

# WHOSE STUDENTS ARE THEY ANYWAY?

*Encouraging Collaboration in Performing Arts Education*

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## ABSTRACT

When discussing the nature of *collaboration*, some might argue that we each have our own definition, that it means something slightly different to each of us. We would suggest that collaboration is simply *working together in order to achieve synergy*.

*The whole is more than the sum of its parts.*<sup>1</sup>

In vocational HE, we walk a tightrope between our responsibility for learning and teaching and the demands of industry practice particularly in the Theatre Production model utilised by most, if not all colleges in the performing arts sector.

Other questions relate specifically to the ways in which we collaborate:

1. What does each of us mean by “our students”? Do we mean those on our own programmes? Should we mean students on all programmes?
2. What do we mean by the student’s right to fail and how do we support this concept within vocational HE?
3. When we talk about collaboration, what are we trying to achieve? For example, are we trying to suggest commonality of working practice?
4. Collaboration is at the heart of theatre making. How does this work in the industry and are we truly emulating this practice?

A conceptual model of collaborative partnership is in line with critical pedagogy in HE theatre practice. The aims in HE are that learners become autonomous and independent and in vocational HE for the performing arts industries, this is connected to the collective ideas of shared goals, shared experiences and shared resources.

This paper outlines and explores the work that we have been doing at Rose Bruford College in the last two years to encourage discussion and debate around collaboration and the ways in which we all engage with it. Might a collaborative framework across the schools of Performance and Design Management and Technical Arts encourage both teachers and learners to improve and enrich cross-school relationships and by doing so, achieve a more productive working environment?

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<sup>1</sup> Translation from Aristotle – *Metaphysica* – c360BCE – Noting that the original “more than” does not necessarily mean “greater than”, it may be taken to mean “more than merely”.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we explore some ideas about *collaboration*. What do we mean by it and do we in fact *do* it?

The title came about on the back of thoughts and discussions during a stage rehearsal at Rose Bruford College in Sidcup, Kent: when we talk about *our students*, whose students do we mean? Do we mean those students for whom we are directly responsible or do we, *should* we, mean all the students in the college?

As members of staff at Rose Bruford, we presume ourselves to be a community of practice, by which we mean a group of people brought together as educators, trainers and practitioners, engaged in theatre making. This, we believe to be a collaborative activity. However, it often appears that perhaps we do not work together as effectively as we could; that we spend rather too much time *fighting our own corners* and that in order to encourage students to collaborate, perhaps we should be setting more of an example.

Another strand to our train of thought was this: we all work in service to a play or the piece, or production or product; or do we? Is our primary responsibility to the student and their learning or to the production? Do we focus on the process or product? Should the expression "*the show must go on*" have any place in an education system? As long as students are learning, should it matter if the performance doesn't actually happen?

Our thoughts continued: we walk a tightrope between learning and teaching and what we call *industry practice*. But do we have a collective understanding about what those things mean?

To quote the Rose Bruford prospectus, "*Collaboration and working together lies at the heart of all we do*"<sup>2</sup>. So we value it, but what does it actually mean and how does it work for us.

Do we think it might be useful to develop a *framework for collaboration* across all programmes and both schools at Rose Bruford?

With these questions in mind, we put forward a proposal to senior management at Rose Bruford that we run staff development sessions to ask these very questions and to see if we could get some feedback on our deliberations.

It should be noted that the comments below are extracted from both written and verbal material gathered from staff at Rose Bruford College during staff development sessions in July and September 2011. Complete bullet point transcripts are available.

This paper builds on the information gleaned in these sessions with a view to taking our ideas for a *collaborative framework* forward.

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<sup>2</sup> Prospectus for Rose Bruford College 09.02.12 <http://www.bruford.ac.uk/principals-welcome.aspx>

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT

After a briefing in which we outlined our thoughts and what we were trying to achieve, we asked delegates to consider five questions.

Not wishing to prejudice our participants, we wanted to design the questions in such a way as to avoid forcing particular answers. Stripped down, our final versions were as follows:

1. When we say “our students”, what do we mean?
2. What do we mean by “the student’s right to fail”? How do we support it?
3. What do we mean by “industry practice”?
4. Do we focus on process or product?
5. Collaboration, what do we mean by it?

