

Design Thinking & JAD's Practice

Since 2020, JAD have been articulating our creative practice and process, to ensure the work that we create is relevant and appropriate for the communities and audiences we intend to reach and engage. Our Design Thinking process is a creative process that we use, that allows us to understand our end users, challenge our assumptions, redefine problems and create relevant and unique creative outputs all with our intended audience.



JAD have held communities at the core of our work since our existence. Our programmes have been successful in introducing new audiences to dance and ensuring that dance is demystified to audiences through the intervention of modern aesthetics to make our work current and relevant. Over time, our approach has evolved from traditional participation and engagement models towards a deeper, more collaborative process. We now seek to involve people in ways that are ethical, inclusive, and mutually beneficial, ensuring that every voice contributes meaningfully to the creative journey.

The purpose of this process, and the aims we hope to achieve are:

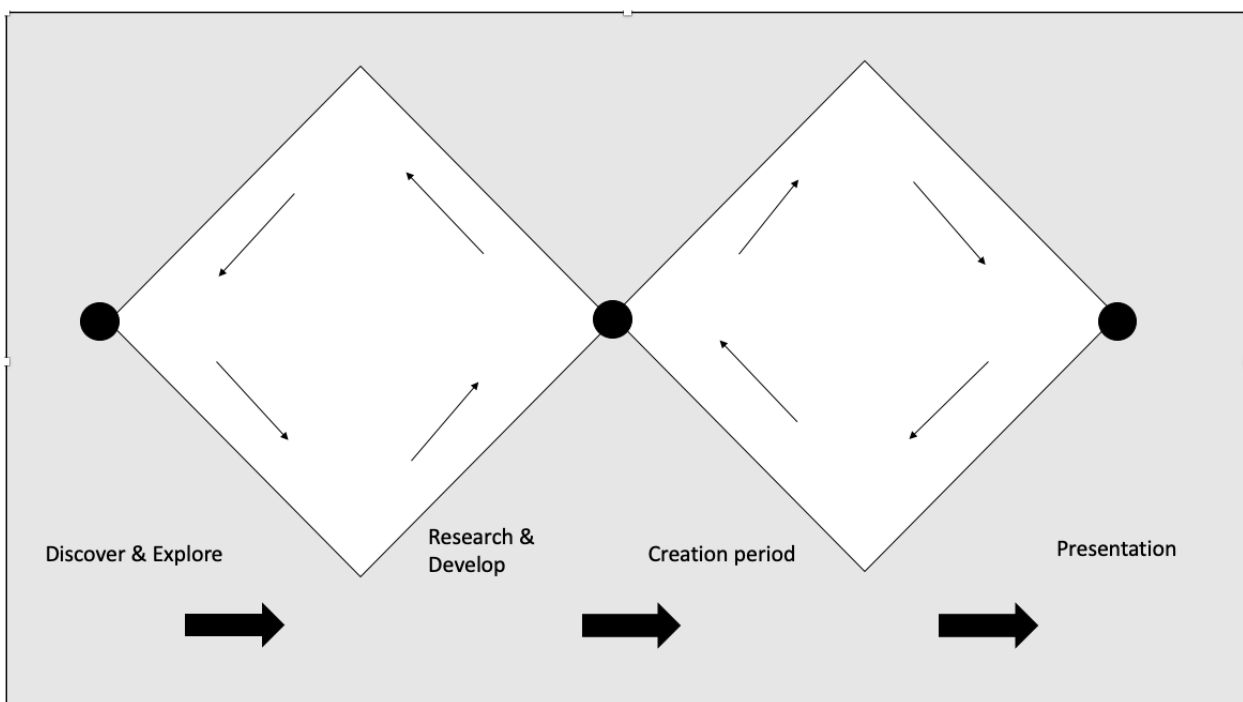
1. To gain a better understanding of how our themes are relevant to our target audience. For example, with our family work we would want to gain further understandings:
 - a. With young people aged between 5-11
 - b. How family units see, feel and explore those emotions
 - c. Understand how young people express these emotions physically and verbally but also how they perceive their elders express those emotions.
 - d. Movement language that feels exciting, connected to or appropriate to those groups.



2. Our second aim is to share and test concepts, vocabulary and ideas with the intended end users. Whether that's workshops, creative projects or productions. We always have a core group of identified people to help ensure the work stays relevant and relatable.

3. Our third aim is to create a high-quality production that incorporates high quality artistic experiences with relative and relatable content, connecting our audiences with our work.

The below process map outlines the double diamond creation approach we use to initiate, research, develop and then create new programmes:



The map follows the 4 key stages of creation;

- Define and Explore
- Research & Develop
- Creation & Testing
- Presentation & Performance

Each area is embedded with interventions and processes that allows for the integration of audiences into the creation of the work. The square surrounding the process is the cultural landscape/environment which is constantly affecting the process and way JAD can work.

The process was designed with an agile context so that if/when/how that surrounding environment influences our programmes, we have planned effectively to adapt and change to ensure our programme is safe and still appropriate for our intended stakeholders and audiences.

