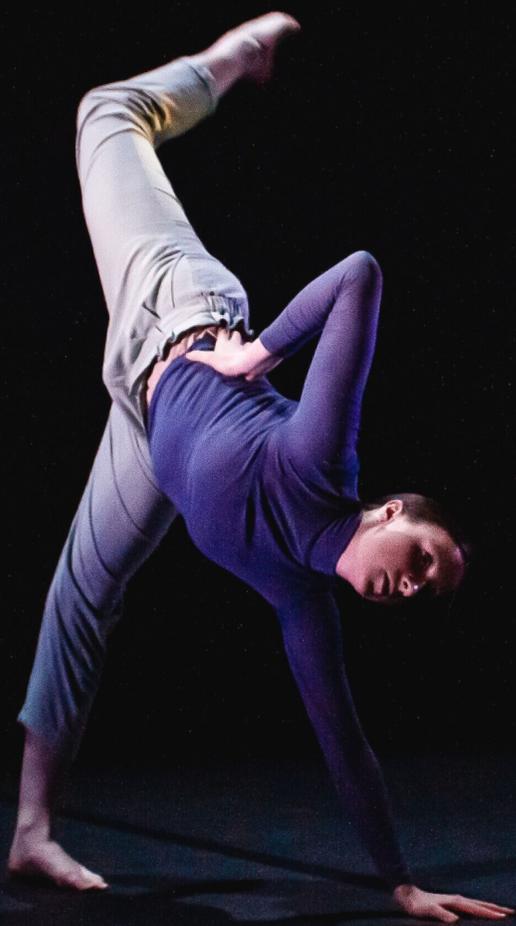


**making it
happen**

a toolkit for Youth Dance



THIRSK YOUTH DANCE

Written by Katy Hewison

Katy is a Performer, Teacher and Maker and passionate about inspiring young people and developing access to inspirational dance provision and professional training routes in rural areas. Katy has a specific interest in connecting improvisational dance practice and play with learning environments, with a project called Improplay. Katy has worked on the Rural Steps project in Skipton, Harrogate and Thirsk.



Image Credit: Elly Welford

WHAT DREW YOU TO THE RURAL STEPS PROJECT?

I am passionate about developing young peoples' access to inspirational dance provision and professional training routes in rural areas. As a young person myself growing up in a rural area I didn't realise the opportunities that were close to me until I was 17 years old. I am keen to inspire those who may not usually have the chance to participate in dance as I believe in the joy and transformative power that dance, play and creativity brings to people's lives.

GETTING STARTED

I was new to the Thirsk area but I knew about Rural Arts, a creative hub in the centre of Thirsk with a theatre, cafe and creative space and discovered a private dance school next door called Butterflies Dance and Performing Arts. They provide a range of provision for young people, covering tap, modern, jazz, street dance etc. and also rent out their space to nursery groups and other providers. I got in touch with both of these organisations to start up a dialogue and see what was possible. I then arranged to hire the Butterflies space to use as our venue for the project as it was well known and well located in the area. They also shared a good understanding of what I was trying to offer and it complemented their existing provision well.

We arranged that I would deliver activities in a slightly different format to originally planned (to support my freelance schedule and not to compete with existing Butterflies provision). Thirsk Youth Dance would provide inspiring opportunities once a month on a Saturday afternoon for young people initially open to ages 9-19 years with the view to narrowing down the age range significantly as participants join. These Saturday afternoon sessions would include contemporary dance workshops, theatre trips and performance opportunities.

Alongside partnerships with Rural Steps and Butterflies, key to making Thirsk Youth Dance a reality was advertising on social media and flyering locally to reach potential participants. I created a Google form for sign-up, making it easy to track interest and capture key information, offered cash payments for classes on the day and a drop-in option if people wanted to just turn up. Having the clear format of classes with theatre trips and performances once a month allowed me to promote this offer from the start.

At this stage, due to timing, I was launching the regular sessions before delivering the Ignite sessions, with the first few sessions free in place of our Create sessions. Participation was all dependent on connections from social media and word of mouth from Butterflies, Rural Arts and myself walking around Thirsk, talking with people and going into shops, local libraries and other spaces to share the flyer. We had a few sign ups online but had good drop-in numbers on the day so had a great turn out overall. Transitioning from free workshops in October to the paid opportunities in November was a challenge. We lost a couple of participants in this transition but we also reached a few new young people who have stayed on since.

