

"DANCE HAS CONNECTED ME TO MY VOICE": THE VALUE OF REFLECTION IN ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE DANCE PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT *A variety of teaching pedagogies are used to teach dance which is now a compulsory core subject in the Arts and also taught in physical education. In this paper, I argue for the importance of a learner-centred pedagogy grounded in reflective practice. This forms a basis for developing a teaching approach that not only enriches students' artistic learning but develops their confidence as dancers and as people. Based on ongoing research with student dancers, I suggest that using reflective practice in teaching dance not only challenges dance educators to keep their pedagogy dynamic, but also creates a space in which teachers can respond more effectively to the needs of particular groups or individual students.*

INTRODUCTION

Over many years of teaching dance at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of the education system, I have explored and devised various teaching approaches for dance in order to meet both the diverse needs of students learning to dance and the requirements of educational change. Dance is now a compulsory core subject in New Zealand education in the arts and can also be taught in physical education. Essential factors that I believe need to be considered are how dance educators can devise teaching approaches in dance education that will offer not only enrichment in artistic learning but also address the changing developmental needs of the learners. This paper addresses these factors by, firstly, perusing established dance pedagogical practice and, secondly, appraising the value of reflection in determining effective dance teaching. I then discuss the impact of the implementation of reflective perspectives in teaching dance as identified in students' written and verbal responses to a reflective, learner-centred teaching pedagogy.

I see pedagogy itself as an art form. I see dance as artistic educational practice. In my teaching experience, I have found that connecting these two elements is an intricate, sensitive procedure. Why sensitive? Dance itself is seen as a multi-sensory experience (Gray, 1989) so there are factors that need consideration that are not always evident in teaching other curriculum knowledge. Why is dance educational? H'Doubler (1940), who has had a profound global influence on dance education, recognises dance overall as a deeply rooted human activity involving the whole personality, and promoting enrichment and integration of body and mind. She has always advocated that specialised forms of pedagogy are needed to harmonise these elements, as well as raising consciousness of aspects of different dance genres.

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Gray (1989) sees teaching dance as a complex process and argues that, irrespective of their teaching or dance background, no two dance educators will teach alike. Indeed, Gray suggests they will probably teach how they themselves were taught even when using identical content material. There are many dance genres such as folk dance, cultural dance, creative dance, line dance, jazz and ballroom dance. Each dance genre requires different levels of competency in technical movement proficiency, artistic creativity and cultural consciousness. Whilst keeping Gray's (1989) stance in mind, I now address these elements by examining different teaching approaches in established dance practice that develop movement competency and enhance meaningful learning experience.

Established Dance Pedagogical Practices

My research indicates that three main teaching approaches are used in established dance pedagogical practice, each having a slightly different focus according to the dance genre being addressed. These approaches are traditional or teacher-directed dance pedagogy, creative dance pedagogy, and learner-centred dance pedagogy (Coe, 1998).

Traditional pedagogy. A traditional pedagogical approach appears to be most widely used in *dance teaching* (Coe, 1998) as it offers security for dance educators through its discipline-based methods. This approach is often known as a teacher-directed style because "the teacher owns the knowledge and communicates it with a great sense of control, management and restriction" (Shulmann, 1990, p. 4) before examining the outcomes. Most societal dances, such as ethnic dance, historical dance, ballet and jazz, have precise footwork and movement technique. Dance educators teach these dances from written instruction and deliver the knowledge to the students with consistency and confidence. The form of the dance, the specific steps and technique tend to be taught from this traditional approach because of the need to judge correctness, as the accent in this pedagogical practice is on repetition and practice for perfect performance. Research suggests that students enjoy gaining educational knowledge of these dances as it widens their perception and understanding of dance in global societies (Coe, 1998).

