

Next Choreography: Transformative potential for young people in choreographic practice

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Abstract

Funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, *Next Choreography* is a three-year Siobhan Davies Dance (SDD) project for 14-21-year-old young people (YP). The fundamental aim of the project is to develop the cohort's knowledge, skills, insight, and experience to create their own unique choreographic work. Distinct to SDD, the project encourages YP to look beyond dance to the different choreographic processes used by artists across different art forms. *Next Choreography* offers three different cohorts of YP (2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17) a one-year program over three terms, each term having a different focus, and progressively building their understanding, developing their experiences, and using their skills.

The project was conceptualized by the SDD team to be impactful in three main ways: on individuals and communities, on SDD as an organization, and on policy and practice. The paper presented at the daCi 2015 conference presented details of the project's Year 1 achievements in relation to particular measures of success. It also made connections where appropriate to the existing body of research into creativity in YP's dance education, specifically, the theory of Wise Humanising Creativity (WHC) as conceptualized and developed by the University of Exeter (UoE) staff, Dr. Kerry Chappell and Professor Anna Craft.

The evaluation conducted by the UoE and SDD team used a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology. Questionnaires utilized quantitative methods and observations, WHC Creativity Wheel, and semi-structured interviews employed qualitative methods. The

data collection aimed to discover in detail the key participants' lived experiences during the project. The project had a number of research questions, and this paper will focus on part of the Impact strand: **Individual/Community** with a specific focus on the YP's transformation, choreographic development, and creativity. Analysis techniques appropriate to the data type were used to draw out the findings. The research was bound by the ethical protocols of the UoE.

Keywords: choreography, transformative, young people, wise humanising creativity, dance

Background

The *Next Choreography* project aspires to encourage young people (YP) to look at and explore dance and choreography across the different fields of dance together with other artistic disciplines (i.e., film, visual arts, architecture, theatre, and the written word). The three-year project distinct to Siobhan Davies Dance Company (SDD) will see three cohorts of 14-21-year-olds (the majority from the Greater London area) experience one year working with SDD and various guest artists. During the first year, the YP met with artists and makers, and attended performances, events, and exhibitions. By experiencing a diverse range of artists and art forms, YP explored how they could connect the artistic disciplines through choreography.

Collaborative research

The project was overseen by Dr. Kerry Chappell from the University of Exeter (UoE) CREATE Research Group working with Charlotte Slade and Amy Phillips, and in partnership with the SDD Participation and Education Programme of Laura Aldridge, Emily Jenkins, and Rachel Attfield. The team worked together to design appropriate questions, methodology, and methods to consider success in relation to the three areas of impact, in addition to offering insight into the presence of Wise Humanising Creativity and personal transformation for the YP involved in *Next Choreography*.

The SDD team conceptualized the project to be impactful in three main ways. The evaluation aimed to evidence these three impact layers: Individual/Community, Organizational, Policy and Practice. This paper will focus on part of the Impact strand: **Individual/Community** with a specific focus on the YP's transformation and the YP's choreographic development and creativity.

Individuals and communities

SDD proposes that the project will impact YP by building their knowledge, skills, and understanding of choreography, contemporary arts, and creativity in a sustained, progressive way. It is hoped that this will result in some kind of transformative change in their lives.

Wise Humanizing Creativity

The research element of the project derives from the theory of Wise Humanising Creativity (WHC) (Chappell & Craft, with Rolfe & Jobbins, 2011). In framing the research element of the study, the team found it useful to apply the empirical framing developed in other WHC research projects (e.g., Walsh, Craft, & Chappell, 2014). Walsh et al. (2014) identified four key themes as core to evidencing WHC, which the *Next Choreography* team further developed to five themes:

- **Making and being made** — the reciprocal core relationship between creativity and identity, and the related notion of humanizing journeys of becoming.
- **New ideas that matter** — that creativity has the capacity to be humanizing when it is carried out with ethical consideration as part of creative value judgements in relation to what matters to that particular community.
- **Working on your own and with others** — that creativity occurs individually, collaboratively, and communally and often within a shared group identity, that dialogue fundamentally drives it between the inside and the outside.
- **Immersion in creating** — getting lost in an embodied creative flow in order to take risks and develop new, surprising ideas.
- **Taking and sharing control** — initiating and sharing the development of creative ideas, and understanding/applying the principles that might guide decision-making.

It is this framing of the WHC concept that informs and structures the data collection tools focused on YP's creativity and potential personal transformation.

