DEVELOPING NON-VERBAL WAYS OF KNOWING IN DANCE: COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL / UNIVERSITY ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT   *Gardner (1983, 1993) has long argued that education privileges certain intelligences, primarily the linguistic and the logical-mathematical. As the arts tend to emphasise ways of knowing outside these intelligences, their marginalised status is exacerbated. A recent two-year project in eight primary schools on dance, drama, music and visual art found that the non-verbal aspects of each art form warranted serious attention to investigate what it means to learn in the arts. In this paper we describe and discuss the results of an aspect of action research in dance from this larger research project. We demonstrate how movement can be used as the primary expressive mode of communication, as opposed to privileging the spoken word. Through the use of powerpoint and video, we provide an intriguing and innovative model for providing non-verbal feedback and feed forward in the dance classroom.*

KEYWORDS

Dance education, Non-verbal, Embodied expression, Feedback and feed forward

INTRODUCTION

Patterns of verbal interaction in classrooms and the ways in which discussion can influence learning have long been the subject of study. For example, Barnes and Todd's (1977) seminal study provided some of the best examples of socially constructed knowledge in the research literature and many others have carefully scrutinised verbal dynamics in classroom interaction (e.g., Cazden, 1988; Good & Brophy, 2000; McGee, 2001; Mercer, 1995; Nuthall, 2001). Rather than add to an already extensive literature on this topic, this study offers a contrasting and equally important view on how ideas may be constructed and communicated in dance.

It is well established that children make sense of new knowledge in the light of their existing ideas and experiences. However, it is often asserted that "essential to this process is language, since *talk* aids the organisation of experience into thought" (Bennett, 1994, p. 63, emphasis added). This assumption about the centrality of talk underpins much of the work in social constructivism, wherein knowledge is jointly constructed through dialogue in social contexts. It is important, however, to interpret dialogue broadly, not just as talk but also as communication in all its varied forms (Shields & Edwards, 2005). The arts provide a wealth of

communicative forms, many of which are non-verbal such as gesture, shape, movement, relationships, sound, rhythm, tone, pitch, colour, use of space, layering, texture, position, levels, facial expression, body language, perspective and many more. Instead of privileging the linguistic, dance, in particular, opens up possibilities for the non-verbal to be pivotal.

This article describes an action research project in a New Zealand primary school dance classroom. It demonstrates how movement is used as the primary expressive mode of communication, as opposed to privileging the spoken or written word. Because of the small sample size, it would be presumptive to call the findings conclusive. Rather, the process provides an intriguing model, which creates an innovative point of departure for future research and experimentation within dance education.

BACKGROUND

The Art of the Matter (Fraser et al., 2006) was a collaborative research project based in Hamilton, New Zealand. The project comprised 10 primary school teacher-researchers from eight schools, with classes of children across the Year 0-6 age range, working alongside three university researchers and arts consultants. The project extended over a period of two years (2005-2006). The overall aim of the project was to investigate how children's development of ideas in the arts can be promoted, enhanced and refined in primary classrooms and, in doing so, build knowledge related to arts pedagogy and research. There was also the associated aim of capacity building for arts research amongst university and teacher partners. While teaching of music and visual arts has existed within the New Zealand elementary school curriculum for many years, the presence of drama and dance as discrete learning areas has been emergent since 2000, when the *Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2000) document mandated the teaching of all four arts areas by generalist teachers in primary schools. *The Art of the Matter* involved research in each of the four arts disciplines. However, this paper focuses only on one teacher-researcher's investigation in dance.

The design of the study drew on ethnographic, case study, self study and action research traditions of educational research. Case studies of teachers' existing practices were produced by the team of teacher and university-researchers and consultants. These highlighted themes and issues related to how children develop their ideas in the arts, including what appeared to support or constrain this process. The case studies were devised from an amalgam of classroom observations, work samples, surveys, interviews and reflective self-study comments. Perspectives from teachers, university staff, children and school policy documents helped to build rich, triangulated, sense-making accounts of current practice (Stenhouse, 1980). These case studies provided a platform upon which to base the action research phase, wherein teacher-researchers devised questions of concern to explore problems, issues and possibilities. Ongoing discussion amongst all the research team enabled the refining of both questions and methods. Teacher-researchers were assisted in this process by the university researchers acting as critical friends as well as joint investigators (see also Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson & Manuel, 2004).