In *dance training*, a teacher-directed style is also prevalent as the emphasis is more on learning dance content for examination or excellence. Dance training is offered in private dance schools or tertiary dance performance centres. A disciplined vocabulary is taught to the students and the success in learning depends on the student's ability to follow the dance educator's demonstration and instructions. As Stinson (1994) illustrates, "dancers typically learn to reproduce what they receive, not to critique or create" (p. 3).

Criticism of using this approach in dance education comes from Stinson (1994) who believes this focus can often put pressure on students to acquire a perfect body image because the student is more 'on show' in examination or public performance, especially as many schools use dance in their annual school productions. There is also evidence of a competitive factor in examinations between students and even private dance schools which, according to Stinson ignores physical emotional feelings and may highlight individual personal concerns. Students can feel submissive and isolated as they learn set exercises, barre work and repetitive choreographed routines.

Creative dance pedagogy. Stinson (1994) sees the next most common pedagogical approach, creative dance pedagogy, as allowing more natural creative expression and freedom from restriction. A creative teaching style places emphasis on offering more freedom for students to display, through movement, their own imaginative responses to given ideas; a process that often releases personal emotion and feeling. However, Stinson observes that, unfortunately, dance educators tend to interpret this approach as playing music and asking the students to 'just dance'. Therefore, the term 'creative dance' conjures up images of bright, happy children, running and skipping joyfully, or older students engrossed in deep, meaningful personal experience, which leads Stinson to question what is actually being learned. Hanstein (1990) supports Stinson's stance and raises another concern that critical thinking may be neglected. In response to this, Stinson advises dance educators to question how and what is being taught, and what value the dance educational experience is offering students.

Smith-Autard (1994) tries to alleviate this problem by identifying Rudolf Laban's analytical principles as a base to strengthen creative pedagogical practice. Laban's principles of teaching cover concepts of bodily action, effort, flow, energy, timing and spatial and relationship awareness. An understanding of this knowledge encourages dance educators to use these spheres to teach Laban's vision of teaching dance to develop the all round personality of the dancer. An open, creative, discovery approach is used, encouraging the "moving/feeling being" (Smith-Autard, 1994, p. 4). Creative dance tasks are set that offer students opportunities to personally interpret expressive outcomes within a creative movement process, rather than working towards a perfect performance (Smith-Autard, 1994). Although Laban's work offers specific content knowledge, the decisions for teaching interpretation are left open to the dance educator. Unfortunately, this approach is not likely to be widely available to all educators in New Zealand, as training in Laban's principles of movement has only been accessible to specialist physical education teachers or teachers trained overseas in tertiary dance centres (Coe, 1998).

Despite their differences, these two styles of dance pedagogy – creative and traditional – both look to the teacher as dominating the dance experience. The third main teaching approach, a learner-centred teaching style, moves away from this stance and places the student at the centre of the learning experience.

Learner-centred pedagogy. Schwartz (1993) is of the opinion that a learner-centred pedagogical style is more suited to addressing the personal development of the student through the dance. The dance experience appears to take on more personal meaning for each student if the concept of self-esteem is addressed as an important factor. If a focus is placed on releasing the creative potential of the individual student to enhance self-esteem, the student will become more confident to explore mastery of physical dance competence (Coe, 1998).

Grounding a learner-centred pedagogy in a feminist perspective places student needs as a priority, giving the student more precedence in the educational experience. A feminist perspective addresses concepts of autonomy, power structures, authenticity and self-determination in the light of the dance educator's and student's own life experiences (Bain, 1991; Hanstein, 1990; Stinson, 1994). This sees dance educators encouraging students to make more links to the world in which they live (Hanstein, 1990), thus strengthening the meaning to be gained from the dance experience.

My research (Coe, 1998) supports the effectiveness of this learner-centred teaching approach, and further identifies other pedagogical skills that can assist a dance educator to address unknown factors about student dancers that may affect the teaching relationship. These factors can be identified as: the numerous variables in students' comprehensive belief systems; the differences in genetic endowment and in physical dance competence; the complex needs of different ages and genders; and, very importantly, the life variables and experiences that dancers bring to their dance experience.

