

Folk Education Network

Folk Education Development Day

Saturday 4 March 2023

Cecil Sharp House

Theme: Teaching folk dance in schools and beyond



Anusha Subramanyam leading an Indian folk dance workshop. Photo: Rachel Elliott

Review by Lisa Heywood

I've been coming to Folk Educators' events since the group/ network started, so it was a pleasure to come together in person at Cecil Sharp House for a practical day of dance development. The day was attended by 15 participants and presenters from as far afield as Devon and Tyneside. The day started with a keynote video from Laura Nicholson, Head of Children and Young People's Dance at One Dance UK (subject association for dance in schools and lead for U.Dance national youth dance programme). Laura talked about high-quality dance with young people, in and out of schools. Whilst she gave a realistic picture of state of the community dance scene with dwindling funds and interest post covid, she also passionately expressed the importance and potency of folk dance. She concluded with words about how all of us in the dance sector need to carry on with the great work of getting young people active and dancing as there are such great benefits to be had in terms of both mental and physical health and wellbeing.

Next up was the fantastic Natasha Khamjani - a street dancer, dance artist, and co-artistic director of Folk Dance Remixed - talking about techniques for working in secondary schools. She showed us how to be fun but firm, bearing in mind that older students can be challenging if they see that you're not in control of the situation. This starts with preparation, asking plenty of questions to find out as much as possible about the participants and context before you step into the room. Setting expectations is also key, not just for the students and what you're expected to deliver, but for the staff too! If staff are engaged and active in the session then it can help students to be engaged too (in my notebook I wrote "look, sir's doing it!"). And of course, as always, being adaptable is vital - being able to read the room when you arrive and decide whether to go with plan A, B or C is a valuable skill.

As well as general advice about how to work with a school, Natasha also ran a practical workshop with us. The first dance started with holding hands in lines – something that secondary students can be reluctant to do. Natasha's solution to this was a game of "squeeze Olympics" - each line sending a squeeze from one hand to the next down the line. When it reaches the end, the last person raises their hand – the line who get the squeeze from one end to the other first wins! We then got into groups to write a dance of our own and talked about how to manage group work. Natasha explained that forming teams and having a goal – to perform the dance to the rest of the group - is a good motivator for the students to want to complete the task well. That said, the idea isn't to show them up or embarrass them, so she suggested that you keep an eye on the groups and get the least well-prepared group to perform first, and the best prepared group last. We used prompt cards with different moves on them to compose our dances, and it was very interesting to see the variety of dances we'd composed at the end, despite all using the same prompts!

We then had a short presentation and discussion about dance leadership qualifications with Laura Connolly, Dance Development Manager, and Rachel Elliott, Education Director. The focus of the discussion was the pending Participatory Arts Qualification – which EFDSS has been exploring the possibility of running a pilot cohort for. Although they are facing some funding difficulties in relation to this, I'm very interested to follow further developments about the course, as it seems ideally suited to practitioners such as myself, who have a firm foundation in our chosen dance form but would like to pursue further training in facilitation skills and safer dance practice.

Next, we enjoyed an excellent workshop from Anusha Subramanyam – a dancer, choreographer, teacher and dance movement therapist who joined us through a partnership

with Akademi, South Asian Dance UK. Anusha's workshop took us through a variety of different dance styles from across India - Bhangra from Punjab, Garba from Gujarat, Ghoomar from Rajasthan, finishing with Kuthu from Tamil Nadu. She explained it has become very popular among South Asian communities here due to its 'funky' nature and being danced to contemporary / fusion music. The variety served to highlight for us the huge variation of different cultures, languages and ideas within India. Anusha described Indian culture as 'dialectical' – by which she means holding differing or opposing views as equal, not defining either as right or wrong. This is a particularly interesting point to reflect on in the light of our last FEN meeting about regional traditions, where Mikey Kenney spoke about the value of regional variation and individuality in folk music. I feel like Anusha's words resonated with my feeling that we should value variation and individual interpretation in dance too.

This theme was also reflected in the educational focus of her session, which was working with young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Her approach here was that it's not helpful to get caught up on specifics of the choreography. Instead think about the intention or core element of the dance and allow each participant to explore that in their own way. For example, if a dance involves moving in circles, perhaps someone might make circles with their hand or even a finger, instead of travelling on a circular path. This was particularly helpful for me as due to fatigue I joined in with the workshop entirely from my chair!

Lastly, we had a workshop from the bundle of energy that is Laura Connolly - English clog dancer, early years and primary dance educator and EFDSS' Dance Development Manager. Laura's session focussed on teaching percussive clog dancing to primary school children, but there was plenty in there that could be applied to other styles. She started off with some warm-ups and icebreakers – the aim being to get us moving as well as to start introducing rhythmic ideas. One of my favourites was a game called “don't clap this one back” – where you clap different rhythms in a call and response with the participants. The idea is that they should respond to all the rhythms except one, which fits the words “don't clap this one back”. A great learning point for me was the way Laura responded when one of us “tripped up” and accidentally clapped back the “trick” rhythm. She congratulated us on listening and stopping ourselves once we realised that no-one else was clapping, rather than pointing out that we'd been “caught out”. After all, developing listening skills is the aim of the game.

Next it was time to get our clogs on! Laura pointed out that it's essential to agree a “quiet” signal before participants put clogs on as they are very noisy! It's tempting to think that “noise” is the main element of clog dancing, but I really liked how Laura suggested emphasising the silence between beats. As with many folk styles one other point that Laura mentioned was that many of the groups she teaches have never come across clog dancing before. So how can we create a “way in” for newcomers? One way that Laura does this is to give a demonstration in assembly before she runs workshops, or if that's not possible she sends videos which teachers can show to the class before she arrives. Another tactic is to teach or demonstrate rhythms from pop music – making it relatable by combining clogging with something more familiar. I'm definitely going to think about how I can integrate this into my own practice.

All in all I had a fantastic and inspiring day – a brilliant opportunity to share ideas and learn new skills. I look forward to our next meeting!

Lisa Heywood is a dancer, caller and workshop leader based in Northamptonshire. She calls for ceilidhs and barn dances, facilitates workshops (morris, maypole and social dance) and hosts online meet ups and training for callers. As a performer she has toured the UK with Laurel Swift's Morris Offspring and co-choreographed Morris-Natyam, a show combining morris with classical South Indian Bharatanatyam dance. Previously she has been a lead dance tutor with Shooting Roots, as well as a workshop leader and project manager with Science Ceilidh. Her most recent project is DANCE:SOCIAL – which combines social dance styles from different cultures in a participatory fusion dance party.

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