

Standing Strong

Pedagogical approaches to affirming identity in dance

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Introduction

In this paper, I reflect on research undertaken with third year University students in dance. To contextualise my research, I begin by providing a brief introduction to my specific approach to feminist and phenomenological research in dance, outlining an epistemological strategy of embodied ways of knowing. Discussion of narrative methodologies follows, leading into an autoethnographic narrative based on the research with students. Rich material drawn from students' assessments, my class plans and teacher's recollections are woven together in the form of an autoethnographic narrative. This narrative allows me to feature the students as characters and to highlight their specific experiences of masculinity and femininity, cultural difference and embodiment within their varied dance knowledges. Reflecting through and on the narrative, I derive key pedagogical approaches from my own teaching and learning experiences. I conclude by suggesting that pedagogical approaches involving embodied ways of knowing may potentially support students to affirm their identity through dance.

Researching dance

As a dance researcher, my work draws on feminist and phenomenological perspectives, in particular, working with a focus on exploring lived experiences in dance making (Barbour, 2005; Fraleigh, 1987; Reinharz, 1992). From both feminist and phenomenological perspectives, our individual movement experiences are valid sources of knowledge and appropriate sites of research. As Sondra Fraleigh (2000, p.56) wrote 'phenomenology has the task of studying embodied experience.' As an embodied experience, the activity of dancing can provide a context for interpreting the world. I consider that I am the site of my research, as teacher, researcher and dancer. My students also engage in their own acts of interpretation as they dance, and they are consequently, potential research participants.

I articulate my validation of dance making as an epistemological strategy as 'embodied ways of knowing' (Barbour, 2006). Although challenging to articulate in words, I describe embodiment as being simultaneously and holistically cultural, biological, spiritual, artistic, intellectual, social, spiritual and emotional, with a recognition of individual differences in terms of culture, race, gender, sexuality, ability, history, experience and environment. As an epistemological strategy, embodied ways of knowing recognises that each person already embodies knowledge and that such knowledge is contextual. Importantly, each person is also potentially able to create knowledge. For these reasons, I have argued that knowing can be experienced as creatively living in the world (Barbour, 2006). My research begins from this articulation of embodied ways of knowing.

A challenge for feminist, phenomenological and dance researchers has been to develop methods of representing research findings so that the richness and multiplicity of dancing experiences are not lost in words. I have sought to identify particular methodologies that support a focus on lived experience and allow representation of such research in novel ways. Narrative methodologies, particularly autoethnography, use descriptive language and literary techniques to attempt convey the richness of embodied experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 1998, 2000). Arguably, narrative representations of lived experience can convey dancing experiences more fully than standard academic texts. This representational method of creating autoethnographic narratives allows me to explore issues related to honoring both research participants' voices and my own researcher's voice, avoiding an objectivist stance, engaging in critical reflection, sharing embodied experiences in words, creating a narrative frame, and enhancing kinesthetic empathy through literary techniques.

In this paper, I offer a narrative based on research undertaken with a particular course of third year tertiary students studying dance as an optional subject. These male and female students were very diverse in their movement backgrounds, with bodies of knowledge in hip hop, Kapa Haka, musical theatre, ballet, Cook Island dance, Samoan dance, jazz and contemporary dance, as well as a range of sports. Culturally, the students identified as Maori, Pakeha/Palagi (New Zealander of European ancestry), Samoan, Cook Island, Niuean and Sri Lankan, suggesting the need for an appreciation of issues in multicultural education (Bolwell, 1998; May, 1999). As a teacher, I aimed to support my students to become responsive dancers (Albright, 1997; Bracey, 2004; Butterworth, 2004; Shapiro, 1998; Stinson, 1995), rather than only instruments for choreographers' work in a specific genre. I see responsive dancers as conscious of their embodied differences and the way in which their differences in cultural, historical and spiritual backgrounds and commitments, age and gender, environmental, social, political and historical contexts, all influence the way they make dance and how they are perceived when performing dance. Consequently, issues of body, gender and culture were deliberately explored in the dance studio.

