

**Ludus Dance and Dance Consortia North West Consultation Report:
Digital Dance Cultures and Youth Dance Practices in the North West (UK)**

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Executive Summary

This report outlines the findings from the consultation led by Ludus Dance (LD), undertaken through funding by Dance Consortia Northwest (DCNW), into digital dance cultures and youth dance practices in the North West (NW) of England, the UK and beyond. The commission set out to question how the development of a digital platform in Lancashire might support the evolution of youth dance in the NW. Building upon LD's annual Big Up North platform, which was designed to celebrate youth dance across the region and was delivered online in 2022, this report evaluates how to best create remote engagement, and how to present youth dance online, both live and archival.

Following the digital advancements brought about during the COVID-19 pandemic, this report examines the dance industry's rapid pivot to digital practice, with specific focus on young people's engagement and relationship with dance in a digital format. LD set out to discover how digital engagement could be a way to engage and share practice for artists and families to whom socio-economic, geographical and time constraints are barriers, with the aim of increasing access to youth dance across the region.

This report draws from a dossier of learning from practice and exploration of live work presented in digital spaces and makes recommendations as to how young people might engage with digital practice going forward. Through a mixed methodology, this report outlines two case studies: Scoping Digital Dance Cultures and the Big Up North Youth Dance Festival

Due to several shifts in the dance and funding landscape, the key recommendation from this report is for the development of a Ludus Dance Digital Hub to act as both archive and central point of engagement for young people and dance/non dance audiences in NW England and beyond.



Ludus Dance, Light Up Lancaster 2021: Fusing digital film with live performance

“Technology cannot replace the live experience of dance either in teaching or performance, but it can serve as an innovative and engaging mechanism for expanding and enhancing young people’s experience and engagement.”

Youth Dance England, 2010

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Introduction

This report summarises the research findings from the DCNW 2022 commission around digital dance cultures, its evolution and potential impact on youth dance in the North West of England (NWE).

Ludus Dance (LD) set out to explore how the development of a digital platform in Lancashire might support the growth of digital dance practice within the local youth dance sector. Using their existing Lancashire dance platform Big Up North (BUN), which was delivered online in 2022, LD examined how to best create an event which encompassed remote engagement alongside presenting live streamed performances and the sharing of dance films (which were watched simultaneously by an audience of young people from their own locations).

Following the digital advancements brought about during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, this report builds upon the dance industry's rapid pivot to digital practice, with specific focus on young people's engagement and relationship with dance in a digital format. LD set out to discover how digital engagement can be a way to participate in and share practice for artists and families to whom socio-economic, geographical and time constraints are barriers, with the aim of increasing access to youth dance across the North West (NW) region.

Key research questions included:

- How can the digital realm be used to connect young people through shared creative practice?
- How successful was BUN as an online youth dance event?
- How can LD develop BUN to support young people, emerging & established dance artists to:
 - o develop and/or teach robust and innovative digital dance skills?
 - o be empowered to communicate through digital dance practice?
- How is NWE's youth dance sector strengthened by LD building a digital dance platform that creates, shares and archives digital dance practice by and for young people?

This commission draws from a dossier of learning from practice and exploration of live work presented in digital spaces (see Appendix A). In terms of methodology, the research draws from web-based research, and informal conversations with young people and artists working digitally. This approach results in two key case studies Scoping Digital Dance Cultures and Big Up North.

The report concludes by making key recommendations for LD around digital and online work from their base in NWE.

Key Stakeholders

Dance Consortia North West

Dance Consortia North West (DCNW) is a diverse collection of dance artists, companies and venues that come together to generate, collaborate, and celebrate dance across the region.

DCNW identifies and delivers collective actions that produce change which is greater than artists and individual organisations could produce by themselves. Working together to make small changes and big impacts, DCNW aims to:

- Grow the quality and range of dance entering, generated in and emanating from the North West
- Nurture regional talent, enable artistic ambition, production and presentation
- Develop audiences, engagement and sector knowledge
- Attract regional, national and international attention for dance in the North West.

Supported by Arts Council England, its members and project activity, DCNW is a powerful consortium of dance artists, companies and venues that are collectively responsive to the strengths, needs and specialisms of the region's artists and organisations, whilst also learning from and collaborating with the wider dance and cultural sector.

Ludus Dance

Founded in 1975, as a worker's co-operative by dance artists, performers and political activists, Ludus Dance was the UK's first 'Dance in Education' company. Through its early form the founders devised performances for children and young people to engage with topics that were shaping the world they grew up in. These were experienced in education settings and built upon the methods established by the Theatre in Education (TIE) movement. Ludus Dance enjoyed successes at home and across the world.

Over time Ludus Dance has developed into a unique children and young people's charity that uses dance to empower the next generation to find purpose and meaning in the world. Working locally from our home in Lancaster we devise an annual dance performance, through which we tackle and comment upon societal issues that directly affect the collective future of both people and planet. We gently disrupt imbalances of power that prohibit children & young people from taking control of their futures, by placing creative power for how our performances take shape into their hands.