Delegates were split into five groups taking one question with them for consideration.

## OUR STUDENTS

*When we say “our students”, what do we mean?*

Outside the realms of this forum, the term *our students* is used in a both possessive and inclusive sense. For example this statement from the LIPA website:

*Our students are creative, energetic and multi-skilled  
They are the centre of everything we do.  
Study at LIPA and you will be encouraged to work hard and enjoy your studies.<sup>3</sup>*

And this from EBSL:

*Our students  
EBS London is truly international centre of study. This is our hallmark and a  
cornerstone of our success. The focus on language skills and inter-cultural  
development does not come solely from our academics. At EBSL you will learn as  
much from your peers as from your tutors.<sup>4</sup>*

...might each be said to do exactly that. Is this *possessive inclusivity* what we understand to be common practice across all HE? Is it perhaps what we aspire to?

In general terms, we identified that delegates *aimed* to be inclusive about all students, but that often the timetable and specific programme goals got in the way, sometimes forcing an exclusive attitude towards students from other programmes.

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<sup>3</sup> Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts, 05.03.12, <http://www.lipa.ac.uk/content/OurStudents.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> European Business School London, 05.03.12, [http://www.ebslondon.ac.uk/about\\_ebs/our\\_students.aspx](http://www.ebslondon.ac.uk/about_ebs/our_students.aspx)

Bulleted initial observations in answer to the question follow:

- All those we have a responsibility for over their length of stay and beyond.
- Students training to our agreed ethos.
- It should mean all students irrespective of course or discipline but sometimes it is difficult not to be biased
- Those who we influence and who influence us. Those also we can help develop and who define what we are. Our contemporaries and peers to be...
- “Our” is a possessive. To what degree do we possess them. Are they “the students”? “Our” is a way to categorise them – so what are the categories that we ‘aspire’ to?
- Those for whom we engage as part of our vocation
- Depends on context – either the college or programme (if programme, sometimes students both past and present)
- On different levels, those students we are directly responsible for and all the students in the college

And points teased out in discussion:

- Possessiveness might be seen as negative. Perhaps we should ensure that *inclusiveness* is the word we use.
- Responsibility, contact and investment in student learning is a shared obligation.
- We should cultivate an awareness that students remain connected to us after they’ve gone. That they belong, even after graduation, in a community

Further discussion on what kind of student we *want* to call *ours* covered:

- An engagement beyond the explicit contractual agreement
- These are people we can’t (or don’t want to) give up on
- We look for a particular type of investment in the work

We are narrowly demarcated, are there ways in which we might better understand others’ practice:

- We need opportunity to see the devising or rehearsal process from the point of view of other practitioners.
- As, for example, an actor, how does it feel to be a lighting, costume or sound student under pressure? How can we share this knowledge and experience? Induction or *company* meetings might prove useful here.

So to summarise response to this question: a desire to create an inclusive environment in which all students understand that they are part of a larger, cohesive whole does not always translate into reality. Too often programmes take a self-protective stance in order to ensure a particular objective at the expense of the wider team engaged in production or group work. There is clearly a will to address this imbalance, how might we facilitate action?

## THE STUDENT'S RIGHT TO FAIL

*What do we mean by "the student's right to fail"? How do we support it?*

*The right to fail is of the essence of creativity (just as the prevention of failure is of the essence of conservatism). The creative act must be uninhibited and marked by supreme confidence; there can be no fear of failure - nothing inhibits so fiercely, or shrinks a vision so drastically, or pulls a dream to earth so swiftly, as fear of failure.<sup>5</sup>*

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Some initial thoughts in answer to the question:

- Through constant and on-going assessment and feedback – seeing dangerous signs of failure
- The ability and opportunity for a student to try any new approach – which may or may not work
- Allowing experimentation with practice and process
- Accepting their right to disengage with the educative process. Tutoring and feedback
- Failing to master a task is sometimes a great learning experience
- The students' outcome belongs to them. Our input into it is our responsibility, but what they do with it is theirs.
- They certainly should be allowed to fail gloriously
- Learning from mistakes/encouraging risk-taking – all laudable and important – but not always possible when we have such public project work which is asked to function as showcase/shop window

And from discussion:

- What form might a collaborative framework take? Might it include an expansion of peer observation across the college so that staff gain some experience of others' programmes?
- Induction activity across programmes that promotes a shared notion of collaboration and working together. Thus students are brought together from the outset.
- Students and staff might perhaps work together across programmes in creative endeavour?
- What can we do to improve communication across programmes? We need organisational structures to promote collaboration and shared goals.
- Rose Bruford is a village or community, but often appears to be in crisis management mode. How does this actually affect our collaborative aspirations?

