

Lockdown Learning

Reflections from the National Centres for Advanced Training (CATs)

Maintaining momentum through lockdown and beyond, by Chloe Travers, DanceEast Centre for Advanced Training Coordinator, and Alexandra Henwood, DanceXchange Head of Learning and Participation, on behalf of the National Centres for Advanced Training in Dance.



CAT students at DanceXchange

The National Centres for Advanced Training in Dance (CATs) have been engaging and supporting young dancers since 2004; assisting young people to access high-quality pre-vocational dance training, regardless of their personal circumstances. Supported by the Department for Education's Music and Dance Scheme, the twelve CATs are based at leading dance organisations across the country. The National CATs work with over 900 students, providing means-tested grants to enable greater access to dance training.

The past few months have seen the ways in which we work alter drastically to meet the challenges of lockdown. We have refocused our programmes and stepped outside our usual training structures and methods. Whilst we have certainly encountered a variety of difficulties, there have also been many beneficial discoveries, which we are confident will continue to have a positive impact long after lockdown.

By fully embracing digital dancing, whether that be live streaming performances, participating in technique classes via Zoom or exploring creative tasks via pre-recorded videos on YouTube, we have been able to respond to our evolving environments and continued to pioneer, promote and deliver best practice in pre-vocational dance training. Navigating the challenges

“The opportunity to train more frequently, at their own pace, has allowed students' creativity to soar”



CAT students take part in an Alvin Ailey Intensive

of lockdown has united the National CATs in a profound way, sparking innovative ways of working together and strengthening our connection.

These new ways of training have enabled our students to access a number of high-quality dance experiences that they would not usually have been able to. A positive of us all training at home is that barriers such as time and travel have been reduced, which opens various opportunities. Recently, we were able to connect students from each centre in a digital workshop with New Adventures and Sir Matthew Bourne; enabling students across the country to train together and work with world renowned artists. Our awareness of space has been considerably increased recently; we've all had to adapt to new physical dance spaces whilst our regular venues have been closed. Perhaps what has been the most noticeable is the space that is now between us whilst we dance. Being able to regularly train together, albeit remotely, has continued to provide a much-needed social element to our week, as well as a sense of normality and structure to our daily lives and ultimately has enabled us to maintain a sense of self.

Even within the midst of a pandemic, dance has continued to provide a sense of relief and joy to many. However, dancing in lockdown has presented several challenges and has certainly been a rather steep learning curve. There are a number of possible barriers

to digital training which have made it more difficult for some young people to engage during lockdown. We have noticed this most in the lower number of participants engaging in our outreach work, which has resulted in a national decrease in applications to join the CATs. As we learn more about the various possibilities of digital dancing and the best ways to overcome digital barriers, we look forward to feeding this learning into our future work so that our provision is as accessible as possible.

One of the great outcomes of this opportunity to reflect on and refocus our training has been the ability to incorporate a broader range of skills, which have sparked greater versatility and enhanced students' technique and creativity. Through digital dance training, students have been able to access classes led by a wider range of artists more regularly, which has enriched and broadened their knowledge and understanding of dance. In addition, being able to access a more flexible training schedule has empowered students to better balance the demands on their time. The opportunity to train more frequently, at their own pace, has also enabled their confidence and creativity to soar.

Being able to support students in developing a wider variety of skills has resulted in our students becoming more innovative and it has been so exciting to see such unique, multi-faceted artistic voices flourish within challenging

conditions. Arguably, the skills that dance training offers, such as resilience, adaptability and creativity, have been great preparation for navigating such unfamiliar circumstances. During the recent months we've noticed our students, from all across the country, mature in their approach to training: adapting to the shifting circumstances, displaying their passion and commitment for dance and becoming more intuitive, resourceful dancers. Our students have noted themselves that they feel a greater sense of autonomy and self-motivation - all key traits of a strong and successful dancer.

As we now start to move back into the studio, we're really looking forward to re-engaging with the aspects of dance that we have sorely missed during lockdown. That said, the National CATs are committed to not discarding the learning and benefits that this digital dance revolution has provided us. Moving forward, we will endeavour to provide our students with a richer dance experience by embracing the best of both practices and ensuring that the barriers to each are reduced.

There have been lots of exciting discoveries through our adaptations over the past few months and we are excited to continue to realise new ways of working to ensure that we match our dynamic and shifting industry and best support our students.

Further information
nationaldancecats.co.uk