In summarising established dance practice, it can be seen that the use of different dance pedagogies gives access to meanings that have strong personal relevance and are encoded in students' dance experiences. These meanings are intangible and cannot always be taught but they can be the result of being exposed to different teaching styles. I have worked with all of the above approaches and discovered that certain dance pedagogies will work for some students in inducing learning; for others, they could be totally ineffective (Coe, 1998).

So how can a dance educator devise an effective dance pedagogy that is dynamic, effective and mindful of student needs? In the remainder of this paper, I outline and describe ways of achieving this, based on 20 years of dance teaching experience, aligned with 10 years of researching student dance experiences. I question, evaluate and reflect on my teaching and gauge student responses to movement exploration using reflective practice.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF REFLECTION?

I see value in reflection on the teaching experience as a means of strengthening a confidence in an ability to teach and a determination to achieve artistic aspirations that are devised for students' learning. My research reinforces Stinson's (1994) position that conscious reflection ascertains beliefs that influence the consequences of choices teachers make, as persons and educators.

I also agree with Shulmann (1990) that no single philosophy or pedagogical style will build all the bridges of understanding or connections in a class of diverse students. In the initial stages of a dance course I use this pedagogical stance to reflect on the individual needs of my students before selecting further dance content and teaching approaches. I consider aspects such as; previous dance experience; age and gender differences; physical energies and body types; students' levels of self-confidence; and their commitment to learning the dance.

As each lesson is taught, the reflection becomes ongoing as I plan according to student responses. I use verbal reflective practices during class, and then encourage student written reflection, for two purposes. Firstly, the students write to clarify the direction of their work in progress and, secondly, I use these reflective statements to confirm the effectiveness of my teaching approaches. It should be noted that, except where otherwise identified, the quotes used in this paper as evidence are from ongoing research conducted over the last three years with tertiary dance students.²

Schwartz (1993) believes that student dancers become involved with the dance for a specific purpose and will only take from the dance experience what has personal meaning. This is always at the forefront of my thinking, and the following student reflection verifies this:

² This research on establishing the value of dance to the learner has University of Waikato ethical approval.

Reflecting on how I have progressed on my dance course, sees how glad I am to have filled an empty space in my life...dance is more than moving, it is using self image related to the world around us, developing all our aesthetic senses...I have explored a lot about my inner self and how powerful those inner feelings really are if expressed...I now feel more confident and more sure of myself...

This reflection indicates the value of writing about personal dance experience in that written reflection highlights meaning that has been gained by the student but which is not always visible or accessible to the teacher. Rawhinia, a female dancer (in Coe, 1998), gives a further example of this:

...I now have learned to believe in myself and who I am...I have a greater spiritual awareness...I have learned to take a hold of my emotions through the dance...*I have learned to reflect more, thus giving me a lot more self determination...the dance has connected me to my voice...the dance experience has touched me very deeply to my soul...the soul is your grass roots...and when you touch it with the right combination of people...well, it has given me a great power surge...the courage to speak...* (p. 81, emphasis in the original)

These written reflections authenticate the meanings that the students take from the dance experience.

ESTABLISHING A REFLECTIVE, LEARNER-CENTRED PEDAGOGY

In this section, I describe how I establish a teaching relationship that allows for this transformation of learning using reflective practice and identify three key reflective practices: *observation*, *perception* and *contemplation*.

