

16. Learning to be professional: the story of my placement experience Department of Dance and Culture Intern at a major touring ballet company

People say that in order to truly succeed in something one must have a passion for it; the same applies to studying for a degree or developing a career. It was my passion for dance that led me to choose a degree in Dance and Culture at the University of Surrey. Initially, many people could not understand my choice of study and questioned me on what I might do having completed this degree and at the time I admit I was unsure myself.

I chose the four-year undergraduate sandwich course hoping it would enlighten me on possible career paths and also enhance my knowledge and skills; increasing my employability prospects. After two years of study, my third year would involve a thirty-week placement at a professional dance organisation.

As an established dance institution, The University of Surrey Dance Department have connections with many professional dance organisations and they assisted in finding me a suitable placement. Having discussed which area of the industry I would like to work in, they then contacted organisations on my behalf to enquire into possible placement opportunities. It was then my responsibility to contact designated companies to arrange an interview.

Following a successful interview, I was offered a placement position at a ballet theatre based in the North of England. This ballet theatre are recognised as one of Britons leading touring Ballet Companies, touring both internationally and nationally for up to thirty-weeks each year. In addition to performing, the Company also have a large vocational training sector for young dancers and an education department delivering accessible dance work around the country.

Whilst at the company I worked primarily for two departments; the majority of my time was spent with the department for education and community outreach, where I was given the official title Learning and Access Assistant. The role proved extremely varied; assisting with practical delivery, general administration and project management. Whilst out of the office I joined dance education officers around the UK supporting them in facilitating dance workshops and events. In the office I worked under the leadership of the Department Director and Coordinator aiding with general administration as well as being given my own projects and responsibilities. My role within the Classical Training Department was very different as I worked independently as a pastoral member of staff. Within this role I acted as the communication link between parents, students and teachers. As the first point of call for first aid and student support, I had to undertake certified emergency first aid training and a course in child protection prior to this position.

The working environment during the thirty weeks was very supportive; my Departments and in general the whole Company immediately welcomed me. Within the Learning and Access Department I very quickly felt like a fully-fledged member of staff and was immediately involved and asked for input in all meetings and projects. My department helped me understand the general Company structure and certain aspects such as Company etiquette and procedures. The rest of the Company such as the Marketing, Finance and Public Relations Departments were also very helpful, allowing me an insight into what they do to give me a fuller

understanding. I felt able to approach anyone within the Company to assist me or ask for their advice. Seen as a formal member of staff, I felt able to receive work or instructions from Company members outside my Department and I felt able to delegate work to them if tasks were more suited to another Department's expertise.

I was assigned a mentor from within the Education Department to act as my main point of call for support and to assess my progress and provide feedback to the University. They were extremely supportive and encouraging professionally, but also sensitive to external more personal issues. With the placement based far from home, part of my placement experience included having to move somewhere completely new. The extra responsibility of finding somewhere accessible and affordable to rent added an extra dimension to my experience, and I felt even more like I was entering the real world. The Company were sympathetic to my situation, knowing that I knew few people and was unfamiliar with the area, they helped me settle in and were adaptable to my needs.

The Learning and Access Department job role proved vast and varied; as well as travelling nationally with the Company delivering activities; they also work within formal education institutions delivering short and long-term projects. In the entire thirty-weeks, there was not one day that was ever the same. I was constantly challenged with new situations and new people to engage with. The variety of participants and clients ranging from primary school pupils, to Old Age Pensioners to visually impaired adults and mentally disabled children meant I was constantly required to adapt my communication approach in order to engage with them.

Prior to placement I had a small amount of teaching experience from working at a private dance school. I had studied modules at University on how to plan and implement community dance sessions with different participants, however I had never had any practical experience. The opportunity to work first hand with such a variety of participants was stimulating and exciting and I enjoyed the challenge of adapting my approach to different situations. In reflection, it was through these situations that I was able to recognise my ability to communicate effectively with clients and discovered how surprisingly confident I felt working with these different people.