I chose to keep class fees low and find trip opportunities that were affordable; £10 per Saturday session (3hrs) and £7/8 per trip, which enabled the group to be more accessible. We had a lot of young people who were new to dance and saw our opportunities advertised on Facebook as well as regulars who already attended Butterflies Dance; the low prices widened our reach to young people who had never danced before.

Looking ahead and planning which additional activities could happen helped keep momentum and interest going, crucial as we were only meeting monthly. Participants had something to aim for and were keen to continue attending when they knew about exciting opportunities we were getting involved in such as workshops, performance opportunities and the chance to go see professional performance work. We went on a trip to the Yorkshire Schools Dance Festival in which the group performed and watched other work from professionals and local school dance groups. This gave young people an opportunity to strengthen friendships and provided families the opportunity to witness the different provision and style that Thirsk Youth Dance provided.

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TASTER SESSIONS

Due to timescales, Ignite taster sessions were saved until after Christmas. In January 2020 I emailed all Primary Schools in the area giving a list of available dates and times for free taster workshops. These were first come first served, with a deadline date for filling in the workshop participation form. This system seemed to help in receiving interest from schools and getting workshops booked in quickly. I attempted this offer with Secondary Schools in the area but had no luck in booking workshops.

For each school workshop I suggested an informal sharing to families at the end of the school day. This was a great support for Thirsk Youth Dance as it enabled advertising to go further than the school community, direct to the families, giving them a chance to see the provision in action and receive key information about the sessions. Participants were invited to Create sessions which included a registration with the families (a chance to learn more about Thirsk Youth Dance and get to know other parents), which I feel has been a valuable factor in building relationships and maintaining retention of participants.

A TYPICAL SESSION

Thirsk Youth Dance sessions tend to include the following:

Icebreaker games - to get to know people in group, feel settled, be engaged, build energy and focus

Creative group improvisation warm ups - to highlight team work as youth company

Cardio/aerobic exercises - to increase heart rate

Technique exercises - to build skill and safe practice, including mobilisation exercises (roll down, shoulders or spine exercises), pliés and footwork, and shift or swing exercises moving in space

Travelling across room - including floor work, jumps and shifts

Learnt Phrase - to develop movement vocabulary, sequencing and movement memory

Break - snack and chat time! A very important part of a Thirsk Youth Dance session and a chance for dancers to bond further. The break also usually includes watching a video clip of a professional dance company trailer or performance, that links with the creative task and also exposes them to professional work in the sector.

Creative and Performance work - Each week we will explore something different or work towards a performance piece. It often includes a few of the following: group lifts, partner work, group improvisation, devising material (solo, duet, group), developing choreographic work, rehearsing & performing.

Feedback and Performance discussion - giving peer feedback, discussing ideas, costume, lighting etc.

Cool down and chat - reduce heart rate, re-focus



Image Credit: Elly Welford



Image Credit: Katy Hewison



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SKILL DEVELOPMENT

A lot of young people didn't know each other prior to Thirsk Youth Dance so ice breakers, group lifts and partner work have been a great way to build relationships, trust and loyalty. As sessions went on the group became closer and this was supported and enhanced by the social aspect and teamwork on trips. The slightly older participants (12/13 years) were role models for the younger participants (9/10 years). Dancers have also developed increased self confidence and development of technique, creative tools and performance skills through regular attendance and the range of content offered in the sessions. One key element I wanted to focus on was increasing their awareness of what a youth company is, what a dance company is like and roles a performer or choreographer might have. One young person has been really interested in directing and choreographing. She is slightly older and has explained that she doesn't enjoy performing but likes to take other roles during rehearsals, so we have explored this for her.

SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES AND SUSTAINABILITY

Establishing the group first and then delivering Ignite taster sessions in January worked really well. It allowed us to keep maintaining group numbers, new interest and word of mouth amongst the community after the Christmas holiday. When delivering workshops in schools in the new year, a lot of the schools expressed they had not had workshops like it before, which allows us to introduce young people to a new opportunity. Not only is this a great potential recruitment for new participants, it is allowing me to build up contacts as an Artist for working in the area in the future and has enabled the wider community to understand the impact Youth Dance could have for young people in rural areas.

