

The Education Academy

Decolonising DMU Toolkit

Decolonising DMU Case Study

Performing Arts

**Decolonising DMU
Case Study Performing Arts
Hearing the voice of
students as research
partners**

Strategic Student Advisors

Joy Frimpong-Donkor & Chelsea Wilson

Front Runner – Creative Marketing & Promotions

Freya Cooper

Programme Leader

Rosie Garton



Image: 'Lucid Rhythm' – an audio-visual pod walk made in collaboration with Gob Squad (Performance Company module)

Credit: Joy Frimpong-Donkor

Background

Performing Arts

On the BA Performing Arts programme we attract a diverse community of students across gender, class, sexualities, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. As a team, our teaching focuses on encouraging students to engage with current socio-politics to create contemporary performance works that offer gateways for people to discover and affirm their place in the world and to open dialogues about understanding identities. The Strategic Student Advisors panel was a pilot project that committed to hearing the student voice on our programme, to fundamentally ensure these principles are core to both the student/staff community as well as further considering our teaching principles and practices. Our concern continues to be how divides in our course community are formed and how these impact on a sense of safety, belief in oneself and ultimately levels of engagement and achievement.

The Panel

The Strategic Student Advisory Panel consisted of two paid temporary positions which were held by Joy Frimpong-Donkor and Chelsea Wilson, (Performing Arts – they graduated after this project in 2021). The purpose of this panel was to gain a perspective from the student experience to reflect on areas for improvement in terms of celebrating equality and diversity on the programme and ultimately to propose a series of action plans to embed into the everydayness of our teaching. The terminologies used in this document Joy and Chelsea's, we do not always get this right, but the emphasis was on the importance to say things aloud, listen and open the conversation.

This is the start of the journey

**This is about engaging in conversations that might feel
uncomfortable**

This is to celebrate diversity on our programme

**This is an opportunity to make a difference for future learning
experiences**

Joy & Chelsea

The Advisors



My name is Joy, and I am a 3rd year student on the Performing Arts course.

I have taken on the role of being a Strategic Advisor, as I hope to identify areas where we could aid a greater sense of inclusion for students from ethnic minority groups within the course community, to promote togetherness within every cohort.

I'm Chelsea, a 3rd year Performing Arts student. I hope to raise differences that might effectively promote positive responses on the course in terms of inclusion and diversity. It's important that we highlight issues that may inhibit students from Black or ethnic minority groups, so that every student feels as though they are valued in a safe working environment.



Overview

Joy and Chelsea reflected on their personal experience of the programme to identify areas for improvement in terms of nurturing our diverse community and enabling open and safe discussions around how we talk about race in a safe and supported environment for all. Following interviews with fellow students, meetings with the programme leader and discussions with members of the Decolonising DMU team, Joy and Chelsea decided that to begin to share the value of lived experiences, they wanted to celebrate their own and their peers' stories of the programme, as the first step to inspiring and supporting others.

Manager', Freya Cooper (3rd year Performing Arts) interviewed Joy and Chelsea about their Strategic Student Advisor roles

Freya

An interview

I understand that your roles have been helping us to:

- *understand from a student perspective issues that arise among students from ethnic minority groups*
- *identify worries ANY student may have in talking about race and ethnicity*
- *consider ways to further celebrate the diversity on our programme*
- *identify areas in our teaching and community activities that could be more inclusive*

Can you tell me a bit more about why you think this role is so important?

Joy

"We just want from the first year, everyone to feel they can talk to everyone, eliminate any cliques and conquer that first hurdle"

We've taken on the roles as strategic advisors as we feel like there needs to be a point of contact for anyone in the course that wants to talk about inclusion or not feeling included or their feelings on or experiences not feeling included. We're trying to make the course more inclusive and feel like a community. So, say in first year when you first arrive, some people might already be friends or some people might exclude certain minority groups, and we just want from the first year everyone to feel like they can talk to everyone, eliminate any cliques, and conquer that first hurdle.

Chelsea

We are effectively here to highlight the problems and differences in certain situations and work together, with Rosie to make a positive response. It's good to have a student's perspective who may have experienced this type of exclusion and work with staff to fix these issues.



