

Facing contemporary challenges with the whole human: Dance Research Matters Event Response

Kathryn Stamp, Vipavinee Artpradid
Postdoctoral Research Fellows
Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE), Coventry University

“Dance is an essential part of a whole, rather than a spare part.” – Dame Siobhan Davies DBE

The Dance Research Matters event, held on 27th May 2021, was hosted by the Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE, Coventry University) in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Due to current circumstances, it was an online event, with approximately 250 registered participants. The day was structured into four main discussion panels, covering the following topics around the event’s foundational idea – ‘Dance Research Matters’.

Professor Sarah Whatley opened the conference, and Helen Weedon (Senior Investment Manager) from the AHRC set the scene. A mid-day conversation with Baroness Deborah Bull and Executive Chair of the AHRC Professor Christopher Smith raised the provocation ‘What are the questions for dance research today? Cultural value and dance’.

The four panels and their corresponding panel chairs and panellists were:

Panel 1: Dance research: how do we evidence value and the public benefit of dance research? (Chair: Ruth Gibson; Panellists: Kate Marsh and Dan Daw, Rosa Cisneros, Rosemary Lee, Emma Redding)

Panel 2: Why practice matters – if practice is part of dance research, then what needs to change to reflect the value of practice as an epistemic system? (Chair: Susanne Foellmer; Panellists: Jonathan Burrows, Simon Ellis, Funmi Adewole, Efrosini Protopapa)

Panel 3: Dance research beyond borders (Chair: Charlotte Waelde; Panellists: Kate Elswit, Siobhan Davies, Rachel Krische, Scott deLahunta, Timmy de Laet)

Panel 4: Research futures – PGRs and the research pathway, emerging fields. What do PGRs want from dance research? What are their priorities and anxieties? (Chair: Victoria Thoms; Panellists: Tia-Monique Uzor, Kat Hawkins, Mira Gokul, Paul Hughes, Vipavinee Artpradid, Vida Midgelow)

By focusing on themes relevant to thinking around the future shaping dance research, C-DaRE and the AHRC intended for this event to be a catalyst for positive change in the recognition and support of dance research, to create further connections and spark conversations that would continue beyond the event itself. The event also aimed to enhance thinking about the creation of a sustainable and vibrant future for dance research, to encourage researchers in the field to be confident and resilient in their leading work. The panellists, panel chairs, and participants of the event fully engaged with the key points and questions from [Professor Sarah Whatley’s position paper](#) titled ‘Dance research is important. Stimulating and supporting the future of dance research in the UK’.

One of the salient points that emerged from across the day, all of which will be discussed in this report, was around the language, translation and communication of dance research and how we need to rethink dissemination and access routes. Another key takeaway was concerning ways to evidence the benefits of dance, and of dance research, whilst tackling the beliefs that dance is misunderstood, undervalued or even

frightening to those unfamiliar with the field. Expansion, rather than reduction, of dance research was a particularly prevalent point, referencing the need to explore transdisciplinary research opportunities. Funding was a significant topic, perhaps due to the collaborative organisation with the AHRC, as well as the need to diversify the dance research 'sector', both at postgraduate researcher (PGR) level and beyond.

Dance as a beneficial experience and dance research's role in developing and evidencing that benefit was an underlying thread throughout the day. Rosemary Lee's poetic offering about her reasons for being in dance research, such as the significance of transformative moments, the cooperation of the ensemble, the problem-solving and love, amplified the personal and interpersonal resonances of research through dance. Although unable to be there in person, disabled artist Dan Daw's thoughts from discussions with Kate Marsh were shared by Kate herself. Dan offered a reflection on his experiences of inviting disabled dance researchers, like Kate, into his creative space and noted that researchers added an observational tool and depth to his line of inquiry. Particularly powerful was how Dan felt that having researchers in the space allowed him to reclaim his body being observed, "scrutinised through a lens that isn't medical but political". Dan and Kate's discussion brought to light how dance research had contributed to the expansion of creative practices and opportunities for disabled dance artists, an achievement that should continue to be built upon. Rosa Cisneros, whose work emphasises co-creation with the communities with which she works, noted that "dance allows us to stake a claim in certain spaces because the body is power – the body helps us think, reimagine and think about what is possible; the body and the language are interconnected." Rosa added to earlier illustrations of how the reach and benefits of dance research often go beyond the project itself. This is largely because of the impact that participants subsequently have on their own communities, a ripple effect.