[Please click on Figure 1 to link to Powerpoint. Slides 1 – 11. Stop and start at any time by clicking on the Play / Pause button.]

Figure 1.   *Samples of mimetic resources and response in School B*

ONE TEACHER'S JOURNEY IN DANCE

Prompted by reading the case study as well as viewing her teaching on video, one of the teacher-researchers recognised a significant ritual of practice, which occurred consistently in her dance lessons. Her verbal language had supremacy over the movement of dance. In addition, her feedback tended to be teacher-driven and often occurred at the end of the class. Through discussion with her university colleagues, she set herself the intriguing challenge of incorporating more dance movements as a means of providing non-verbal guidance, as opposed to emphasising spoken or written language. This did not mean that she did not speak at all but, rather, that she consciously built in specific dance ways of communicating (gestures and movements) within feedback stages of the lessons. Initially, the teacher gave feedback on aspects in the dances that she liked using non-verbal dance moves. After three demonstrations of non-verbal dance feedback, the children asked if they could give non-verbal feedback to one another. The teacher-researcher quickly supported this idea and watched with interest as the children developed their own dance feedback language. Periodically, she would check in verbally with groups to gauge whether they had understood what their peers were communicating to them (e.g., 'What was the person telling you?') and she assisted with clarifying any

confusions or mixed messages. Her 'checks' were to confirm children's understanding rather than to provide verbal explanations. She was encouraged to find that quite a lot of their non-verbal communication was clearly conveyed and received.

The teacher-researcher noted initially that the more confident children seemed to use a more complex range of dance sequences to communicate their ideas, whereas the less confident used simpler, more pedestrian type moves. All forms of non-verbal communication were accepted and encouraged. Over time, however, as their skills and confidence in the discipline of dance grew, more children incorporated extended dance sequences to communicate ideas. She also noted that using dance movements as feedback was easily understood by the children as well as inclusive. For example, children who had English as an additional language and more kinaesthetic learners did not appear to be disadvantaged by non-verbal feedback to the same extent as when feedback was verbal.

When interviewed about the innovation, children commented, 'I like it because I could see what my dance looked like [to someone else]' and 'I found it better than being told because it was a surprise.' The defining factor here for all of the children was that they did not have to mentally convert what they viewed into words. Rather, they viewed, internalised their thoughts and then responded non-verbally through movement. Put simply, they embodied their ideas in movement. Arguably, this response demands a high level of cognitive reasoning and substantiates that dance processing and producing requires a high level of cognition (Eisner, 2002). It is clear that dance can also be a place where teachers see their children from a new perspective. In addition, over the period of the trial, it was apparent to the teacher and university researchers that the children's confidence to move and improvise was sustained and strengthened. The dance participation time was increased as children kept working on and using their movement repertoire, rather than having to anticipate what they were going to say verbally (Fraser et al., 2006).

Once the children became *au fait* with giving and receiving non-verbal feedback in dance, the teacher-researcher extended the process to the giving of suggestions for improvement or feed forward. This formed the basis of the next cycle of action research with her class. The lessons still featured some verbal discussion, especially when recapping main ideas with the class, outlining changes groups had made to their dances and refining ideas. The children volunteered dance pointers, such as the importance of using different levels in dance, the need to spread out to give group members room, and to vary individual moves amongst group or unison moves. As with the non-verbal feedback, non-verbal feed forward was offered by children to their peers and checks were made to ensure those receiving the suggestions were clear as to what was meant. It seemed that non-verbal communication required a sharper attention to the message by the children. This was inferred from their stillness, lack of fidgeting and absorbed silence while watching their peers. It was also evidenced by their ability to verbally interpret and adopt or adapt what was conveyed.