Craft (2008) recognized that participants engaging in wise creativity would need to take “appropriate actions, which recognize multiple forms of understanding and knowledge” (Craft, 2008, p. 10). Thus, they must take account of the individual's multiple perspectives and needs. WHC then integrates this with Chappell's (2008, 2011) conceptualization of

humanizing creativity, which articulates the reciprocal relationship between identity and creativity — they feed each other. As the maker makes, they are also making themselves (i.e., making and being made). This is referred to as “becoming.” At its best, this becoming contributes to development in a humanizing way, encompassing conflict and difference, revelation of important new ideas, compassion, and empathy. Embodied dialogue in all its forms is considered a vital part of the process.

Methodology

The research acknowledges the social construction of reality and honors the different multiple perspectives presented by all the individuals involved. The methodology was mixed quantitative and qualitative (i.e., questionnaires, observations, the WHC Creativity Wheel, and semi-structured interviews with the YP and Arts Facilitator¹, all designed to focus on the YP’s lived experiences of the project). Three YP were randomly selected and agreed to be interviewed and observed by UoE staff each term.

Research questions

1. What is the impact of *Next Choreography* on each participant?
 - 1.1. Can we gather a deeper level of understanding of whether each participant’s involvement in *Next Choreography* has contributed to any transformative changes in their lives?
2. What can we learn about the value and impact of a choreographic project on YP’s creativity?
 - 2.1. Participants’ ability to use/have confidence in taking risks with a range of choreographic tools increases

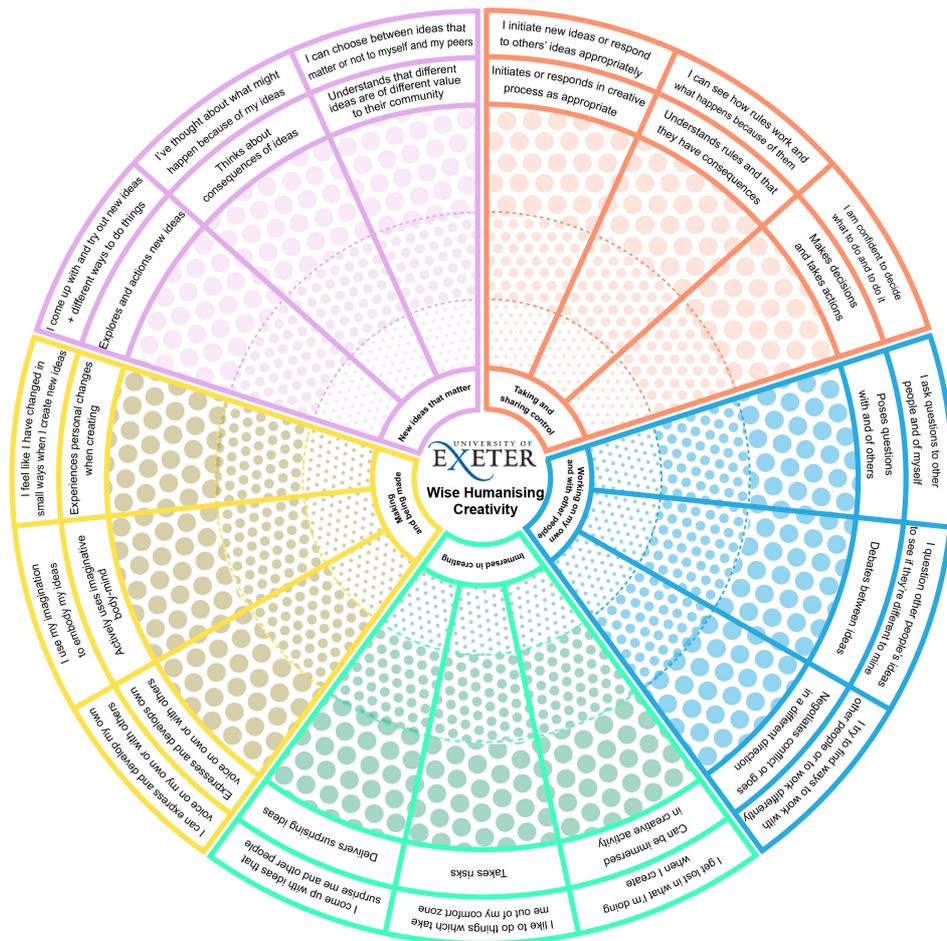
Data collection

Each term the cohort filled in a WHC Wheel (CW) while engaging in a dialogue with the Arts Facilitator (referred to as a 1-1). The wheel is structured around the five key features of WHC and aims to evidence the cohort’s progress in terms of their understanding of creativity and any personal changes occurring during the project. Each section of the CW required the cohort to complete a scale of “a bit,” “quite a bit,” or “a lot.” It must be stressed

¹ Arts Facilitator is the artist/s employed by SDD to lead the sessions with the YP

that the wheel is not a statistically structured test but a qualitative dialogic tool, therefore the project does not make claim to statistically significant outcomes with the figures.