Alongside this sits a series of developmental dance programmes that target marginalised individuals, their families and support systems. These provide unique ways for those who face injustice to access social capital to increase their life chances and the opportunity to prosper. Through weekly dance classes, creative drop-ins, intensive training, volunteering opportunities, and paid professional opportunities we use dance as a tool to realise potential.



Analysis

Case Study 1 – Scoping Digital Dance Cultures

- How can the digital realm be used to connect young people through shared creative practice?

Ludus undertook a scoping exercise of *youth dance digital practices*, focusing on the variety of digital tools that can be used to enhance and transform community dance practice for young people. It became apparent that very little research had been undertaken within community youth dance practices and its use of the digital since the pandemic. Therefore, the scope was widened to include all digital dance cultures within dance organisations and projects, both within the UK and internationally. Results were captured in a visual mural (see Appendix A).

As a result, five key areas of digital dance cultures were identified:

1. Digital Dance Stage

Website and accompanying phone application that acts as a digital hub for the showcasing of dance classes, festivals, works in progress, performances, skills building, links to social applications, and archival footage.

Examples include Greenwich Dance's [Digital Stage](#) and Swindon Dance's [Online Platform](#)

2. Digital as Creative Process

Utilising future technologies within the creative process and/or in the performance of that work (see Appendix C for glossary of these technologies).

Examples include Together, nee Merseyside Dance Initiative's Scratch [virtual production](#) and the Pavilion Dance and The Motion Dance Collective's R&D work [Vibes](#)

3. Digital as Interactivity

Digital Interactivity gives the end user options and choice as to how they want to navigate their dance experience. This interactivity may include augmented reality as part of a live dance experience. Interactivity can also include downloading digital exercises/resource packs, taking part in online dance classes, and partaking in online games.

Examples include AVA Dance Company [Angel VR](#) and Blue Moose Dance companies [digital offering](#).

4. Digital as Capture

Live streaming dance experiences online with live elements occurring concurrently with online passes to events. Digital capture can also include a mixture of dance film screenings, solely live events, and online streaming of performances. Examples include virtual taster workshops, Q&As, live online workshops, festivals, screendance performances, pre-recorded live performances, and interactive performances, as seen within the Tanzahoi [festival](#) and the U.Dance [Digital festival](#).

5. Digital Marketing

Social media interactivity as both communication channels and as interactivity with young people, with a specific dance focus.

Examples include Barking and Dagenham [youth dance](#) and the National Youth Dance Company's TikTok [presence](#)

This scoping work also drew from current research on the ethical considerations of dance and the digital. In terms of the demographic of children and young people that work with LD, it is clear that whilst the digital options open to dance as a creative process are exciting, these would not be readily accessible to these young people, particularly those experiencing digital poverty. Accessibility should be at the heart of the digital offering, and the digital as interactivity, as well as the digital dance stage, to open options to reach those experiencing socio-economic, geographical and time constraint barriers.

Through this research process, LD clarified for itself that the focus should be on quality of content rather than volume, and that the landing space for this content should take into account digital safeguarding and privacy laws, moving away from the ethical issues presented by social media platforms, which include amongst others environmental impact of digital footprint, social isolation and depression as a result of social media addiction. As a direct result of this research LD are committed to drastically reducing its digital footprint, and role modelling control over social media usage.

Case Study 2 – Big Up North

Big Up North youth dance showcase ran as a mixture of online and live youth dance performances on 8th May 2022. It was this hybrid approach that led to LD setting out to evaluate how to best create remote engagement, and how to present youth dance online.

Using the scoping digital dance cultures research (see Case Study 2), Ludus reached out to the artists who worked with Big Up North to invite the artists and children and young people to attend an in-person research and development day to explore what working digitally might offer the youth dance sector (see Appendix B). The day was to be run in conjunction with Together, formally Merseyside Dance Initiative.

Several factors affected the success of the event. Together, the partner host folded as an organisation alongside local dance artists being unprepared to take part in a free professional development session unless they were being paid. This resulted in little uptake or appetite with additional comments that additional training was not required in this area from the local youth dance workforce. It should be noted that during the national and international scoping of Digital Dance Cultures there was little evidence of innovation in this area from the youth dance practitioners who were consulted. This indicates disparity between the skills the local workforce state they have compared to the digital youth dance practice that is outputted. Further investigation would be needed to understand what the barriers are that prohibit the workforce from doing so.

This lack of engagement rapidly changed the scope of the research and led to LD needing to consolidate its findings from anecdotal evidence from its current young people. The overwhelming feedback suggests that there is not the interest or appetite for another digital festival, with a renewed emphasis and embrace of the live. Community and connection are key attributes of the work of LD and the young people of the North West, and whilst digital tools can support these young people in telling their stories, a digital festival in the current post COVID climate felt too isolating. This is further evidenced by lack of digital dance films submitted for U.Dance 2022 and 2023; LD were the only dance film category in 2022.