In addition to working in the office, and at events and workshops in the region, I was also offered the chance to go on tour with the Company for a week. This opportunity was completely unique and was excellent in illustrating the range of dance activities on offer and allowed me to see another level to dance access work. I found the experience positively challenging and certainly character building, as I had to accustom myself to new surroundings without the support of my friends and family. At the start of placement I had quickly and easily got into a daily routine of going to work and coming home again. Whether I was working in schools or in the office there were still familiarities, which acted as a means of support. On tour this was completely different; you are away from your home and the majority of your work colleagues thus you are very isolated and can only rely upon your self for help and encouragement.

The placement made use of and extended my organisational skills. Even trivial tasks such as making my own way to workshops and events and on tour required copious research and planning in advance. Having to do tasks like this on a regular basis not only required me to use my initiative but also extended my day-to-day skills such as map reading and using public transport.

In addition to practical facilitation I was given a large amount of administrative work. With this I was able to develop key skills in computer literacy; learning how to competently use databases and functions such as mail merge all of which will be useful in any future career. Having

observed colleagues project manage, I was then given a number of my own projects to take charge of. My own projects were perhaps the most daunting, yet at the same time the most fulfilling and where I can clearly identify the most professional development. Although I had studied project management at University and produced a number of theoretical documents in regards to coordinating projects and events, I had not had many opportunities to put my knowledge into practice. A unique factor about placement is that you get to experience the realities of working in the professional environment; if things did not go to plan then there would be genuine consequences. The role as project manager required me to use my initiative and come up with relief strategies to solve certain problems and overcome obstacles. These tasks required organisation of the highest level, working within budgets and timescales and having to communicate on a number of levels to a variety of people. The projects allowed me to collate all the skills and knowledge I had gathered and gave me a real sense of achievement to see the final results. Whether it was reading a resource pack I had produced or watching the final performance of a course I had organised, I felt a real sense of ownership and pride towards the work.

Despite all the positive comments about my placement experience, it was not all plain sailing and there were difficulties and challenges I had to face on certain occasions. There were projects at the beginning of my placement that were not entirely successful and I look back now wishing I had then had the confidence to persist, to pester clients and be more determined. There are times when I have been bored and completely frustrated by long menial tasks that have no end in sight. The number of times I have stressed when I have had hundreds of pages to photocopy for an immediate deadline and someone has jammed the photocopier. However, all these issues represent realities of full time employment, which come part in parcel of experiencing to be a professional. It cant always be all fun and exciting and things cant always run smoothly, what is important is that when I reflect back now I can see alternative ways of handling these types of situation.

One of the main highlights of the placement was the opportunity to work with passionate people who have an extensive knowledge of the dance industry. With so many years experience in the field, it was a great insight to see how they had achieved many of their accomplishments and the route they had taken to their current position of work. Working at such close proximity to professionals not just within my own Company but extending outside to the self-employed dance and creative artists, I was able to see what qualities and skills professionals look for in their employees.

The amount you are able to learn and the benefits you gain from undertaking a professional placement is very much up to you as an individual. Your host Company can provide you with a basic insight into how the professional industry function. However, it is your responsibility to embody that knowledge to extend your professional development. The more effort and enthusiasm you put into your work the more you stand to gain. The opportunity to learn and work alongside professionals, utilise and expand existing skills and gain inside knowledge is invaluable and puts you at a great advantage when it comes to the stage of starting your career.

Over only a thirty-week period I feel I have significantly developed knowledge and skills that will prove generally invaluable within any professional industry. The department have helped me reflect on the majority of work I have done, allowing me to see the successes as well as identifying my individual strengths and areas for development. All of the opportunities given to me have allowed me to acquire new skills and I take away some formal qualifications in child protection and emergency first aid that all contributed to my professional development.

From initially feeling very apprehensive and unsure about my placement and my career choice at the end, I am now much more excited and focused about the future. Though there are no guarantees, and I have much development to do professionally, I have a much clearer picture of what is available to me and how to try and achieve that. The previously unknown realm of dance education has been exposed to me under the supportive gaze of this ballet company. Now I am back at university for my final year, I feel there is a purpose to my study and I am more independent and inclined to take charge of my own learning and development. I now have the confidence to grasp new experiences and have a greater understanding of how to progress to the next stage of my life. For me this professional work placement has been integral in introducing an area of the dance industry for which I am now passionate and intent to succeed in.