As a result of these trials, non-verbal peer feedback and feed forward through dance became a regular part of the dance lessons, with the class buying into the culture of non-verbal communication. That is, a culture of refining dance ideas

through the medium of dance was developed, which was generated by a process rather than a necessary product. Moreover, the children took ownership of the process through changing the timing for when the feedback and feed forward was given. Feedback was given when groups specifically asked for it during the lesson, as opposed to at the end of the class. In this way, their ideas could be developed further in class, as opposed to being left in temporal limbo until the next class. This also lessened the impact of the problems associated with movement memory loss from one session to the next. The researchers also noted that these suggestions, offered in movements rather than words, appeared to be received positively. The children seemed less defensive and more receptive to new ideas, in contrast to their responses in earlier teacher feedback phases.

Video clips of the process that this teacher-researcher trialed over a 10-week period are included in the following powerpoint segment.

[Please click on Figure 2 to link to powerpoint. Slides 1-12. Stop and start at any time by clicking on the Play / Pause button.]
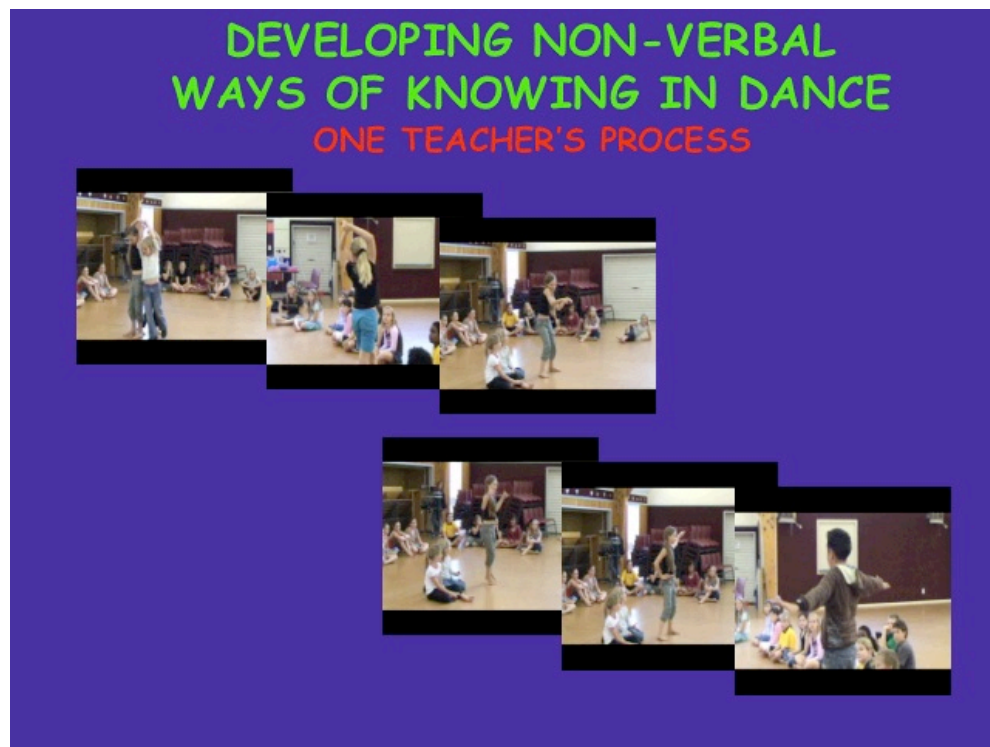