In this particular dance course, the students choreographed and performed their own solo works, completed reflective worksheets, choreographed and/or

performed in group dances and submitted a final written assessment to demonstrate their understandings. I invited the students to participate in the research, asking their permission to keep copies of their assessment for use in research, to undertake additional reflection after the dance course was completed, and to read and respond to drafts of the narrative. The students featured in this narrative gave permission for me to describe them, to quote their words, to use their real names, and they were actively involved in the development of the narrative. Therefore, the narrative I offer below draws on the students' own autoethnographies and reflections, as well as literature and theoretical notions drawn from my research, readings set for the students, my teaching notes and class plans, and descriptions of scenes I developed based on my recollections. The characters in the narrative include myself as teacher and the students, using our own words (indicated by use of indented quotations). The narrative thus attempts to bring alive on the page our experiences together exploring issues of body, gender and culture. Additionally, the narrative provided a context for me to share and reflect on my pedagogical approaches to affirming identity. I invite you to engage with this narrative, allowing the scenes and characters to resonate with your own teaching and learning experiences to enrich and enliven the words on the page.

Narrative

Walking slowly through the dripping trees on the way to the dance studio, I ponder Sherry Shapiro's (1998, pp. 14-15) inspiring quotation.

This shift from disembodied knowing to embodied knowing calls into question traditional dance pedagogy. The question of knowledge changes the relationship between the teacher and the student. The intent of the learning experience moves from one of learning movement vocabulary for the sake of creating dance to gaining an understanding of the self, others, and the larger world for the possibility of change.

While I keep this quotation foremost in my planning for teaching, it certainly takes some time to unpack and transform dance exercises and activities in order to develop a different pedagogical approach. Entering the dance studio, I turn down the volume on the hip hop music currently filling the room. The focus in the room shifts and the students leave their conversations, personal warm up rituals and gather together on the floor for our first discussion of the week.

'So, how did you all get on with reflecting on your early dance experiences? Remember I asked you to write a short narrative about how you learned about gender and culture through movement?' I get nods from most students and one or two guilty looks. 'Today I'm hoping that some of you will share your narratives with us ...' I sense a little anxiety about reading aloud from some students, but Courtney speaks up, focus clear in her blue eyes. 'Well, I really started thinking about femininity when I read your article. I have a little story to share' she says (Barbour, 2001). Perhaps it is her theatre training that gives her confidence to share her story first. Courtney reads from a fresh sheet of

paper, brushing her long white-blond hair away from her face and sitting upright in preparation.

My nine year old eyes study the faded photograph of the young ballerina in awe. She looked so feminine, so light and so elegant, stretched up on pointe and dressed in a pale tutu. I was so full of desire to be like the girl in the photo that I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. She looked like me, only older. My mother walked into my bedroom, gentle and poised as ever. 'Are you looking at those photos again Courtney?' she exclaimed, leaning over my shoulder to study them with me. 'I like them' I replied. 'Mum, why did you have to give up ballet? You look so pretty here'. 'Because I got bored with it' she sighed, having had this conversation with me many times before. 'And I wanted to be able to do other things, like be a mum'. My mother kissed me on the forehead and left the room, leaving me alone. I took another look at the photo, then ran to my dress-up box and pulled out an old floaty skirt. I put it on, it was too big but that didn't matter. I stood in front of the mirror and balanced on my tiptoes, imitating my mother in the photo.