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<sup>5</sup> The Right to Fail: Creativity versus Conservatism, Albert J. Sullivan, *The Journal of Higher Education* Vol. 34, No. 4 (Apr., 1963), pp. 191-195, Ohio State University Press

Producing the following recommendations:

- Perhaps staff development sessions need to further explore collaboration, with recommendations included in timetables or otherwise acted upon during the following year.
- Each programme might present a definition of collaboration and *mission statement* for their programme. These are then forged to form a general collaborative mission statement for the college.
- What about a *speed dating* skills and interests session? Even just staff get-togethers.
- Staff to recommend sessions for creative staff development to share and expand on practice i.e. multi media projects/film and video
- Ensure that learning outcomes support the “right” to experiment (Failure)
- Dissertations or independent research projects support a variety of modes of assessment in order that students who are less good with writing have the opportunity to submit in another format.
- To manage the impact of an individual student’s experimentation outcome (Failure) on the group.

To summarise this thread, it is of particular note that discussion led straight back to the central theme of collaboration. Staff development played a key role here as did the idea of the *informal organisation*, wherein the social interactions between members of staff feed directly into the success or otherwise of formal working relationships.

Where the student’s right to fail was discussed, constructive alignment was a key strategy. How do we ensure that learning outcomes, assignment briefs and coursework both support and allow this concept?

#### INDUSTRY PRACTICE

*What do we mean by “industry practice”?*

*Without a standardised international methodology yet available, a mass of detailed though uncoordinated analysis and research has been undertaken in different parts of the world, and certain practices and methodologies have been widely adopted on an ad-hoc basis.*

*Unfortunately little is being done to standardise these methodologies and valuable opportunities are therefore being lost to build a more comprehensive body of regional knowledge that could be used for cross-border comparisons and international policy making on a more coordinated basis.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> From *Understanding Creative Industries; Cultural statistics for public-policy making*. A paper prepared by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation in partnership with the Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity, 2005

We use this quotation to illustrate the nebulous definition of the term *industry practice* even at the highest levels. We think we know what we mean by it, but this meaning is actually very different for each of us.

Initial thoughts on the question:

- Should the question be *practices* (plural)? Recognising diversity in practices, and questioning attached values and status, seems important when I think about this.
- Standards of work which vary from task to task, job to job, department to department – so varies
- Practices (plural)/standards of work applicable to the performing arts (hence varied)
- The opportunity to look at and understand practice that can be found away from college and to use this experience to further this practice through practical research
- Current practice in the workplace. Two problems we face are the plurality of the ‘industry’, which version of their practice do we mean/prioritise? And the notion of ‘industry’ is problematic – it is not an industry, but rather a sort of festival/commune of various professional organisations from small, mid and large scale theatre, reaching through to media such as TV, film, web-based etc. How do we engage with *them*, not *it*.
- A simulation of what might/could happen in the real world
- The vast range of (primarily theatre) practices that people do for a living in the UK and Europe
- Approaches developed, adopted, adapted and accepted in amongst commercial practicing/artistically active practitioners. These to be understood and refined/challenged/developed...
- Presumably, that which occurs within the industry as opposed to academic stuff.

From further discussion:

- Placements and collaboration with industry partners are vital to ensure our continued relevance in an ever changing technological environment.
- PDP needs to happen early on at level 4 and across schools, continuing throughout a student’s time at college.
- Informing and preparing students for collaboration – *why this is important* is a key concept to articulate.
- Does assessment kill collaboration? Student fixation with grades does seem to get in the way of a collaborative approach when each of them is trying to outshine the others.
- We, as members of staff, need to collaborate more. We need to know more about each other’s industry practice.
- What about a staff development session specifically focusing on shared/sharing practice?