As a collective, it was clear that we firmly hold the understanding of the benefits and impact of dance research. However, one of the challenges we face as a community of dance researchers is how to capture and communicate the proof and evidence of both benefits and impact, especially for intangible experiences. Offering participants a consideration on the impact of dance research on the wider academy, Simon Ellis reflected on the dialogical relationship between dance researchers in the academy, the work that the dance researchers are doing, and the academy itself. While dance researchers (particularly practice researchers) may feel small in the face of the academy, he rhetorically called for a consideration of "**the way in which practice-research might reach beyond its own boundaries – to dialogue with other areas and extend practice beyond its own margins**". For example, we could ask "how might these hard to grasp methods move the extraordinarily large mass of the academy?" as the potential to make a beneficial impact.

Emma Redding addressed **the challenge of making dance research more visible** by raising four key points about evidencing this value of dance and dance research, first by asking "Isn't any evidence of the value of dance and dance research worth gathering?" She then noted that this evidence should be captured in different languages, contexts, and methodologies, because "one form of truth does not negate other truths". These points emphasised how "advancing and sustaining dance research is best done collaboratively".

One suggestion for raising the visibility of dance research was to re-examine how we evidence our research, with Rosa proposing that **evidence should reflect the breadth of the process**, with 'outputs' being, "living breathing documents that are tangible and intangible, in that paradox, that tension [is] an important part of that evidencing because I think dance is constantly evolving as we are human and so for me it's important that the evidence reflects that messiness. that process". Perhaps changing how we evidence our research, and our impact, greater understanding of the power of dance research might be communicated and, thus, recognised.

Practice research was also recognised as one of the integral tools for evidencing. Speakers from Panel 2, such as Jonathan Burrows, emphasised the movement towards embracing “the plurality of diverse practices – including embodied forms of research practice”. Efrosini Protopapa noted the distinctive ability of practice to “draw attention to something more material”, acknowledging that everything that a practice researcher does is ingrained with value – including “all the translations and multiple mutations that occur through such activities of translations of practice for different audiences”. Further, these practices can be linked back to the need for funding of these invisible, early stages, and tangential activities of research. Funmi Adewole talked about the importance of lived experience to practice research and how that diversifies epistemologies, emphasising that a lot of invisible work goes with bringing lived experience into academic work. The latter in itself is a significant contribution to evidencing value. Later in the Q and A she underlined this significance by commenting “It’s not complicated – it’s just not seen. They are forms of research that have not yet been named or put in a book”.

Responding to a question on what dance research needs in terms of evidencing, Jonathan said that “the definition of what can be evidenced and how it can be evidenced to include ... hidden impacts, slow impacts, physical communications, forms of practice which are not immediately present in an academic fashion”. He further suggested that it is possible to “rethink the way that these things are validated and evidenced” and that ‘what would be gained by it would by far outweigh the difficulty of doing that work’. This line of discussion challenges those in policy making positions to make changes to and expand indicators of value and impact.

The discussion between Baroness Deborah Bull and Professor Christopher Smith raised a number of points regarding **what types of knowledge are valued – such as our preference for the written word – and which *should* be valued – such as the embodied knowing that arises from the “nature and ephemerality of performance”**. The impact of this frame of valuation can be seen in how arts, humanities, and social science research are “excluded from R&D funding, on the basis that it doesn’t come up with a technological solution”, even though these areas of research offer insight into behaviour, “which are part of a solution to some of our contemporary challenges”. Deborah then questioned the factors that determine the value of types of knowledge in society. Are we sufficiently asking how this knowledge “furthers us as a society”, “furthers others”, and how knowledge should be valued “at a time when resources are scarce”? The types of knowledge production that are valued are often very closely linked to funding success. Jonathan also observed that [the report from the Practice as Research Advisory Group \(PRAG\)](#) demonstrated a step in the right direction in promoting the importance of “embodied forms of knowledge”.