Joy

“Our lecturers may think everything is fine when sometimes it’s not”

It’s important, not only for the students, but for the teachers to understand what students go through because Rosie was telling us when she introduced this position to us, that she might not understand what we go through when we’re starting off and because she’s a lecturer watching in, she may think everything’s fine when sometimes it’s not and the students feel like they can’t come to the teachers sometimes. So, we’re kind of like that middle person who can speak to a student and then go to the lecturer and be like ‘this is what’s happening’ and in this sense we are strengthening our community and the performing arts programme as whole.

Freya

What are the kinds of things you’ve been doing in these roles to understand how students may be feeling?

Chelsea

“We want to showcase what you can make by being this tighter knit community and not putting labels on groups of people”

We’ve been going into classes and approaching students directly, so with Jason’s lessons last week we just spoke to a few people in that class before and after the lesson. We feel as though just making people aware that they can have their voice heard and if you’ve gone through anything we’d like to hear your voice, this does not just have to be ethnic minority students either, everyone is entitled to voice their struggles.

Joy

Adding to that, we will be making a video to promote what we’re doing to the whole course so that the lecturers can show this to students at open days or on their first days, so they know we are a course that is celebrating inclusivity. We want to showcase what you can make by being this tighter knit community and not putting labels on groups of people.





Image: 'Lucid Rhythm' – an audio-visual pod walk made in collaboration with Gob Squad (Performance Company module)

Credit: Chelsea Wilson

Response

Rosie

We had a small budget, Joy and Chelsea were allocated 10 paid hours, this covered:

- Meetings with me
- Attendance at faculty EDI panels
- Meeting with Mark Prescod (DDMU Project Team member) and Charmaine Marufu (DDMU student ambassador)
- Talking with students on the Performing Arts programme
- Creating a 'Diverse performance community' padlet
- Making 16-minute short film

Being seen

In our meetings the reoccurring themes were the drive for **everyone** to be seen, heard, and having their lived experience valued. Following discussions with students on the programme from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, Joy and Chelsea talked through cultural differences that mark a distinction between students. An example of this was commitment to family and church-based activities, which impacted on student-led rehearsal times, this then resulted in not being chosen to work in particular collaborative groups as the years progressed. We often talked about the 'fear' of addressing such issues that divides cultures, ethnicities, and religious beliefs, from the perspectives of all students and staff. When Chelsea, Joy and I talked, we had an agreement, we were in a safe space and we were allowed to get it wrong, as long as we said it out loud and discussed it. And together we struggled over terminologies, ways to approach students, how we would translate what we wanted to say into text. By the end of this project, we realised that we were very much just at the start.

Joy and Chelsea felt strongly that they would like there to be a legacy, something they could leave behind that could incite confidence in students from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to realise creative potential and academic achievement.

Legacy

Joy and Chelsea created:

'Joy & Chelsea's Diverse Performance Padlet' – with a focus primarily on work made by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic DMU students, professional performance makers and music artists, this padlet documents a wide range of inspirational performative practices.

'Three years at DMU' – a video outlining the role of the Strategic Student Advisors and documenting the practice and theoretical engagement that Joy and Chelsea have experienced and created throughout their study.

Joy also produced a 10,000-word thesis for her Research Project: 'Hearing the body: Communication of the Black body through

movement, bodypercussion and spoken word in historical, contemporary and futurized performance practices' - this work primarily draws from a wide range of Black critical writers and theorists to frame a discussion around an historical narrative of modes of performative communication that permeates contemporary practices.



Image: 'The Psyche' – a performance film made by Chelsea Wilson (Live Art module)

Credit: Chelsea Wilson

Issues

Joy and Chelsea

Issues

Rosie's notes from a meeting:

It starts on the first day, the separation about different tastes in music and dance styles, about the food you like and what you do on the weekend. It is about different frames of reference and how we can celebrate that and talk about it in a generous way and not be scared and avoid it.

It feels like people are worried about working with us sometimes incase we just want to make work about being Black. We **don't** always want to make work about race, but also, we don't want to be worried about doing that incase we offend anybody. We don't worry about the males when we make work about being female.

By the end of the 1st year, everyone has decided who they want to work with and that's it. You don't get a look in – it doesn't matter how committed or skilled you are. Then you stick to what is safe, and work with the people you feel comfortable with. It's weird, it's like people don't even know they are doing it. No one is being purposefully mean, if we don't socialise together, then we don't work together.

“It's got to start with the community building”

It's got to start with the community building, including confidence building, and celebrating cultural diversity and creating safe environments to talk about exclusions and feelings of difference.