The performance trip to the Yorkshire Schools Dance Festival and the go-see trip to the Northern School of Contemporary Dance have been huge inspirations for all participants. The journey to and from these events on the minibus also creates bonds and friendships, not something to be underestimated! Young people have been blown away by the professional work they have seen and experienced, they have talked to choreographers, listened to One Dance UK Talks and received a Discover Arts Award a YSDF. They are inspired by seeing training routes nearby to them and love the opportunity to travel to nearby cities, a brand new experience for some of them.

The administrative running of the group takes a lot of time. This was more than first expected and something to consider when setting up a new group. It has been difficult to find a consistent way of contacting all the participants' families to let them know of upcoming workshops and opportunities. A private Facebook group for parents/guardians has been set up, as well as Facebook page, Facebook page messenger, mailing list and more recently a website page. I have found that parents need variety and consistency. Email's aren't always received and not everyone is on Facebook. Asking for a confirmation of your email or a like on a Facebook post can be useful to understand who you have reached, along with the potential numbers interested in an opportunity.

"Young people have been blown away by the professional work they have seen and experienced."

Participant numbers on trips have been a challenge due to minibus sizes and costs. It is a huge increase in price for a 16 seater as apposed to a 8 seater, however it allows more participants to experience the opportunity. Another adult is needed to help when we have more participants which increases costs too. Balancing numbers, support and budget will be a challenge in the future, but I think it is one we can work towards with the learning we have made on the project.

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, I chose to move classes online from May 2020. Sessions are still at 2pm on a Saturday, however they are twice a month now. An additional dance, stretch and rest session every alternate Wednesday is offered too. This schedule was planned to support young people at home and had been created after consulting parents of regular participants. Uptake has been less than expected however the small sessions have allowed those participating to develop confidence and skills in a remarkable way. A challenge post-pandemic will be increasing participant numbers and starting momentum again.

All parents and guardians understood from the outset that this provision was funded through the Rural Steps project and that at some point this would end. They sometimes give small donations for the post-Rural Steps pot and we have included the sale of merchandise to raise further funds for this too. In the future, to support sustainability, I will reduce the length of the session and raise prices slightly to make sure we can cover studio costs. We will fundraise or increase the prices for trips to cover travel costs and we have developed good relationships with local taxi companies who are now able to provide us an educational-rate discount. Close connections with primary schools in nearby areas also allows for advertisements through schools to support future recruitment.

REFLECTION AND THE FUTURE

Looking to the future, when we are able to dance in person again, I aim to commission a promotional film and have photographs taken to help with advertising and increasing participant numbers for the group. Another goal would be to increase awareness of the opportunity to boys. We currently have two regular participants who are male (less than a quarter of the group). When delivering workshops in schools, teachers and young people have mentioned that more boys would like to get involved but the transition from school workshop to coming to Butterflies by themselves on a Saturday is very daunting. I think in the future a small project could help support this transition to regular sessions. Collide, a boys dance event with NSCD/Leeds Dance Partnership is a great event which could be used as a performance opportunity as part of this project idea if possible in the future.

*"I love creating dances to perform to others.
I love being lifted and lifting people."*

- Thirsk Youth Dance participant

Young People in Thirsk, some whom had never danced before October 2019 have performed to hundreds of people on the stage at York University as well as seeing Professional Dance companies perform at a conservatoire just 50 minutes drive away from them, which they never knew existed before. This is a huge achievement. I have seen first hand the life long inspiration these trips and workshops have given young people. Thirsk Youth Dance will also continue to provide inspirational trips to theatre's, dance training routes and dance connections in the Thirsk area and beyond in Yorkshire.

Thirsk Youth Dance Company has not only provided young people with a place to connect and meet others they didn't know before in their community, but it has connected parents, families and has even got them dancing with us at the Christmas sharing! It has enabled connections with a private dance school, developing awareness of youth dance and appreciation for the style alongside traditional provision. It has also allowed us to make connections with Rural Arts, who have been incredibly supportive and helpful in connecting to the local community at the beginning of the project.

Thirsk Youth Dance Company is a community full of young people and families eager to learn, connect and be inspired. They are excited for Thirsk Youth Dance to continue in the future, as am I.



Image Credit: Elly Welford