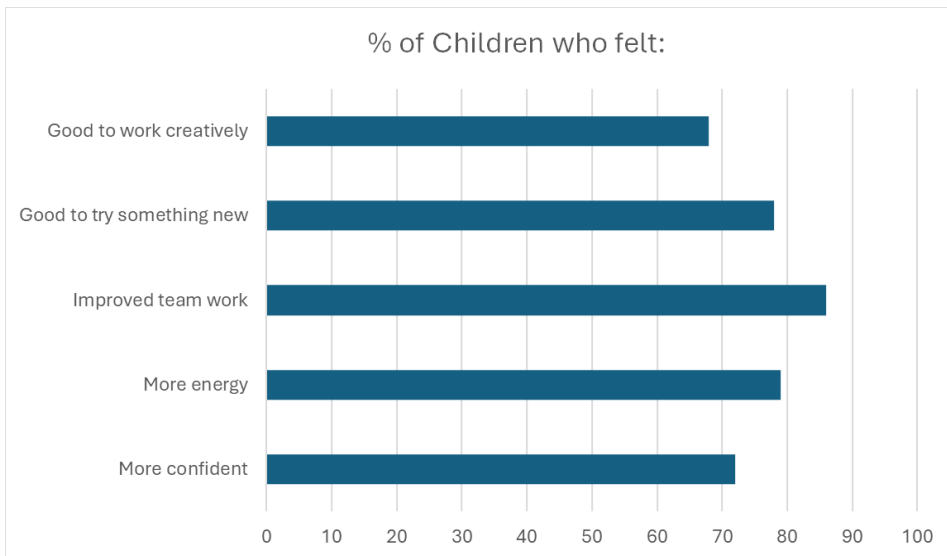


Our creative interventions can range from open research and development sessions, workshops, creative exploratory sessions, open rehearsals, discussions and observation activities, which embed communities into the above four stages. It's important to note that each stage has some sort of intervention, in order to ensure the process isn't tokenistic and we usually ensure the groups used across the process are consistent in each stage.

In the most recent development phase, during the initial exploration of our new production *Meet the Hatter* we engaged with 492 school children across areas in the North of England to explore ideas, key themes, character development and an engaging movement vocabulary. Through these workshops, we researched the impact of our work, uncovering that happiness ratings increased by 1.8 points before and after our engagement:



In addition to this measurable uplift in mood, children also reported feeling more confident with more energy, and enjoyed working creatively whilst doing something new:



Our passion lies in creating exciting and relevant experiences — and we want to do that with people. This is a continually evolving process that adapts depending on the creative context, age group, and setting of each project. While our participation and engagement work remains a vital part of our identity, our Human-Centred Design approach is distinct from co-creation. We recognise that co-creation belongs to those whose lived experiences and ideas shape the work directly. Instead, as a company committed to people-powered cultural experiences, we use methodologies such as Design Thinking to place people at the heart of our creative process, not just at the end of it.

Case Study: Feversham Primary Academy, Bradford

Exploring the world of the Hatter through Human-Centred Design

As part of the development process for Meet the Hatter, we partnered with Feversham Primary Academy in Bradford to engage a group of children aged 7–8 in the early concept development of Meet the Hatter. This collaboration provided an opportunity to test emerging ideas, explore children’s responses to the themes of curiosity and imagination, and co-develop a movement language that felt relevant and authentic to them.



Define and Explore

Our initial sessions focused on open conversation and creative movement. We asked pupils questions about the idea of ‘madness and ‘wonder’, what they thought those words meant, how they made them feel, and how they might move if they were feeling

curious, excited, or a little bit silly. These discussions helped us to understand how children interpreted the emotional world of the Hatter, which uncovered that many connected curiosity with energy, laughter, and bold, unpredictable movement.

Research and Develop

Building on these insights, we introduced simple movement exercises and improvisation tasks that encouraged children to explore the physicality of the Hatter's world. We experimented with pace, direction, and repetition - key elements of JAD's choreographic style - and observed how children responded to dynamic changes in rhythm and energy. Their spontaneous movement choices informed the development of our movement vocabulary for the production, particularly sequences that express joy, confusion, and transformation.



During this phase, we also gathered qualitative data through observation, informal discussion, and feedback forms. Children described feeling “happy,” “bouncy,” and “like my brain was fizzing”. This language helped us shape the tone of Meet the Hatter, confirming to us that the world we were creating needed to feel playful, unpredictable, and full of life.

Creation and Testing

From these sessions, we developed short movement phrases inspired by the children's physical and verbal input. These were tested in the studio by our professional dancers, ensuring that the children's ideas were fully embedded in the artistic language of the production.

Presentation and Reflection

Our time at Feversham demonstrated the value of integrating end users into the creative process from the outset. The children's feedback and engagement directly influenced the development of Meet the Hatter's tone, character movement, and emotional texture. Post-session evaluations showed a measurable uplift in mood and confidence, supporting our ongoing research into how dance engagement can positively impact wellbeing.



In a fantastic full-circle moment, the students who took part in these Design Thinking sessions were then able to see the final version of the production, as we specifically toured to Bradford. The students recognised their ideas and movements reflected on stage such as the exaggerated gestures and the moments of silliness that had come directly from their workshops. Many expressed huge excitement at seeing how their input had helped shape the show, realising that their voices and creativity had made a genuine difference. For some, it was their first time seeing a professional dance performance, and it was even more powerful knowing they had been part of its creation.