

# Drama Studio London (DSL)

## Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

### Inspection report

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Provider reference	58352
Published date	December 2008

Audience	Post 16 Education
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## Main Findings

Course:	One -year National Certificate in Professional Acting
Overall effectiveness:	Good
Date of inspection:	29 October 2008

This feedback contains findings from the inspection visit. It draws on the evidence available from performance data, external and internal reviews, other available documentation and interviews held on the day.

This is the first full inspection by Ofsted of the acting course. Inspectors undertook a standards visit to the school in June 2006, prior to it being approved as a school able to offer Dance and Drama Awards.

### Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that the standard of acting in classes and performances is high. Their assessment of performances notes that students 'demonstrated . . . excellent acting skills' and 'a good knowledge of movement and dance'. Students' work in supporting studies is judged to be 'extraordinarily comprehensive, practical and relevant'. Recent assessments by the National Council for Drama Training observe, for example, that 'students were brave and committed to the physical comedy' of a piece; but also that they had 'poor vocal energy in places' and 'lacked confidence in using the verse'.

The retention and success of students on the course are exceptionally good, with only two students not completing and gaining the diploma over the last three years. Attendance is also outstanding at around 98%.

An increasingly large majority of students gain employment in the performing arts profession when they leave. As far as can be ascertained, the percentage of students who gain work within three months of completing the course has risen from 66% in 2006 to 82% in 2007 and 87% in 2008. The school acknowledges in its self-assessment report that data on destinations is not effectively tracked over time, making it very hard for the school to trace any patterns of employment beyond the first or second year. Of those who do find work, many initially take unpaid jobs in order to become seen and known. Increasingly, however, graduating students are being offered paid work when they leave. Typically, graduates work in television, film and radio, in regional and fringe theatre, in the West End, in pantomime, in corporate training roles

or set up and manage their own theatre in education or storytelling companies. Recent DSL graduates have appeared in *The Bill* and *Holby City*, in *Me and My Girl*, *Spamalot* and *Hairspray* in the West End, in *The Producers* and *The 39 Steps* on national tours, or have secured contracts with BBC 3 or the Royal Shakespeare Company.

### Quality of provision

According to Trinity, 'teaching is of a very high standard'. They note that 'students are encouraged to take risks and develop their creative talents to the fullest extent'. Students themselves are highly stimulated by their teaching, saying that it is challenging, exploratory and empowering. The 12 months of the course, which almost all students now do, are intensive and transformational. They quickly learn to be very flexible and responsive to each other, and teachers adjust their working methods to accommodate a wide range of abilities, needs and predilections. The school's own lesson observation programme suggests that teachers need to put still more emphasis on what and how students are learning. The assessment of students is regular and rigorous in many respects, but is not recorded in a way that builds into a written profile of a student's personal development during the course. Students receive excellent verbal feedback, via their tutor, arising from thorough and frank discussions between all core teachers; but some aspects of this system are inefficient and of less value to students than they might be.

The curriculum at DSL is well designed and core features have been extensively reviewed and revised recently. It is highly responsive both to the changing needs of students in a constantly fluctuating employment market and to what different adults each bring to the course from their previous experience. The programme for the teaching of singing is now better integrated with the vocal training of students. The teaching of movement, previously identified by the school as lacking coordination through the course, is now much more effectively structured. The impact of these significant recent changes has yet to be evaluated. The school offers two directing course places each year, and the opportunity to work with them enhances the experience of acting students. The school avoids endorsing a single methodology in its approach to the training of the actor and encourages students to find their own route to creating and performing work. Gaining employment is central to the purpose of the training throughout the course, but a 'work week' towards the end of the course puts intensive focus on seeking, securing and managing employment in the industry. A wide range of professional practitioners contributes to this aspect of the training.

The guidance and support that students receive are generous, extensive and sensitive to the individual circumstances of each student. Following assessments, students are set clear targets and goals for their own development, and these are the focus of regular and very detailed staff team

meetings followed by personal tutorials. A system of referrals, including self-referrals, ensures that students who are in need of additional tuition or support receive it promptly and specifically. Professional welfare advice and counselling are available. Those students with identified learning needs or disabilities are given excellent support to enable them to cope with the demands of the course. Students appreciate the close family environment that the school is able rapidly to establish each year.

### Leadership and management

The school is well led and managed. The rigour and care of the recruitment and selection process are borne out by the exceptionally high retention figures, and both staff and students speak enthusiastically of the ethos of individual support and challenge that permeates the school. In recognition of the increasing number of applicants who lack good sight-reading skills or a wide cultural frame of reference, the school has developed a two-stage interview and audition process, and is also offering a two-year course for some students.

Teachers are formally observed teaching as part of their annual appraisal, but all these observations are conducted by the principal which limits the scope of the discussion in the school about teaching and learning methods and strategies. Communications throughout the school are very good, and teachers appreciate the increasingly close involvement they are able to have in the strategic and operational management of the school. Students are listened to carefully, and have genuine opportunities to shape their course.

The school has successfully promoted the Trinity qualification beyond those in receipt of the Dance and Drama Awards, and nearly half of the cohort now take it. Teachers bring a wealth of experience from the performing arts profession to inform their work. A few are qualified as teachers, but the school is unsure of exactly how many, nor who would be keen to undertake such a qualification if the opportunity were to be offered.

Resources are good, with the school's own studios being augmented by use of local and West End venues. Communal social space and the college library, including access to networked computers, are adequate, but students say that both of these could be better. The school is involved in considerable outreach work, and actively promotes its equal opportunities and diversity policy. Following the standards visit by inspectors in 2006, it has made an exemplary response to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act in striving to make its provision accessible to all.

Self assessment and quality assurance are thorough and insightful, although very few summary evaluative comments are made about what goes on in lessons. A number of areas identified over the past two years as requiring improvement have been successfully addressed, such as the need to engage

staff more fully in the process of review and change. The school now has a culture in which internal critical review and evaluation are prominent, substantial and realistic.

#### Points for consideration

The school might usefully:

- ensure that the detailed verbal critical comments of teachers at assessment points are captured and recorded in ways that best serve students' needs
- consider devolving the responsibility for observing lessons and feeding back to teachers to one or more senior staff, in addition to the Principal
- reflect on and compose an evaluative commentary on the quality and characteristics of teaching and learning, as part of the self-assessment report
- undertake a full review of the impact of changes made to the teaching of movement and singing
- explore further the opportunities for some staff to train and become qualified as professional teachers