Figure 2. *Developing non-verbal ways of knowing in dance: The process*

DISCUSSION

Dance is clearly a non-verbal domain, yet most teaching practices in primary classrooms privilege verbal discourse. Therefore, it seems that engaging seriously with the non-verbal in generalist primary classrooms is clearly a challenge. Bannon and Sanderson (2000) explained, "dance offers a distinct form of communication separate from the expressive statement of direct speech" (p. 16). While some have argued that verbal language is necessary for working in the medium of movement, Smith-Autard (2004) questioned whether it is appropriate to assume that dance experiences can be translated into verbal language in any authentic sense. In fact, she has stated that "not only are there never adequate words but there is a tendency not to notice that for which we have no language" (Smith-Autard, 2002, p. 34). Dance researchers also agree that reflection and feedback are important in order to inform future action (Chen, 2001; Cone & Cone, 2005; East, 2005; Gibbons, 2004; Lavender, 1996; Lavender & Predock-Linnell, 2001). However, there is little documented evidence related to non-verbal gesture or movement being used as the means of feedback in dance, other than that of Gibbons (2004), who suggested that feedback should be offered by verbal, visual or kinaesthetic approaches.

Williams (2002) found that teachers, when giving dance feedback, tend to leave little room for student voice to contribute to the conversation and that the subjective nature of criticism can lead to defensiveness at perceived personal attacks. In her search to find answers, Williams found that Lerman's "Critical Response Process", when used in the developing ideas classroom, "can foster enthusiasm for problem solving and decrease the traditional tension surrounding both the giving and receiving of choreographic criticism" *(2002, p. 93). This process is a set of guidelines described by McCutchen (2006) as "a constructive step by step way to engage the choreographer and a group of critical friends in facilitated dialogue" (p. 280). However, Gough (1999) warned against feedback being an activity that occurs only at the conclusion of the class. Lavender (1996) developed structured approaches to developing critical reflection in dance, which included strategies for fostering both objective and subjective feedback. However the emphasis, like Lerman's, was on oral and written practices (Williams, 2002).

The non-verbal feedback/feed forward process outlined here appears to offer innovative alternative solutions to the dance feedback issues outlined by Williams (2002) and Gough (1996): issues relating to teacher ownership, timing of feedback and student defensiveness. Moreover, while the teacher-researcher found verbal clarification of the intent of the danced feedback and feed forward was still required, she was pleasantly surprised at the accuracy of the children's understanding. These findings substantiate the stance that feedback offered by verbal, visual or kinaesthetic approaches engages children in meaningful learning (Gibbons, 2004).

The use of video technology was found to be particularly helpful in the feedback process in that it offered children 'an outside eye' viewpoint on their own work as well as helped support movement memory of what they had created from one session to the next. It enhanced and supported the live non-verbal feedback approach being investigated. However, the question needs to be asked as to whether

it was easier for the students to concentrate on only large body movements in feedback, because they were more noticeable in one viewing. Another factor is that the range of dynamics in movement is reduced on video playback.

There were also other limitations. For example, the use of only one camera meant that students' work was captured from only one angle. In addition, the need to have the camera at a certain distance from the dancers in order to capture all of the group's movement compromised the recording of finer, more detailed movement. There is also a logistical problem if one is trying to capture multiple groups at once as they develop their ideas. When playing back, the logistics of rewinding to the footage required for reflection and discussion is time consuming, although it was found that giving children ownership to do this themselves was beneficial. Having several groups wanting to view their material at the same time raises further barriers for extensive use of video for these purposes.

This teacher-researcher's action research trial reinforces that dance has a rich, non-verbal mode of communication of its own that enables the learner to express things in ways that words cannot, or in ways where words are not adequate. It also calls into question the amount of talk that teachers use to convey dance concepts and ideas. Similarly, this finding suggests that asking children to explain what they are doing or attempting to achieve can be limiting and even misleading. It can be more instructive and fruitful for teachers to ask children to 'show me' rather than 'tell me' about their dance. For many children, their expression in dance outstrips their verbal abilities. They are able to 'show' stories, convey feelings, capture moments and compose images and sounds which have expressive power in their own right. Such 'show me' responses were often evident when children were sharing ideas in groups. Many danced their ideas as they spoke or used a type of dance shorthand, using their hands to represent their movements.