- What do students actually understand by “industry practice”? Often a very narrow view. For example “having a role in the West End”. We should open their minds and introduce them to a range of industries, genres and practices.

Again, this question led right back to the heart of our topic: collaboration. It is clearly identified that it is vital to nurture our relationships with the industries we aspire for our students to join.

It is also clear that delegates felt strongly that sharing practice across departments is something we need to do more of.

Practice was pluralised by many delegates to *practices*. This might suggest that these delegates might adopt different approaches to the same shared goal. Alternatively it might suggest that they embrace diversity within a shared environment. In the spirit of collaboration, there was general agreement that whatever the case, we were all taking a positive view in wishing to take steps towards understanding what others are trying to achieve.

#### PROCESS VS PRODUCT

*Do we focus on process or product?*

*We define organizational learning as the capacity or processes within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience. Learning is a systems-level phenomenon because it stays within the organization, even if individuals change.<sup>7</sup>*

If one looks at an educational institution as a *learning organisation*, one might be tempted to see it as staid, unmoving and unwilling to learn and develop. In reality, what we do is to create an environment for learning and that environment needs to be stable in order to be safe and productive.

However, we must recognise that organisations are made up of individuals and not the other way round, so progression and development are vital for continued growth and success.

Our feeling is that the industries our students will enter focus entirely on product, how that product is *made* is less important than the fact that it *is*. Education surely focuses more on process, with the product being a secondary outcome.

So, the delegates’ initial thoughts on the question:

- Both really – sometimes one over the other and depends on who and what for.

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<sup>7</sup> From *Understanding Organizations as Learning Systems*, Edwin C. Nevis, Sohail Ghoreishi and Janet M. Gould, Sloan Management Review, 1995



- The process that leads to the product.  
The process that informs the product.  
We analyse the process in order to identify individual student's strengths and weaknesses within it.
- For some people, process is product. In any case, from a practitioner's perspective "products" are just way-points in a longer process. Creative works are never finished, only abandoned. So what defines the "product"?
- The concept of product differs from programme to programme. Educationally, process should lead, as from the skills acquired all sorts of products can be made.
- On both – process and 'product'/outcome are inter-related.
- Both. One leads to the other and vice-versa.
- I hate the word 'product' as used in this context, but if I understand it properly, then we must focus equally on both the former in what we do, but it is informed by the latter which must out as a type of mission statement
- A product is a 'fleeting moment' of 'stasis' in a longer process of artistic growth. Equally there is not one 'process', nor the desire to fixate on processes. How do we teach the ability to generate/formulate context-specific processes for the future.
- We focus too much on product at the expense of the process being part of an educative/training process.
- An artistic process is the great learning experience leading to moments of artistic production... which continues as a process.
- The same. Get the process right and the product will follow.
- If you focus on achieving quality product, the chances are 'learning outcomes' will take care of themselves. Focus on learning outcomes for their own sake is reductive and mechanistic.
- Unless we explore the process we will not teach or assist the development of new work but simply the recreation of an existing product/approximation of its values without structural organisation.

From discussion:

- In general we aim to err on the side of process, but should we avoid forcing the show to go on if the students are not ready?
- It is important that process is clearly seen as the path towards a product. Analysis of this journey is very much part of the learning experience.
- Students will be entering a fast moving industry where product (production/result) is key. Whilst focusing on process, students need to be aware of the differences between education and the industry.
- In an ideal world, the classroom is where we focus on process, the performance space is where we focus on product. Thus awareness of the differences between goals at level 4 and level 6 need to be clearly articulated.
- In support of the previous question, students have a right to fail in making the product, however it is their process that is being assessed.

- There are many different processes that go towards making a product and each programme will have their own version of these. Where we collaborate is in trying to understand each other's role within the wider team and being supportive of that role.

In summary, this particular question provoked the widest range of responses, but in attempting to bring them all together we recognise the inter-relatedness of everything we do here at Rose Bruford. Bringing our diverse talents, skills and ideas together as processes to achieve a shared goal in the product, show or production is central to what we do and should be celebrated.

### COLLABORATION

*Collaboration, what do we mean by it?*

Observing debate, it became clear that the first item for discussion upon reconvening was going to be this last question, a definition for *collaboration*.