Whilst this is not the result that was hoped for, it has allowed for some further strategic thinking around youth dance and the digital within the North West (see recommendations).

Recommendations

Due to wide scale funding cuts made by Arts Council England, as well as a changing and increasingly fragmented youth dance landscape, this report comes at a time of refocus for LD. Whilst it is clear from the above experiences that there is not the need for a BUN digital festival, there is a need to explore further the relationship between youth dance practices and the digital.

- LD has increased its appetite to continue exploring digital disciplines within their dance making and want to ensure dancers know which tools are available to them to best execute their ideas and tell their stories through upskilling.
- The digital enables young dancers in their self-promotion (marketing / digital portfolio), to document their dance journey, and to increase their understanding of the tools they can use to execute their ideas to an audience (i.e., projection / dance films).
- LD wants to bring dance to more people, and to engage non dance audiences outside of the theatre environment. A recent example includes Light Up Lancaster, which engaged a non-dance audience of 3000+ members.
- People want to digest digital content at a time that suits them and with the time to browse.
- LD loves working with film, creating a more personal camera led experience for the viewer.
- LD wants to provide content as a creative resource and inspiration, attracting dance and non-dance audiences alike.

As a result of this research, the desire to create an online digital archive / resource has been reinforced, with the of recommendation of developing the LD Digital Hub; a digital stage that would bring the current and archival work of Ludus together and provide a space for future live and digital collaborations.

Drawing from the scoping research, a Digital hub for LD might include:

- Premiering / archiving dance films / documentaries by LD
- Live Streamed performances / events
- A place for online dance tutorials
- Digital activity packs with challenges
- Podcasts Series
- Reviews by young people
- Ludus Dance Company Archive (1975 – Present Day)

Conclusion

This report set out to evaluate how to best create remote engagement, and how to present youth dance online, both live and archival. Whilst the initial research questions shifted due to several shifts in the dance and funding landscape, there has been key learning from the project as to how LD would like to engage with the digital going forward, whilst remaining as accessible as possible for the children and young people for which it caters.

0 and the results of the lack of funding and fragmentation of organisations and freelance artists. The lack of engagement in the project speaks to the wider effects of the cost-of-living crisis and what support is required from dance hubs in this current climate. If youth dance is to develop, there needs to be more collegiality across organisations and artists to work towards a similar goal in the advancement of opportunities for children and young people.

The main learning from this project has come from the scoping case study, and it is hoped that this information could itself be disseminated through digital routes, including podcasts and media content.

The next steps of this research are as follows:

- Consultation with young people in the North West around dance and the LD digital dance hub
- Invitation for the reader to consider the use of the digital within their own youth dance organisation
- The development of the LD Digital hub, including a digital archive and a platform for all future work
- Continued research and networking with international partners around digital accessibility
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References

Siddall, J. Dance In and Beyond Schools: an essential guide to dance teaching and learning.

Youth Dance England, 2010.

Appendices

Appendix A – Digital Dance Scoping, [Link to Mural](#)

Appendix B – Digital Dance Consultation, [Digital Dance Consultation](#)

Appendix C – Digital Glossary

VFX	Visual Effects. VFX are used to create imagery out of a combination of live actions shots and Digital Images
CGI	Computer Generated Imagery. CGI is used to create images, print media, commercials, animations and videos, and other digital work
Virtual Reality (VR)	The computer-generated simulation of a three-dimensional image or environment that can be interacted with in a seemingly real or physical way by a person using special electronic equipment, such as a helmet with a screen inside or gloves fitted with sensors.
360 Camera	This camera has a 360-degree field of view so that it captures just about everything around the sphere
Augmented Reality	Technology that superimposes a computer-generated image on a user's view of the real world
Motion Capture (Mocap)	Motion capture (mocap) is the process of recording the movement of objects or people
Immersive storytelling	Immersive storytelling is a technique that uses the latest technologies to create a compelling sense of presence. It gives the audience the feeling of “being there.” It's a unique but impactful way of blending reality with fiction.
Vibrotactile Technology	Technology that enables vibration signals to be felt through the body
Holographic Projection	Holographic projectors provide either a two-dimensional or three-dimensional projection which can be seen without any additional equipment (such as cameras or glasses).
Live Streaming	To transmit or receive live video and audio coverage of (an event) over the internet
Metaverse	The metaverse is a vision of what many in the computer industry believe is the next iteration of the internet: a single, shared, immersive, persistent, 3D virtual space where humans experience life in ways they could not in the physical world.
Green Screen	A green screen is a large green backdrop placed in the background of a shot to allow for digital effects later
Podcasts	An audio programme that you can subscribe to and access when needed
GIF	A GIF is an animated series of images or soundless videos that loop continuously.