As Courtney concludes her story, Holly is grinning, and comments immediately that she understands that childhood desire to be a ballerina. Smiling too, Desiree remarks that dance has often been about being feminine for her too, although she hadn't thought critically about it until now. Acknowledging Courtney myself and thanking her for sharing her story, I respond 'It is interesting to think about how we learn to "perform gender", as Judith Butler would say (1990). I think you've given us a clear example of learning to perform femininity through dance Courtney. Does anyone else have any thoughts?' I ask. Speaking slowly and thoughtfully, Whetu explains that

There is frustration for me as to how, as a Maori woman, I am meant to fit into these Western stereotypes of femininity – you know – white, slim, obedient, small and youthful. Within my dance experience I look to empower female energy and promote what we females believe is feminine... And I think each culture has its own unique understanding of what is considered dance. This is where the challenge begins for me. I am not limited to one culture and I have come to embrace many different cultures without the concern of how I am perceived by them. I find satisfaction in the wholeness that I am from being a part of all these cultures. I like this quote from Lemi Ponifasio (2002, p. 54). 'The body in this sense is the site of difference. Different peoples have their own history to access. The performance is the unveiling and the uncovering of layers that are continued in this history.'

Nods from the group follow Whetu's comments. I prompt a little more discussion, asking Desiree if she can relate to Whetu's experiences. Desiree laughs as she replies 'I certainly do experience the expectations of how a woman should look and move when I am doing cheerleading!' More seriously, she continues

As a dancer and teacher in American tap and jazz, I do see the value in learning these techniques. However, I feel that we place too much importance on techniques from Europe and America, neglecting the cultural dances we have here in Aotearoa. ... I think I am taking my first steps to live more within dance and move through space in a way that makes sense to me. In my solo

dance I want to work with the theme of my experiences of being Palagi or European New Zealander, and Niuean New Zealander and my feeling that I don't fit into just one ethnicity.

As Desiree shares her experiences, I'm reminded of my colleague Stephen May's (1999, p. 33) challenge for multicultural education. He argued

A critical multiculturalism must foster...students who can engage critically with all ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including their own. Such an approach would allow both minority and majority students to recognise and explore the complex interconnections, gaps and dissonances that occur between their own and other ethnic and cultural identities...

'Interesting insights here, Desiree and Whetu. I can see that you are both beginning to think about how these theoretical notions might influence your dancing.' Aware that the guys have not contributed much to the discussion yet, I ask specifically: 'How do you think dancing experiences might teach you about performing masculinity?' Feeling unsure of getting a response to this question I look around the group. Lying on his stomach across the floor from me, Wiremu's head is buried in his crossed arms, long hair tied in a loose knot at the back of his neck. I'm about to check if he is awake, when he lifts his head and says, 'I've got a story about Haka. I think it is also about learning to be a man.' Wiremu rifles through assorted, handwritten notes, props himself up on his elbows and begins to read to us. The other men lean in to catch his words as they spill out.

Wiremu stand still. Stop fidgeting around. I want a straight back, chest out, chin up, legs apart. Boy don't you dare look at the ground or else! When you do your actions they better be strong. You are a descendant of Tuhourangi show me that you are. Look at the audience and single one of them out. Stare at them. Show them how good you are. Show them how manly you are. When you pukana, big eyes, tongue out, gritty teeth. And stop smiling! Haka is not about smiling. If you want to smile I'll put you in the front row of the women and give you a poi. Do you want that? ... so there I was being like my brothers, staunch and proud, with my eyes to the front, chest out, straight back and Tuhourangi styles, standing tall.

Tim is clapping and laughter erupts spontaneously from some of the other guys throughout Wiremu's story; I can see Tim must relate to Haka training experiences personally and the vivid image of Wiremu's threatening Aunty sends the girls into giggles. Wiremu is an experienced Kapa Haka performer and tutor, incorporating the precise footwork and coordination of his training in this contemporary context. 'Great work Wiremu. Good writing – this is an excellent example of how dance socialised and taught you about being masculine. Before we go on to further discussion, does anyone else want to share their narrative?' I catch Elaine's upright posture and eager face next to me and listen as she explains: 'I've got two stories I can read out, but they don't fit together yet. Umm, so... this first bit maybe relates to my culture and learning to dance female.'

All you need to do is have your hands soft and relaxed, then slide your middle finger along the face of your thumb as if you're rolling a pencil. See! You've

got it, now just keep going and now move your arms like this. After years of practice and performance I don't recall ever being properly taught by someone how to dance a Siva Samoa, but will always have a memory of teaching someone else how.