Name (pseudonym):
 Date:
 Project:
 Discussion facilitator:



Put a tick mark (✓) in one box under the statement to show whether you agree a bit, quite a bit, or a lot.

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Figure 1: Wise Humanizing Creativity Wheel

Analysis

A line-by-line constant comparative analysis was carried out on the interviews to generate codes and categories driven by the research questions, but also to allow new themes to emerge as appropriate. This thematic analysis was supplemented by analysis of the CW undertaken to show movement up or down on the different sections of the wheel for each participant, alongside qualitative notes added to the CW during the one-on-one meetings. Developments on the observation schedules, coupled with qualitative writing on these, were also used to supplement and triangulate the thematic analysis. The questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively, and key words from the YP answers were included in the thematic analysis.

1. What is the impact of *Next Choreography* on each participant?
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Under the heading **making and being made**, the YP responded to three elements: **Express and develop my own voice on my own and with others, use my imagination to embody my ideas, and feel I have changed in small ways when I create new ideas.**

The data gathered suggests that more than half of the cohort had developed their ability to express their voice, and use their imagination to embody their ideas or changes in small ways when making new dance ideas. There is evidence that the whole cohort experienced gradual and consistent growth of personal change. As summarized by Ellie* in her final interview *"I can't really relate to the dancer or choreographer I was last year but I think ... it has most definitely evolved ... I think it is like a ongoing process."*

By the end of the first year, there is some evidence that *Next Choreography* contributed to transformative change. Across the three-selected YP, there is evidence that their ability to express their voice is developing, and that this has contributed to changes for them. Molly* commented that she has started to learn how to create things, which is a *"big starting point for me to go forward,"* demonstrating the beginnings of personal change. She annotated her Creativity Wheel by saying that she was *"feeling like I'm exercising new parts of my brain."* In terms of finding her voice, there was a further annotation, which stated: *"still discovering what I'm interested in."* By the final term, Molly suggested that she has *"become more open to new things"* as a result of the project.

Evan* was more critical of whether *Next Choreography* was having a transformative effect on him. The Arts Facilitator noted in one of her reflections that Evan appeared to be frowning in a session. When interviewed, he commented that he was “*trying to make sense of it,*” thus demonstrating that his thinking was being challenged. It is hard to know whether this has led to change as such, although he wrote on the outside of his Creativity Wheel that he now “*feels more confident and comfortable*” and is able to “*have more fun than [the] previous time,*” as well as being more able to “*trust with collaborators.*”

At this stage in the project, it would be prudent to suggest that the potential transformative change of *Next Choreography* on the YP might not be noticed so early, and that this is an ongoing process that is beginning to take shape within them. Molly summarizes this in her final interview, where she refers to her eyes being more open. She has begun to recognize that she has a comfort zone of movement and that the *Next Choreography* experience has instigated her to challenge her perception of movement.

2. What can we learn about the value and impact of a choreographic project on YP’s creativity?
 - 2.1. Participant’s ability to use/have confidence in taking risks with a range of choreographic tools

In considering the impact on the YP’s creativity, the data gathered offered rich insight. Aside from **making and being made**, there are four other categories: **Taking and sharing control**, **immersed in creating**, **working on own and with others**, and **new ideas that matter**.

By Term 2, two categories, **taking and sharing control** and **new ideas that matter**, had more participants from the cohort showing a decrease in their perception than an increase. By Term 3, **taking and sharing control** had returned to where the cohort had begun, whereas **new ideas that matter** had marginally increased but not to where the cohort had started. One might argue that the YP had not had a chance, by this point, to put these new ideas into practice. As Molly explains in her final interview, she had been exposed to new ideas and learned new ways to go about choreographing, but she had yet been able to “*put any of it into action at the moment.*”

* Pseudonym.

However, the **making and being made** and **immersed in creating** data clearly demonstrates growth across the three terms for the cohort. For example, in Evan's final interview, he describes an exercise where they were invited to close their eyes. Before, he would have kept them open during this session, but he decided that this time he would close his eyes: *"I closed my eyes and it was a completely different thing ... you sort of suddenly get all sorts of new feelings and thoughts about it."* Evan has experienced what it is like to be immersed in an exercise. It was a risk for him to close his eyes, but he took the chance and discovered new feelings and thoughts.

Across a number of headings, the three-selected YP presented a shift in their ability and thinking. Where they had rated themselves in the first term, this rating decreases by the second term, but returns or increases beyond their starting point by Term 3. Without a more in-depth study, it is difficult to explain the drop in phenomena for some of the categories. We suggest one reason might be that the YP may simply be more aware of the creative possibilities open to them and therefore consider their abilities as less capable than they did previously. As Ellie stated in her final interview, she explained that she could not compare herself to the person she was before starting the project.