I use ongoing *observation* to assess student responses to my teaching intention. I monitor movement interpretation and then 'view' completed dance work, often through the use of video-recordings. Within my teaching process, I speak and then stand back and *perceive* how effective my approach is, as I intuitively tune into dancers' energies, actions and thought processes of imagery. My intuition has become more highly developed as a consequence of consciously reinforcing my observational skills in relation to aspects such as a subtle change in body language, a brighter light in the dancer's eyes, or an expression of delight at discovering something new. I try to see dancers' interpretations of inner visions from their perspectives, and together we discuss how to transform these into a dynamic form of expressive bodily text. We verbally share the effectiveness of our efforts by *contemplating* the outcomes. I then use written reflective practice to enable students to contemplate dance issues that have strong personal relevance and that indicate to me any problems or concerns they are having in the dance lecture. An example of how written reflection can bring these concerns to my attention is revealed in the following reflection by a male dancer:

I was very conscious of being the largest male in the class. I needed support and understanding. Dance gave me the opportunity to lose the stereotype of big and slow and heavy-footed. As I learned to trust my class and you, Dottie, I am now more open minded, and starting to

push myself, try new things, work harder and get away from feminine dancing and utilise my strength. It's not surprising that I now love the dance.

I also encourage students in their reflections to take opportunities to question and engage in debate about the creative process, as indicated in the following examples:

...the more I see and do and talk about this contemporary dance thing, I can see dance as being an outlet for expression of different people's personalities. (male dancer)

I used my confidence and personality to my advantage in dance today...I brought my own 'life' into this dance, creating an energetic and rhythmic performance, saying what I had to say in the process (female dancer)

These written reflections give evidence of the value of students being engaged both 'inside and outside' the dance experience. This means that students become involved in the dance – dancing, creating, working artistically and exploring personal interpretation. At the conclusion of the dance experience, students will reflect on the dance work in progress – either by writing about the experience or in reflective discussion – stepping back 'outside' of the experience to judge the effectiveness of their choreographic intention.

In summary, I see that as a dance educator, reading *reflections* allows me to 'step outside' of my teaching practice and *perceive* and *contemplate* key issues that relate to my teaching. However, a key point still has to be raised. Student reflections on experiencing dance are only valuable to an effective pedagogy if teachers are prepared to listen to what student voices are trying to say and to realign their pedagogical vision and action as a result.

IMPLEMENTATION OF REFLECTIVE PERSPECTIVES IN ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE DANCE PEDAGOGY

I now discuss how I use these reflective perspectives to support and drive my dance pedagogy. I indicate how they can be incorporated into working in mutual collaboration in the dance, and how they can assist in setting a learning environment of trust, challenge and empowerment and of valuing the creative process.

Firstly, I think it is important to note that my background of dance knowledge stems from being trained in an understanding of Rudolf Laban's (1948) principles of movement, highlighted earlier. Siegel (1998) highlights further perspectives of Laban's work in dance by arguing that Laban's influence draws "attention to dynamics, use of space and time and weight, to phrasing, transitions, the shape of the movement, parts of the body used and not used, to a performer's sense of space through which he or she is moving" (p. 94).

My dance teaching intention is supported by my ability to work with and understand these dynamics of human movement and human development. I use a feminist learner-centred perspective in my teaching to enhance the students' sense of belief in themselves. Using a feminist perspective in teaching recognises and values students as individuals and as human beings. As well, I pay close attention

to the sensory nature of the dance environment, encouraging students to learn to overcome any individual reticence they have to dancing. I establish a supportive teaching relationship, offering constructive, non-judgemental feedback that encourages students to have more self-belief in their creative endeavours. Creativity will not emerge into choreographic form if there is lack of self confidence and mastery of body movement (Coe, 1998).

I challenge students to value their life experiences, using dance as a form of communication to express these, to show who they are and what they stand for. This male dancer shows the value of taking this stance:

My dance gave me the time to show the world, me. Who I am, what I represent to my people, what being Māori means to me and, most importantly, my portrayal of the potential that lives inside of me, a force that everyone has within also, the potential to be, the potential to live.

This reflective perspective illustrates how my teaching practice recognises student uniqueness and artistic talent. I try to understand the dance intention more from the perspective of the dancer than from that of a choreographer or the audience. By making this connection, I too can participate in the dance.