'Learning how to dance feminine?' says Elaine, 'well it is just part of me and my culture I guess. But I can see that if I wasn't Samoan then I wouldn't necessarily think that this dancing was feminine. Maybe I'd move differently as a woman. Anyway, my second story is about my hip hop dance... and I do remember learning this really clearly...' Elaine re-crosses her legs and leans over her journal spread open on the floor. My eyes are drawn most to her hands, following the words on the page and gesturing articulately as she speaks.

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I could choreograph a dance piece. Being the youngest, I was exposed to a lot of the 80s hip hop music and R & B singers through my older siblings. I would imitate Janet Jackson, by attempting to dance her famous soldier charge moves on 'Miss you much'. While other girls shopped, I spent a lot of my spare time watching video clips in which back up dancers would perform in perfect rhythm with seamless synchronised movement making the technical dance moves seem effortless. It was when I hit my teenage years that I became solely obsessed with learning dance moves...I would go out of my way to video tape dance clips and I then learned the dance moves; it was a long process but eventually I was able to perform the moves as if I were one of the back up dancers... I would always wish that I could one day become a choreographer, but it felt impossible to even create an original dance phrase...

'Oh I did that too,' Desiree laughs. Excited discussion breaks out amongst the group as they recognise shared experiences. I hear Barry chuckle and comment to Wiremu that copying music videos was his main form of entertainment with his friends. 'Living in a poor area, all you could do with your mates was play sport on the road or have dance competitions,' he says. I remember too, managing to learn some moves from Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' music video (Landis, 1983) and watching the film *Flashdance* (Lyne, 1983) over and over. While different artists influenced me as a teenager, it is obvious that the hip hop and R & B music video genre has had a huge impact on us all. It is easy to trace the spread of hip-hop culture through our dancing (Osumare, 2002). Around me the excited chatter is drifting off topic, so I interject by thanking Elaine and setting the students small group discussion tasks.

After a short break, the students settle on the floor, lying flat on the wood or with knees bent up in constructive rest position. 'Take some time to rest this morning... Allow your breathing to deepen... Notice how you feel today'. A few minutes into the guided relaxation and I can feel the energy of the studio change as the students' breathing deepens and a quiet focus unites the group. As this activity develops into a warm up improvisation, I am reminded again of how much I need this relaxation too – how my awareness, even while teaching, can deepen to allow me to ease my tense shoulders. I sense the activity of the students gradually increasing as each participates, moving at

the speed and in the specific way they feel is most appropriate for them in this moment. Soon I cue them into more structured exercises, moving through simple patterns based around human developmental movement, aiming to enhance their awareness of functional integrity and efficiency within their own bodies.

Bodies warm and now focused, I move the students into a creative activity. 'Now here is a sketch of movement for you to try. Once you feel you have got the basics, take this sketch and make it yours. Use your choreographic tools' (Smith-Autard, 2004). Observing the students working, I see Barry adding hip hop gestures and a sharper rhythmic accent; Desiree practicing one section repeatedly to incorporate a double turn and add precision to her arm placement. In contrast, Whetu has slowed the movement down and concentrates on centering, her breath visible to me with each movement. Wiremu seems to be relishing the inverted work as I watch him adapt a low cartwheel into a one-handed turning kick. Elaine looks somewhat frustrated and when passing her as I move through the studio, I enquire if she needs help. She sighs, and comments quietly 'From my cultural dancing and learning the proper way of dancing traditional Sivas, I just always use my hands and I'm meticulous about details. I find this task hard. I just automatically adjusted this movement to the styles in me – Pacific dance styles – I can never shake them off.' I reassure Elaine that she is absolutely doing the task. 'Elaine do you remember the way in which Halifu Osumare described the intercultural body? How your everyday movement, popular dance like hip hop, and unique cultural dances can be synthesised, making an identity that we are not always conscious of? I sense that Elaine does remember - even if not Osumare's specific words, she seems to recall the general ideas:

Against the rubric of the imported hip hop vernacular, continuing Polynesian-Asian indigenous styles are also embodied in gesture and posturing, such as martial arts and local Hawaiian gaits. The synthesis of globally proliferating popular culture body styles with local movement predilections that have been present for centuries forms what I call the Intercultural Body.