Ellie and Evan remained at the same level over the year for **taking and sharing control**. Ellie explains that if she cares about an idea, she will initiate control, yet she is also happy to respond to others. Molly, however, showed an initial increase then decrease.

However, Molly is the only selected YP to show an increase for **immersed in creating**. She comments, *"head can get in the way but when I am there, I'm there. So frustrated when I can't get absorbed."* Ellie and Evan both show very high self-rated levels for this in Term 2, which then drops dramatically in Term 3. This could be explained by the course content. In Term 2, the participants were exploring new ideas with various guest artists whereas in Term 3, the YP were working toward a final festival showcase. Ellie summarizes this in her final interview, saying that she felt the course *"zoomed in ... because it's got to the pin point of the festival ... we've lost kind of that playfulness."* Ellie is describing how she was unable to immerse herself as much at this point in the year, as the course now had the focus of the festival to work toward rather than the exploring of ideas and concepts like in the previous terms.

There is evidence that the three-selected YP developed their knowledge of a range of choreographic tools, however, there is a suggestion that they are not yet confident in putting these actions in place. Molly commented in her final interview that before starting the course, her style of movement and choreography was *"quite low to the ground,"* and now she

has begun to “*open that up so it’s a lot wider, and I’m not just using my legs, now my whole body is involved.*” Molly is experiencing her “becoming” (Chappell et al., 2011) and her growth in her knowledge and understanding of dance. Molly clearly relished the challenge the project offered her, as her confidence grew and she appeared to be enjoying discovering what she was capable of choreographically. Similarly, this confidence is reflected in her CW data as her self-reflection shows that she is developing when asked to **Initiate or responds in creative process as appropriate.**

Ellie shared this development in growth of knowledge contributing to her becoming. She commented that before starting the project, she would be given material to explore, but now she is trying to find her own style of creating. She asserted that her choreographic process had changed, but not “*massively,*” as it would take time for her to develop and grow in confidence and skill of application. The observation data reflected Ellie’s ability to respond intuitively, but thoughtfully, and she could frequently get lost in her improvisations. At times, it appeared that Ellie’s knowledge of the choreographic process had grown, and her CW revealed that she had taken risks and was beginning to challenge her comfort zone.

In contrast to Ellie and Molly, Evan explained that before starting the project, his perception of choreography was that it was not that “*difficult really*” for him; it is more important to create “*a space as a safe environment,*” as he predominantly works with actors and not dancers. His ability to take risks in the studio with the choreographic process was reflected in the observation data. At one point during Term 1, Evan was given a task, and during the feedback afterward, he was quoted as saying, “*we were trying to find a right way to do it,*” but he conceded that they could not so they just relaxed and played with the movement and enjoyed the experience. During Term 2, Evan’s confidence in vocalizing thoughts and contributions was noted by the Arts Facilitator in her reflections. However, she also comments that Evan’s ability to evolve his movement vocabulary was yet to emerge, as he was unable to refine his embodied responses. This was reflected in Evan’s CW, as his **New ideas that matter** rating stayed the same over the two terms. It should be acknowledged that Evan considered himself an actor first, and that he generally worked with other actors. This could explain why his rating stayed the same, as potentially the ideas presented to him did not matter as such to his lived experience.

Summary

Data collected during the first year of the *Next Choreography* project suggested to the research team that it is possible to gather a deeper level of understanding of potential

transformative changes for YP. The research showed that personal changes experienced by young people were strongly embedded in the project's communal approach, and that this approach took work to achieve and sustain. In relation to the YP's tracked changes, the analysis showed that over half of those who filled in the wheel felt that they had developed their ability to **express their voice**, use their **imagination to embody their ideas**, or **changed in small ways when making new dance ideas**. Ultimately, there is evidence that they have all experienced some sort of **personal change**. It must be emphasized, though, that some young people remained the same on the CW, and a small number rated themselves lower by the end of the year. We have suggested that perhaps this is due to disruption and realization of the breadth of possibility before them. In summary, the research showed there had been small fledgling changes for more than half the YP, but we conclude that this, as yet, has not been a transformative change, as we recognize that the YP need time to explore and play with their new knowledge and understanding of the choreographic process. From here, the project aims to track a selection of the YP in future years in order to ascertain whether these changes continue to build. The evaluation team will also repeat this process with the Year 2 and 3 *Next Choreography* cohorts to cumulatively add to the findings articulated here.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank and acknowledge the SDD team, the young people, and Arts Facilitator for their time given to this piece of research evaluation. We would also like to thank the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for funding the project and University of Exeter and University of Winchester for supporting additional research time for the University researchers.

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