Chambers gives the following:

collaborate verb (**collaborated, collaborating**) *intrans* **1** to work together with another or others on something. **2 derog** to co-operate or collude with an enemy, especially one occupying one's own country. **collaboration** noun. **collaborationism** noun a policy of collaboration with an enemy. **collaborationist** noun. **collaborative** adj. **collaboratively** adverb. **collaborator** noun.

ETYMOLOGY: 19c: from Latin *com-* together + *laborare* to work.<sup>8</sup>

At first glance then, a quite straightforward idea of what we wanted to talk about. However, this proved not to be the case.

To start with, there appeared to be some convergence of thought, definitions being as follows:

- A way of people working together with relatively flat or non-hierarchical structures.
- Shared purpose (is that even possible) which implies, at some level, shared values and experiences
- Working together – bringing different skills together towards a common purpose.
- Everyone and every part of the endeavour
- Exploring new ways of making the “whole” and finding new ways to devise and define what “whole” is/can be. Creating work greater than the sum of its parts.
- Working together as equals on a task/creative activity. Understanding others' creative ‘field’ and reflecting on one's own in order to develop a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

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<sup>8</sup> Chambers online dictionary 09.02.12 <http://www.chambers.co.uk/>

- Working together – students and staff, across school boundaries; working together – college and external partners
- I think about at least two different types of collaborations. One within college and one between the college and other institutions. It would be great to share skills and knowledge with other tutors.
- Being partners in crime.
- Working together in a constructive and mutually beneficial way to move towards mutually agreed goals – to share energy and still for the benefit of all involved.
- Creatively work together, discussing, sharing and moving towards a mutual desirable goal and to which we hold ourselves *mutually* responsible.
- Working together in a way that allows all to have “real” input and in which all input contributes in a “real” way to the outcome

However, in discussion our delegates were suggesting some diversity:

Working together is the starting point, but it goes beyond just working together, it is a mode of operation, an ethos and a dialogue.

A college environment as a village, a community of practice

- The actor is part of something, part of a hive.
- Collaboration vs ensemble – what are the distinctions?
- There are many modes of collaboration and we need to negotiate them.

We might identify different types of collaborators or collaboration within a given environment

- Different roles and subjective experiences within a collaboration
- Collaboration focussed purely on an objective

How important is hierarchy in facilitating collaboration?

- The autocrat
- The facilitator
- The supportive critic (critical friend)

Collaboration should have a sense of uncertainty, hyperawareness, and most importantly space and time.

What is the essence of collaboration?

- Buying into a shared goal
- Sense of the individual’s contribution
- A process to get there

Communication is about being prepared to listen, not just wanting to talk

- Is there effective communication across the college?
- Collaboration happening as a by-product of goodwill does not demonstrate an ethos.
- Might we lack the organisational structure to support collaborative practice?

What supports our collaboration?

- Environment
- Tone
- Ethos

Modes of collaboration in a college environment can prejudice some collaborators over others.

- When we are all working towards a single creative vision, the ownership of that vision tends to be held by one person, usually the director. How do we then preserve or ensure, for example, technical programme learning objectives within an environment that has a *performance product* as its goal?
- Are there forums to promote collaboration? Does a committee structure defeat other collaborative groups?
- The more reflective amongst us also have a right to have their voice heard (i.e. those who are the most verbally dextrous should not dominate the forum)

One delegate went so far as to suggest that any enquiry into meanings and modes of collaboration was at best pointless, at worst divisive as it merely served to strengthen people's prejudices and allow these prejudices *safe haven*:

*Your initiative in trying to move the college towards a greater degree [...] of collaboration is potentially valuable [...] The danger as I see it is that unless collaboration is clearly defined - and can be adopted as a mission statement or mantra - what will be happening is that many different people will be talking about their own subjective notion of collaboration (using adjectives which have their own subjective meanings anyway) and, although there may seem to be agreement and movement taking place, it won't be. [...]*

*My fear is that a lot of people could walk away from this initiative feeling warmly confirmed in their prejudices and that there'll be no changed behaviour; no improvement in the college in collaboration - whatever that is.<sup>9</sup>*

We feel that this final comment is rather missing the point. Of course we need to start off with a common definition and that is partly what we were setting out to do.