Starting points

Reflecting on this pilot scheme, Joy and Chelsea considered some starting points to take forward into the Performing Arts Programme next academic year.

- Re-frame the first 'hello' introduction task to be less focussed on 'where are you from?' and 'where do you live?'.
- Reflect on induction week workshops to ensure inclusivity
- Amend seminar research tasks, for example **everyone** to select a practitioner from a background that they consider under-represented within contemporary practices
- Expand the teaching of dance techniques to acknowledge a more diverse range of cultural approaches
- Programme a workshop in the **1st year** for students and staff to engage in open conversation about how to talk about race
- Refresher workshops/talks at the start of **each year** for **every year group**
- Ensure that one project a year has collaborative groups selected by the tutors to ensure continued mixing of students
- Continue to diversify reading lists and practitioner examples
- Continue to ensure theatre trips include a diverse range of practitioners
- Continue to expand range of visiting artists in terms of practice and ethnicity
- Research funding to further the Strategic Student Advisor (SSA) roles
 - o SSA's to host a regular platform to share stories
 - o SSA's to have 'availability' sessions for anyone feeling excluded/concerned about the course community/study engagement
 - o Firm the relationship between SSA's and the Student Voice Committee
 - o SSA's to input on the annual 'Performances to See list'
 - o Presence at the EDI meetings
 - o SSA's to play a key role in promoting social events on the programme

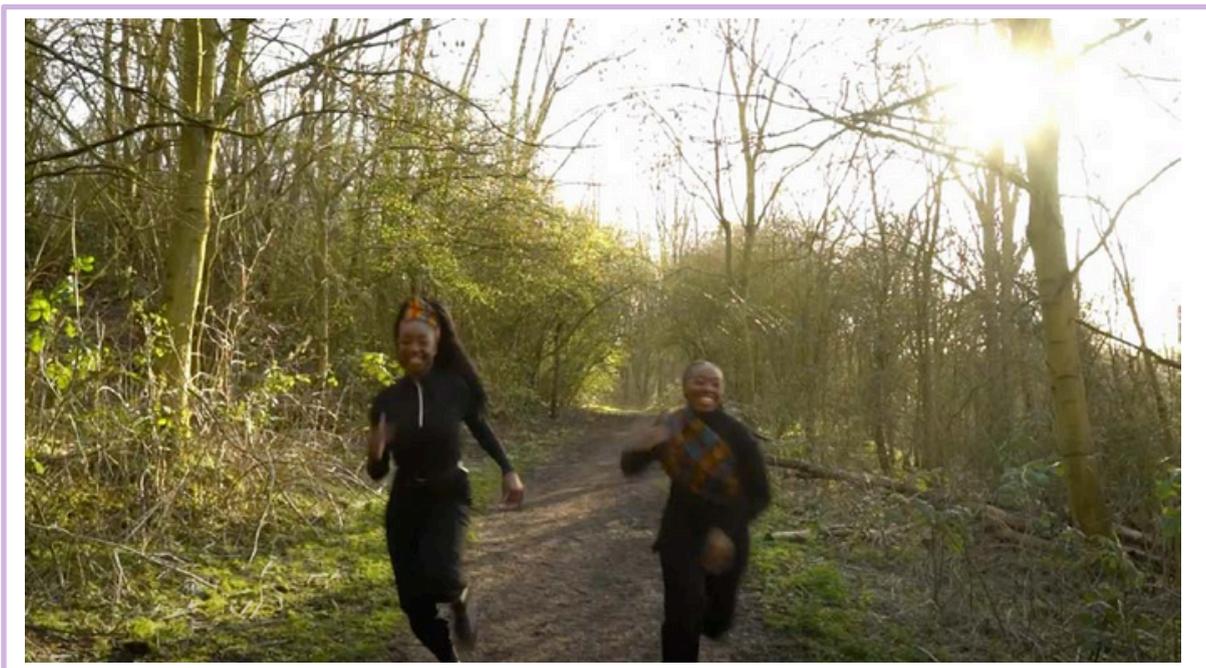


Image: 'Blackspace' – a performance film made by Joy Frimpong-Donkor and Sydneé Thomsson (Screen Dance module)

Credit: Joy Frimpong-Donkor and Sydneé Thomsson

Compiled by Rosie Garton, June 2021

**With huge thanks to
Joy Frimpong-Donkor and Chelsea Wilson**

For further information, contact
The Education Academy
dmu-ea@dmu.ac.uk