This understanding evolves through *mutual collaboration*, a reflective practice that enables the student and dance educator to establish transformation in learning. Stock (2000) sees mutual collaboration in dance as exploring artistic practice that is "not only relational but emergent, interactive and embodied" (p. 213). McKechnie (1999) elaborates on this viewpoint, looking from the dancer's perspective:

The dance artist senses dance in the mind's body, in its bones and nerves and muscles, just as painters see with the mind's eye, and composers hear with the mind's ear...It is in the powerful connections between language and sensory image that we discover our most compelling visions. (p. 6)

By using reflective communication about the dance experience, either verbal or written, students learn to understand the meaning of these 'compelling visions'. This reflective communication assists both teacher and student to realise the impact of mutual collaboration in the teaching relationship. To make this contact, the dance educator can be equally firm yet inclusive, demanding yet sensitive, motivating yet constructive, and empowering and challenging but, throughout, placing the student at the centre of the learning process.

As students start working in the creative process to devise their own dances, their initial response or understanding tends to come from reflections on what they know, of personal life experience and dance mastery. To implement reflective practice in mutual collaboration, I observe the students intently, monitoring personal transitions that are occurring and encourage movement improvisation to develop this expressive intent. I challenge their interpretation through open discourse in order to confirm their objectives before encouraging the students to take more personal ownership of the dance. A male dancer discusses this process:

I was taught from childhood to love music and drama. From this sown seed, new thoughts took root and the process for creating my dance

was initiated. Dottie could sense this, encouraging me to develop a sense to create something dramatic, unique and awe inspiring, and I did. Reflecting on this work is like cleansing one's mind. I felt exhilaration as I let go of inhibitions...there was hope and enjoyment expressed, a true renewal of strength, even with stillness, it was wonderful.

Again, this student reflection reveals enlightening evidence of learning that the dance educator cannot otherwise access, showing the influence of a particular pedagogical stance. Written reflections of this sensitive nature generate distance from the creative process for the dance educator allowing space to withdraw emotionally from working with the dancer, and reflect on the pedagogical stance that he or she has taken and, again, to question its impact.

Trust and care are two important perspectives that affect my pedagogical stance in an artistic teaching environment. As students observe my commitment to their success, and perceive my faith and belief in them, a trust is developed, both in me and in their *own* intuition, which can release their choreographic intention. The following female dancer's reflection illustrates this point:

The passion and commitment of the teacher has given me the motivation to learn and discover more about this creative discipline. I have been encouraged to produce a personal style that drives me out of my comfort zone and 'design myself anew'.

My teaching experience has shown that it takes time and hard work to stimulate a learning environment of trust, respect and care, as other factors often emerge that can upset the balance such as 'feeling awkward' or needing to 'look good'. I have noted over time that if I encourage a focus on the dance and dance tasks, students tend to stop focusing on each other. I strongly advocate that the question of body image should never be overlooked as it can limit a desire to dance and induce fear of being 'on show' or moving in front of others.

Student reflections also reveal that a philosophical stance that *empowers* students has a strong impact on their ability to release personal creative expression. Empowering the students to believe in their choreographic intent occurs when the teacher acknowledges student commitment and their desire to weave threads of imaginative thought into expressive bodily text. As this release unfolds, the teacher holds and strengthens these inner beliefs by reiterating, through verbal response, that the emerging dance form has worth and value. I encourage students to realise that they have a creative voice that is respected by the dance educator. A female student validates the results of this approach in her reflection:

I now perceive myself as a creative person with a mind capable of experimenting and developing personal ideas with a great deal of imagination. I choose to keep away from conventional styles, needing the freedom to be artistic and inventive in terms of my own choreography...

