



Callers' Development Day Saturday 8 February 2020, Cecil Sharp House **Review by Alison Rowley**

The second Callers' Development Day was a wonderful opportunity to be surrounded by a wealth of calling knowledge and experience, to share ideas and to gain practical workable advice.

After a warm welcome by Kerry Fletcher (EFDSS Folk Educators Group Coordinator) and Laura Connolly (EFDSS Dance Development Manager) we launched into the intriguingly-titled 'Afro-Ceilidh Jam' with Andrea Queens from Folk Dance Remixed. Combining song with freestyle dance movements and mirroring, it reminded us that callers are a diverse lot with a range of experience of other dance styles. Freestyling might have been outside the comfort zone for some of us, but it certainly broke the ice and warmed up our bodies, voices and minds for the day ahead.

The first keynote by John McMahon and the panel discussion immediately following it focused on how folk dance can be used within the community to aid health and wellbeing, not just as entertainment. John, as Senior Manager for Policy and Research at Arts Council England, explained the relatively new move towards Social Prescribing as a formal alternative (or complement to) 'conventional' forms of medicine. I was unaware that Arts Council England is funding an increasing number of projects in the area of arts and health. In 2018/19 there were 468 projects – a 50% increase. John signposted us to steps we as individuals can take to make the most of this trend, such as connecting with local link workers, and signing up to organisations like the National Association of Link Workers, and the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance.

In the panel that followed we heard from three practitioners: Sara Marshall-Rose (trainee dance and movement psychotherapist and Folk 3D), and Jo Harmer and Cath Watkins (FolkActive). The main talking points were the steps involved in setting up a project like this, and the personal skills and techniques you might need to teach in this type of environment. For example, your role is 'facilitating' rather than 'calling' – you need to provide a structure but also to stay in the moment and be able to adapt.

My feeling by the end of the discussion is that Social Prescribing is still in its early days but there is a lot of potential for the folk dance community to get involved. Now is a good time to start thinking about projects, finding the knowledge and training you need, and making contacts with people in your local area to make things happen! And one very concrete goal that we as a community can work towards is getting 'folk dance' added to the NHS suggestions on their Dance For Fitness web page, by finding case studies and building momentum – let's do it!

We then had a choice of three special interest groups, and I opted for Mary Panton's session 'Calling For Older People And Those With Mobility Issues'. Mary gave us an overview of some challenges and strategies from her experience of running folk dance classes specifically aimed at older dancers. We worked through a couple of different ceilidh dances while Mary suggested ways to adapt the moves to cater to a range of mobility issues. This session had a lot of practical advice that could be transferred to other calling situations, such as when a less mobile dancer approaches the dance floor at a wedding, and it opened my eyes to moves I wouldn't have guessed would be problematic. I didn't know, for example, that people living with Parkinson's often have difficulty walking backwards.



Most attendees opted to enjoy lunch from the café downstairs, and extra tables were laid out so we could continue our discussions, social catch-ups and networking as we ate.

After lunch we were joined by Anna Leatherdale (Director of Learning at People Dancing) via webcam for the day's second keynote speech, this time regarding 'Continuing Professional Development'. This also focused mainly on teaching dance within a therapeutic community setting, but with an emphasis on finding the information you need to teach in your chosen setting effectively. She acknowledged that 'you don't know what you don't know' and pointed us to the vast wealth of resources that People Dancing provides – from training courses to podcasts to documents online.

This was followed by a panel about mentoring callers, with Cat McGill (Cat's Calling Academy), El Budden (Shooting Roots), and Mike Ruff and Erin Mansfield (lead tutor and mentee at the EFDSS English Country Dancing classes). I can personally vouch for the enormous number of opportunities these speakers all provide for new callers to learn the craft and gain experience, and the advice in this session ranged from general calling tips to practical support you can provide in a mentoring situation. For example, Mike and Erin discussed the value of evaluating what worked and what didn't after each session, and how it helped them both to reflect and improve.

We split into special interest groups again for the final session of the day. I took part in a discussion of inclusiveness and diversity for experienced callers with Cat McGill. On the subject of gender neutral calling, the consensus in the group was that this is often a clearer way to call for new dancers anyway, and that it's possible to call gender free without people even noticing! This discussion was a great opportunity to find out how other experienced callers approach certain problematic moves. We also considered how to be inclusive to dancers with additional needs – Cat's advice was to think about what is *most* useful and focus on that. For example, using big arm movements to support your calling on a chaotic dance floor will be more useful than learning Makaton and hoping that those at the back can see and focus on it.

Kerry and the team at EFDSS did a brilliant job of organising a fun day that catered to a wide range of experiences and priorities while still feeling coherent. There was a really positive atmosphere throughout, and it was clear that all the speakers were passionate about empowering callers and helping us to expand our knowledge and skills for the benefit of the dancers we teach, whoever they may be.

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