How dance is often misunderstood by those who do not seek to understand it, and the idea that dance can be viewed as ‘frightening’ by those not familiar with it, might also contribute to ideas about why funding is not being sought by or allocated to dance researchers. Kate Elswit highlighted how, in transdisciplinary environments, dance researchers need to translate or accessibly communicate their practice to ‘outsiders’ in order for transformational understanding to develop. If, as was highlighted by a number of participants, funding panels often have a lack of dance reviewers, funding bids are being read by a lay audience. Siobhan Davies later identified what almost seems to be a paradoxical quality of dance. She shared how, “Our dilemma in dance is the very complexities we are empowered by. We encompass huge possibilities and narrowing them to something which is doable and receivable is a fine challenge.” Therefore, consideration of how dance research is communicated and its impact evidenced, to funders and future participants, may be key to unlocking future funding opportunities. Furthering this, Rosemary Lee raised how we need to allow witnesses to our research without “dumbing down the experience”. We should recognise that the “really intelligent, profound, and wide-ranging experiences of dance” need to be sufficiently and accessibly communicated to those who might not immediately recognise the potential and real impact of dance research.

Discussion of the **'missing' human imaginary in people's understanding of the whole human**, was another point raised which might contribute to a (mis)understanding of dance that could affect funding judgements. Scott deLahunta explained how dance should have a seat at the table in shaping the human imaginary of the coming century because of its ability to imagine different, potentially more transformative and inclusive imaginaries of what constitutes the human. Scott emphasised that **transdisciplinary research could offer a way to access funding that expands ideas about bodily practices and bodily knowledge within other disciplines**. This positions transdisciplinarity as the joint undertaking by two or more disciplines in exploring new innovations, as equal partners. A parity between dance research and other disciplines was emphasised by many speakers, such as Kate Elswit, Rachel and Efrosini – that dance should not be resigned to the margins of such endeavours.

While there was much discussion about *why* dance should be an equal player within the cultural sector and within the creative industries, as well as part of trans/inter/multi-disciplinary projects, *how* they can be is a slipperier concept. An emphasis on **the ability of dance to expand knowledge of the body, of society and of other disciplines** ran throughout many of the sessions. The third panel of the day advocated for dance as an epistemic tool for uncovering new understandings that might not be otherwise be considered. On the unique nature of dance research and why other disciplines seek to work with dance researchers, Siobhan described a dancer at work as an “undiluted kernel of human activity – close – close to the act of beginning, doing, expanding, receiving, ascending, questioning, testing, and often all this is done simultaneously.” Running through these discussions, and highlighted by Scott, Kate, and Rachel in particular, was how dance does have an equal role in transdisciplinary projects, not as a secondary or lesser contributor, but as an equal partner, or even to lead on such projects. In Siobhan's words, “Dance is an essential part of a whole, rather than a spare part.”

Jonathan talked about how dance is and can be even more so **an equal partner in multidisciplinary projects**, describing the image of dance practice research as a model of what the anthropologist Tim Ingold calls “a meshwork – a way of bringing together diverse materials, combining, or redirecting the flow” of what they can become. This image suggests an expansion – not a reduction of the field and community. Timmy de Laet suggested that we consider the notion of co-bordering, “as it expresses how our field is always running across borders, be it between different disciplines or between theory and practice, or between critical thinking and the embodied experience, in order to demarcate its contours as a field of inquiry yet never, and I stress this, never as an imperialising gesture”. The importance of reflection and dialogue about when and where we do and do not set parameters for ourselves as a discipline and sector was echoed across multiple panels. At the same time this consideration has to be countered with ensuring that dance research is not being assigned to the margins or towards the bottom of a hierarchy. However, the question that arises is, “Where can dance research shine a light on the reductiveness of hierarchical ontologies in the first place? In what ways has dance research already done that?”.

