about learning new dance technique and developing their creative voices.

*"Consider who you are delivering to; one size does not fit all for taster sessions. You must be ready to adapt and reconfigure during a session based on who is there."*

## FORMING THE GROUP

By Easter we were set up logistically and were able to begin weekly sessions. The Create stage was still a free experience for the participants to try out the group but now ran at the same venue, time and day that the regular Sustain sessions would be held. We offered 3 free sessions to try before the term started. It could have been done as a full day workshop during school holidays which I think may have worked equally well although some participants may have seen attending for an hours taster as less of a commitment than a full day of dance. These sessions were a snapshot of typical regular session content. We kept things light and fun; a mix of introductory games to form relationships leading to warm up/technical exercises leading to creative tasks in both a full group and in partners/trios.

We created a really nice atmosphere and hope we made everyone feel welcome and safe. The venue was beautiful and very light and open and had a great wood floor, so this helped to make it a good all round atmosphere. We asked for feedback after the sessions to inform future plans. We varied the content every week but the focus was definitely on relationship development and having a go rather than tough physical routines and technique. This worked well but again, consider who is attending and adjust the levels of technique/creative tasks based on what they are enjoying and engaging with.

We continued to promote through social media and produced business cards and flyers which we distributed to the whole of Harrogate town centre. The venue circulated details about us in their parish magazine which was distributed widely to local homes.

These initial sessions were well attended and we developed a really lovely relationship with a number of the participants who joined us for the term ahead, albeit a small but dedicated group of 3-4 girls. We reflected on these first two stages to acknowledge what worked well and what we may do moving forward. Personally this was the most challenging element as Katy and I hadn't worked together before and so we needed to work out what was best for the participants and at the same time develop a relationship and rapport between the two artists delivering. If co-teaching, you need to consider how to structure sessions so the participants are getting the most out of their time and that the teaching flows in a succinct manner.



## MOVING FORWARD

The participants who returned got a lot from the sessions and enjoyed the content, but the numbers were low. Whilst this is to be expected with a new group, I found this a challenge as it is much harder to generate that sense of team, of excitement and working as a group when there are 2/3/4 dancers. The venue was beautiful but noticeably big so it sometimes was a bit awkward with 2 dancers and 2 teachers! I think you work through this though and we saw the ratio as an unusual treat where you can really engage with each member of the group. During that first term we had a session with Gecko Theatre. The participants really enjoyed working with Gecko and it was a lovely opportunity to work alongside the new group as participant rather than facilitator, allowing some really beautiful creative ideas to emerge. It was also great to be able to publicise that our group were having a session with a professional performance company and that any new members were welcome to join in this one-off workshop. Trying to find new angles when promoting the group is useful.

As the term progressed the group developed technical skills and confidence in creative tasks. You could see their own movement styles emerging. They felt comfortable to begin expressing ideas and thoughts and we kept that dialogue open, checking in with how they were, how they found the sessions and ideas they may have for the future. We were continually sending that message that this was their youth dance group. We devised a bank of small sections of material which we began to slot together to create an informal piece. It was the anniversary of the first man on the moon and the church where we were based was housing a giant moon installation that coincided with our end of term celebration. I thought it may be nice to tap into another creative event that was taking place in the venue. We held a family sharing of the piece, shared some cake and took a group trip next door to visit the installation which was a really lovely celebration for the end of the first term!

Returning in the autumn term, we gained new participants who heard about the group on Facebook and via word of mouth but sadly lost two long-standing members as their circumstances had changed, meaning numbers remained very low. I kept advertising online and tried to connect with the council to try to engage with young people who were NEET or in care and looking for activities. I also made contact again with the new students from Harrogate College.

Obviously the relationship building and forming of a group had to be restarted and this was again the focus for the sessions but most members were of a higher technical ability than the last group so this brought more opportunities to push the movement delivery to a higher level. We worked towards a performance piece for Dance It Up North in October 2019, using a mixture of tutor-led choreography and participant creative content. The piece became a duet and I felt the two dancers really enjoyed the experience and gained a lot through it being a duet rather than group piece. It was hard to generate the feel of a Youth Dance Company and that collective passion for performance a group gets when it is not actually a group yet. I think the two members really felt this, yet they did an amazing job performing and it was wonderful to see Harrogate Youth Dance on a professional stage.

*"Trying to find new angles when promoting the group is useful"*

## REFLECTING AND THE FUTURE

The project in terms of regular weekly sessions came to a natural pause and, whilst I am not 100% sure the Harrogate area has a particular need for contemporary Youth Dance, I would say for anyone looking to explore this, there is certainly a thriving and long standing dance community which you could tap into.

The social media channels remain open and I populate these with information and opportunities in dance. I am open to maintaining a dialogue with organisations and individuals about reinstating the sessions and the group if this became relevant and viable in some form in the future.

On reflection, when looking at if a youth group is viable in the Harrogate area of North Yorkshire, I would consider the following:

**Need** - I had not anticipated how many privately owned dance schools were in the area and how many of the local residents attend on multiple nights during the week. I also did not appreciate that three schools offered dance within the high school curriculum. Although the youth dance offer is and was always intended to be different and complimentary to the private dance schools or school experience, I believe most of the young people interested in contemporary dance already had full weeks and simply did not have the time to attend anything new. Also, Leeds has such an amazing contemporary dance offer and for those who are very serious about developing as a contemporary dancer, they can access Leeds in very little time.

**Advertising and marketing** - Although we invested a lot of time in to this, it still needed to be bigger and this takes further resources. Marketing should be wide, consistent and specifically targeted. I discovered that "only mums use Facebook, we all use snapchat and Instagram!", but finding out this sort of information from the people you want attending is great as you know where to push advertising spend and effort.

**Rural area** - North Yorkshire is very large and most places out of the centre are accessed via country lanes, so even though on a map it looks like families could access the centre of Harrogate easily, it does take a fair amount of time and effort to travel in. It may be an idea to consider teaching in very rural locations as there is less dance on offer and a possible better uptake, however you then must factor in the additional travel time for you as a artist and the potential reduction in income due to smaller numbers.

I think the experience gave joy to many young people throughout the project and I did feel, if certain circumstances and pressures had not arisen, the group had the potential to grow and develop further into the future. My lasting thoughts on the group was that however small, it was always a positive and encouraging environment where young people could be themselves and that was what this project was all about for me. I hope the young people will take away similar memories and feelings from their time at Harrogate Youth Dance and perhaps some of the work they explored and experimented with will come up again in their future.

*It was a good balance of learning group routines and also having freedom to create our own dance routines after learning new styles*

- Harrogate Youth Dance participant



Image Credit: Matty Joplin