(Osumare, 2002, p. 38)

'Perhaps this is one way to understand what is happening for you now. What do you think?' Encouraging Elaine to keep playing with the sketch, I suggest she try to avoid judging herself too harshly. 'Eventually you will find what interests you as a choreographer,' I reassure her.

Pedagogical strategies

Through the use of autoethnographic writing in the narrative above, I am able to share with you my teaching and learning experiences in the tertiary dance studio. However, important for my on-going pedagogical research is that the process of writing this narrative also allowed me to reflect on my experiences and to identify pedagogical strategies as they unfolded. As I reflected and wrote, using writing itself as a way of knowing (Richardson, 1998), I was able to identify that fostering embodied ways of knowing in the studio was integral to my teaching practice. Supporting the students to recognise their existing

embodied knowledges and their potential to create new understandings was important within dance activities and assessments. Alongside this focus was a deliberate celebration of the students' embodied, cultural, gender and other differences (Bolwell, 1998; May, 1999). This was reflected in encouragement for students to draw on their varied existing dance knowledges and their cultural heritages as they undertook assessment tasks and engaged in new learning. In particular, the students were invited to reflect on their learning about body, gender and culture, and to share these experiences in discussion, written assessment and in dance. It was important in celebrating the students' embodied differences, that I avoided imposing my own knowledges and practices upon them. I appreciated that exchange and dialogue was a more respectful process for teaching and learning. As the narrative revealed to me, supporting the development of critical understandings through embodied reflection on notions such as the intercultural body (Osumare, 2002) and gender performance (Butler, 1990) was particularly productive for these students. Again, however, the development of critical understandings needed to be undertaken as creative, narrative and embodied explorations, in order to be meaningful for these students.

Of course, these specific pedagogical strategies were situated within familiar, general pedagogical approaches, the foundation of which I believe is the development of a student-centered, supportive learning environment. An important part of such a learning environment, from my perspective, was reducing the power relationship between students and teacher - a more general and feminist pedagogical agenda. Using open-ended questions that encouraged students to respond in the manner most appropriate for them assisted further in keeping the focus on the students' learning. Reflection also played a significant pedagogical role, in discussions, in movement activities, and in artistic and written forms (Coe, 2003; Leijen, Lam & Simons, 2008). Reflection allowed the students to recognise their learning and to demonstrate their new understandings within the class. Providing individual, respectful verbal and movement feedback, and negotiating content and assessment were also more general pedagogical strategies I employed (Gibbons, 2004; Hamalainen, 2004). As I continue researching my own practices I anticipate further understandings will unfold.

Concluding reflections

As I reflect upon this particular teaching and learning experience, I realise how much I personally value a pedagogical approach that works to enhance diversity, respect and tolerance in the dance studio. I believe that the students' comments revealed that they also value this approach as it provides a context for exploration of their embodied experiences. In addition, I value the opportunity to give critical consideration to assumptions about identity, embodiment, gender and culture. Again, the students' comments reflect that they value the opportunity to engage critically within dance making. Perhaps most significantly for me is the recognition that students can experience empowerment in the process of exploring their own embodied identity. This may lead them to express their identities in dance making – embodied ways of knowing.

For myself as educator, I recognise that any pedagogical insights I have emerge in specific embodied moments of teaching and learning. Creating narrative representations of teaching and learning experiences allows me to reflect and to acknowledge that pedagogy itself is an art form.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the students participating in this research and who feature as the characters of the narrative – Courtney, Whetu, Holly, Wiremu, Elaine, Desiree and Barry.

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Biographical statement

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