Funmi responded to these questions of hierarchy by establishing that dance research advances knowledge because it challenges entrenched ontologies of research, with Practice Research being a case in point. She noted, in terms of what dance research has to offer knowledge advancement, that her “understanding of academia is that its built on certain systems of knowledge – ways of producing knowledge and presenting it. There are other systems of knowledge that have not been accepted. **Practice as research has the power to bring those [other] systems [of knowledge] into the academic system that can change society**”. Mira Gokul shared this view of how dance research and practice, especially through the intensity of PhD study, can expand our view of the world and advance our knowledge, explaining how it “offers a magnifying glass to understand how we

experience the world, to understand our humanness, to understand the intimacies and the secrets that constitute the world”.

Rethinking where dance research takes place is another way in which recognition might be increased, continuing to expand exploration of how dance can respond to real-world challenges. Deborah advocated for dance and health projects, research that attends to health challenges facing the NHS, especially coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, without exploitation. Dance research happening in different community settings is important to demonstrate the scope of dance research. With this, there may **be a need to expand where dance research is discussed or disseminated, or even to evaluate why we value certain publication routes over others**. Funmi discussed the importance of ‘grey literature’ for early researchers or dance researchers located outside of the academy. Literature and dissemination routes that communicate more to the sector, rather than solely to other academics, might help to increase recognition or at least inform a wider audience of our research activities. As Emma highlighted, dance researchers can be viewed as pathway makers but with gates that run alongside the path, which we need to open to let people in to witness what we are achieving.

Collaborations were also suggested by Emma, who posited that “advancing and sustaining dance research might best be done collaboratively”. Timmy agreed that collaborations are significant for fortifying the culture and place of dance research, explaining how, “To me it is clear that dance research cannot be a local, isolated endeavour. Collective actions and collaboration are key to add both urgency and strength to any attempt to conquer, expand and consolidate a place for dance studies, in funding schemes, in higher education, in the arts”. The challenge with any collaboration or cross-disciplinary research is navigating hierarchies, as well as traditional and normative understandings of what research is, can be and should be, which makes the question of **how** dance researchers can be equal partners a difficult one. Efrosini suggested that “What counts in collaboration is not so much the separate contributions as the network that unites them”, something to consider when negotiating a collaborative research offer.

An example of **the power of collaborations**, Kate Marsh explained that her research with Dan can be understood as an act of disabled artists staking “a claim in the dance research sector by making our relationship, and collaboration tangible and visible”. This is significant because ‘disabled artists are often invited into dance research and dance spaces (where there are limited spaces of autonomy and ownership in the way disabled artists practice and contribute) by established gatekeepers on terms that already exist for normative bodies and normative dancers”.

In Panel 1’s Q and A, participants continued the discussion on gatekeepers with chair Ruth Gibson asking about the possibility of being gate openers instead of gatekeepers, which participants responded with the need for ‘softer gates’ and the need for a range of diverse people with keys. Emma poignantly noted about the pathways being forged by dance research that “We’re [the dance research community] furthering that path but we’ve got gates at the side that we want to break down”. The proof and evidence of the value of dance research are vital to the breaking down of those gates.

A rethinking of power structures in research and of research was another strand of discussion throughout the day and there is scope here to consider **how a reconfiguration of gatekeeper access might offer dance a more equal share of the funding pie**. Additionally, the need for more dance specialists on funding panels was also raised as a way to overcome a particular barrier that prevents dance from accessing or being valued in a similar way to other creative arts disciplines.

One of the main points around making our research more visible was around language, **translating and communicating our research both amongst ourselves and to those**

who may feel distanced from the dance-related work. Practice research can be a leader in this work of translation and communication. On this issue, Susanne Foellmer (panel chair) pointed out that “Academia is also moved by what practice and artistic research has to offer. There are also certain epistemological traditions that you have to pay attention to in order to put across your findings. How do we deal with these aporias, paradoxes, opportunities, wonderful moments where there are no opposition [or] where for some reason artistic research has to translate itself into academic? What that might mean? There will have to be things that have to change. What might those be?”. Protopapa shared her positive experience of the work of translation but also how in the current time **the systems of validation (of work) needs to evolve** – “I identify with this feeling of trying to protect the work and sometimes for helping others to do that... And to not get tired from the work of translation. Sometimes I even find myself enjoying this process- finding another articulation; it is part of the work – to meet a different set of criteria, a different set of understandings. I am also aware of the labour that goes into that. Now it’s necessary to start changing these systems of validation”.