It is clear that the use of the non-verbal in dance gives children the freedom to explore in ways not driven by linguistic structures. Using such a communicative mode helps to build capacity and greater fluency in dance as children become more confident and knowledgeable about how dance can convey meanings and nuances. This assumes, however, that teachers appreciate the value and subtlety of the art form as a discipline and not purely as a set of skills to master and tasks to complete. By attending to dance through the non-verbal we extend and enhance sensory awareness. Eisner (2000) argued:

> … learning to see and hear is precisely what the arts teach; they teach children the art, not of looking, but also of seeing, not only of listening, but also of hearing. They invite students to explore the auditory contours of a musical performance, the movements of a modern dance, the proportions of an architectural form so that they can be experienced as art forms. Seeing in such situations is slowed down and put in the service of feeling. (p. 9)

As with any action research project, questions kept emerging which required further investigation. For example, further research is required on the criteria used by children for acceptance or rejection of the dance feedback and feed forward. Were they making decisions based on improved *quality* or were they simply

choosing to change or accept what they liked and what their peers preferred? The children created movements that tended to be largely symmetrical, repetitive and akin to the moves commonly employed in popular video-dance culture. Whilst this repertoire reflects the children's interests and preferences it does not necessarily extend the possibilities, or seriously challenge their perceptions, of dance. At this point, it is fair to raise the question concerning how quality is judged. Whose notion of quality dictates what is more desirable in dance?

It can be argued that any approach to teaching dance, whether it emphasises the non-verbal or not, requires sufficient challenge and opportunity to go beyond popular interpretations in order to enhance embodied expression. The aesthetic evaluation of any art form requires a sensitivity to nuance, as the arts "traffic in subtleties" (Eisner, 2000, p. 9). Developing an appreciation, therefore, for such subtlety in dance is also part of learning in the arts. Gough (1999) claimed that appreciation involves the subjective (emotions, sensations, feelings, memories) and the objective (concepts, language, form, structure) and a synthesis of both can help to find meanings. In addition, "the devil is in the details. The artistry of composition [in any art form] happens in the editing and refining stages. Editing requires acute critical thinking" (McCutchen, 2006, p. 177). Arguably, it is this critical thinking that dance also needs to develop if quality is to be enhanced. The degree to which the children in this case adapted and refined ideas after feedback is open to debate and warrants further scrutiny.

Another question relates to how the excitement and challenge of a new physical skill might affect children's choices of dance movement. At times, the enticement of technical virtuosity seemed to dominate the process. For example, the introduction of the 'walk over' move resulted in the students practising the move repeatedly until they were proficient. It seemed for the majority of the group at this point that the pleasure of repeating and acquiring this skill was certainly driving their engagement. This begs the question as to when a skilful move becomes assimilated into the children's movement range and becomes one of many choices.

CONCLUSION

Gardner (1983, 1993) has successfully challenged traditional notions of intelligence, proposing that schools have longover looked a range of intelligences that are undervalued and underserved. The dominant discourse surrounding what counts as knowledge in most educational institutions is the emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Other ways of thinking are often marginalised, such as the bodily kinaesthetic discussed here as manifest in dance. This study challenges the existing dominant discourse to raise the status of that which may be overlooked in traditional 'measures' of school success. Valuing arts-related intelligences such as bodily knowing goes some way to reducing the inequality of a system that privileges the linguistic and the logical-mathematical.

It seems clear that this innovative approach to dance, which privileges the non-verbal in feedback and feed forward, is promoting another way to develop moving thinkers and embodied knowing. This is a pedagogical model where primacy is given to embedded bodily knowing in dance, rather than to verbal language. It may

be a longer journey and issues of quality need to be carefully considered. However, the ownership by children of the non-verbal process indicates that the approach has considerable potential. In an educational climate where there is burgeoning interest in dance education in the New Zealand primary school setting, this unique approach to engaging children meaningfully in their learning bears further scrutiny and application by teachers and researchers alike.

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