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<sup>9</sup> Unnamed participant, by email following on from the first staff development session

In summary then, it appears that all of us want to collaborate within our own definition of the word. It is therefore important (and ironic) that we collaborate in trying to bring these various definitions together in order to understand others' perspectives.

Looking at the responses to this question in light of the responses to other questions it is clear that there is a will to take this study into collaboration further. How might this be achieved?

#### SUMMARY ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

There is a consensus that in very general terms, when we talk about *our students*, we do mean all students at the college, both past and present. It is felt to be important that this *inclusivity* is embedded in college ethos and teaching and that it be extended to alumni and the wider industry. We need to find ways in which to seed and encourage this sense of *belongingness* across programmes and schools in order to promote a community of practice with branches spreading much further than college boundaries.

Allowing a particular student room to explore his or her own ideas (and thereby allowing failure) within a collaborative framework requires a particular level of support in order that the learning experience for other students is not compromised. Learning objectives and assessment for tasks in which it is possible for the performance of one particular student to impact those of the wider group need to both allow and support this right and include safeguards to ensure the overall success of a project.

Industry practice was universally pluralised. It is understood that we practice in a diverse industry and that this requires many different approaches to the ways in which we do our jobs. However, it is worth pursuing a further exploration into commonality of working practice; any one institution, company or venue, will have its own particular way of working and it is this bonding through common practice that encourages collaboration in a range of environments.

Process and product are inextricably linked, one leading to the other. Taking a general definition of "product" to mean that which we strive to achieve at the end of a rehearsal process, then there appears to be agreement that the focus for us as educators is to allow the student to explore and develop practice through process and reflect both within and upon the resulting product, piece or production.

There appears to be an overwhelming agreement that by collaboration, we mean working together and striving to achieve synergy. This is what theatre making is all about and with this in mind, we want to find ways in which we can further encourage and improve collaborative practice across the college and out into the industries we aspire to populate.

## HOW DO WE MOVE THIS FORWARD?

### *A Framework for Collaboration at Rose Bruford College*

As it currently stands, the situation begs two further questions:

- Do we, in reality, reflect/model the best modes of collaboration in our staff/staff and staff/student dealings?
- How do we train or educate for collaboration as opposed to merely encouraging the idea of working together?

Equally, moving forward requires that particular attention be paid to the following:

- Maintaining distinct theatre skills whilst building skills in communication and teamwork should be a baseline goal for all programmes.
- We don't have to be right all the time; collaboration should allow us to be wrong.
- Time and space needs to be given for all to use their voices.
- Staff development should focus on building relationships, teamwork and inter-activity rather than statistics and benchmarks.
- The organisational structure of Rose Bruford College needs to move away from crisis management.
- Staff workload to allow room for change in a supportive environment.
- Staff suggestions are not always taken seriously. How might this be addressed? What procedures are in place for dealing with such initiatives as these?
- College ethos and branding are identified as being something with which members of staff feel they want more involvement. So much of what this college is about stems from who we are as practitioners and educators.
- The BRUFORD CONNECTS initiative is seen as a positive step towards inspiring wider collaboration. It is important that staff be encouraged to take ownership and feel part of this project.

Time and space, being at a premium, are identified as the primary obstacles to collaboration within Rose Bruford College. Workload does not allow time for vital focus on building relationships or indeed for reflection on our own performance and practice.

It has been identified that *staff development* benefits from being *staff led*. In the spirit of collaboration, it is recommended that perhaps some sessions might be put out to tender; members of staff suggesting and leading discussion on issues that are of interest at an educational level. These sessions might also be used to share practice in order that members of staff are better informed of the work done by other departments.

Members of staff should aim to work together on diverse projects in addition to college productions, meet over lunch and discover interests other than those with which we are immediately engaged. A *speed-dating* model has been suggested as an icebreaker.

Can management suggest ways in which college structures and working practices might be adjusted to allow time and space to encourage this freedom?

Our work is on going; we believe that the same collaborative attitude as exists in the industry, needs to be encouraged in education for the performing arts. This paper is our first step towards achieving that goal.

*Pat O'Toole and Mark Simpson, Rose Bruford College, Spring 2012*