There were a number of references throughout the day to ‘invisible’ researchers or absent voices from dance research. **There are dance researchers working in the field currently who do not have sufficient support, as well as possible future dance researchers that need to be better supported now, to ensure their contributions, later.** This absence or lack of access referred to both early career researchers and students, but also people in the industry who conduct research but are, in some way or other, excluded from the academy. The presence of PGR students at the event, as well as hearing about specific PGR activities in panel 4, spoke to the importance of, yet also the limitations experienced within, the existing dance graduate support and provision in the UK. It was emphasised by Vipavinee Artpradid that the experiences during postdoctoral study and after can be transformative in helping new dance academics to better understand the demands, culture and breadth of activities undertaken by dance researchers.

An emphasis on the broadening or expansion of dance research was dominant throughout the day, as has already been indicated in this synthesis. This expansion was also recognised as needed to **ensure greater diversity of and access to dance research for marginalised researchers.** Kat Hawkins recognised the additional challenges particular groups will encounter, such as access to disability allowances, when they enter the academy, in addition to the invisible labour that has been undertaken to even get themselves to the academy’s threshold. This was a view shared by Tia-Monique Uzor who shared that there needs to be “an intentionality in funding to make those connections...I’ve taught many black and brown, diverse genders at undergraduate, but those people do not move up to Masters, do not move up to PhD level, why? There are many reasons why but, speaking as a black woman, I would definitely say: it’s the money”. Funding, for many marginalised dance artists and dance researchers, is the only way to access further study and is integral in supporting the next generation of dance researchers. Vida Midgelow also acknowledged the need for better funding routes as support for artistic doctorates, but also emphasised that the structures, within which artistic doctoral research can happen, need rethinking.

The precariousness of dance in education in the UK and the possible effect that this precarity will have on dance graduates entering the dance research field was referenced throughout the day. How will future generations of dance researchers be nurtured if early access to dance does not exist, or only exists as a platform for the elite? Whilst the final panel focused on the provision for post-graduate dance researchers and institutionalised research practice within the formal education system, Rachel also emphasised her heartbreak over the destruction of dance in education, noting the predicament that “the young people who miss out are often the people who can’t afford to access dance privately”. The event also highlighted **the need to continue to advocate for dance’s place within education and to evidence its worth as an educational practice.** Paul Hughes spoke of the fight against cuts in higher education for dance courses and staff in one particular institution, although this is not an isolated incident. Nevertheless, Paul’s provocation raised a question regarding what we are attempting to save, making us consider whether dance

education currently works for only the few rather than the many. How might the fight to 'save' dance in education move forth to revolutionise dance as an educational practice? To expand the concept of dance education to be more collaborative, expansive and inclusive? To provide a form of knowledge that may be alternative to traditional, 'normative' ways of knowing, but can alter how we come to be in, understand, and navigate the world?

The Dance Research Matters event called for a shift in the cultural and social valuation of knowledge that is gained through dance engagement. It embraced the centrality of dance research in transdisciplinary projects whilst acknowledging that dance research can (and should) embrace interdisciplinarity as well. It pointed to the need for dance researchers to continue conducting research that broadens the human imaginary and depth of body-based, embodied understanding in, and in collaboration with, other disciplines. It advocated for the increased visibility of dance research through greater financial, systemic, and policy-based support, but also through dance researchers exploring more accessible ways of translating and disseminating our research. It recommended increased support for present and future dance researchers. It called for the establishment of measures to ensure greater diversity of and access to dance research for marginalised researchers. Dance research matters, so, what's next?

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