Freedom to be artistic and inventive emerges from a teaching environment that is *secure*. The security for individual dancers to experiment and demonstrate their personal talents is, I believe, often missing when dance educators work from a

creative pedagogical stance. I use two strategies, structuring freedom and using an appropriate tone of voice, to create a sense of security. Structuring freedom, firstly, sets the length of time for discovery and exploration of artistic intention shown in movement improvisation and, secondly, allows time for open discourse on the effectiveness of the resulting choreography. I believe setting an appropriate tone of voice in communication also helps to respect the sensory nature of artistic practice. A critical vocal tone shown by the teacher, either visible in body language or spoken comment, can immediately close down a dancer's creative intent. Motivating action without undue criticism is of utmost importance – as criticism can prevent or inhibit what the student is trying to say through the dance. It is my preference when teaching, to pause, think and then reflect on the outcomes being searched for by the dancer. Through consultation with the student, another key factor emerges – which is learning to perceive and sense a dancer's physical and mental energies. I try to appraise whether students are tired, frustrated, challenged by each other or confidently analysing new movement responses. Two male dancers show the emotionally fine balance they hold when working in the creative process:

...when you are so focused it's as though your inner soul is dancing on the outside of you...when you work from within, you extend yourself to your best possible ability and it doesn't look or feel awkward... (Coe, 1998, p. 78)

I am a true believer in this process being more important than the finished result. The learning and the self - determination were apparent through the process...true liberation...a rare feeling for myself. (Coe, 1998, p. 77)

It is evident that the reflective nature of the creative process in the dance needs deliberation. The creative process transforms what students initially envisage in creative thought into physically expressive dance. Writing critical reflections of this process shows them how their artistic propensity develops into personal choreographic style. Dance is then valued as being as much an intellectual pursuit as a physical one.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

My concluding reflections on teaching dance return to the student's comments that inspired this paper: "...the dance has connected me to my voice...the dance experience... has given me a great power surge...the courage to speak" (Coe, 1998, p. 61). My teaching experiences make me ponder on whether the 'power surge' comes from the inner thoughts to drive the dance or whether the actual created movement draws out of student dancers what they want to say. My teaching intuition senses that the 'power surge' is a passion and love of the dance that gives energy to the dance.

This love of the dance is kept alight in my teaching when my *observation* catches a release of artistic vision. Creative insight can be felt or *perceived* in a sudden change of breathing, or a change in muscle tension. I *contemplate* a change of power taking place in the teaching relationship as students accept and take ownership of their emerging artistry with great joy or tears of relief – in awe of new self-belief in that what they first saw in imaginative vision is actually

emerging in active form. The following reflection from a female dancer reveals this emotion and shows the synergy formed by her depth of response to my pedagogical stance:

My heart thuds a fraction faster; a fraction louder, as music summons...I stroll, head up, towards the light, it's time. I plunge to the floor before slowly growing and turning towards my moment to shine. This space is my possession, my energy is released, unconstrained and propelled forwards. Movements pour from one to the next, slithering into position like an effortless jigsaw. My hands paint expressions in the sky, and my body stretches its wings as each joint is at its mercy. I enjoy every specific moment, knowing this is mine, ALL mine.

The sensitive nature of a dance experience can be charged with emotion, imagination and artistic perception and, as this reflection shows, be joyful and exhilarating, for both dance educator and student. However, there can be times when the teaching relationship can be volatile and frustrating if what the student visualises for creative interpretation of a task does not materialise in active form, as suggested in the following student reflection:

I had problems.... I assumed that because I knew what I wanted to express in my dance...the actual movements would 'just come'. I spent a lot of time not doing half as much as what I felt I could do...soooo irritating! (Coe, 1998, p. 62)

Another dancer's comments pointed to the importance of the teacher's stance in assisting students through their struggles to represent their ideas through dance.

I think you have to take what suits you and work out your own way of doing it. How the teacher is, is reflected on the students. If the teacher is confident, the students will be...if the teacher's not comfortable, the students will not be comfortable...they have an incredibly strong influence on each other, each has got to feel good about sharing their ideas. (Coe, 1998, p. 66)

Whichever form it takes, an inclusive non-threatening learning environment connects dancers to their individual voices, to an awareness of an intrinsic state of consciousness. I believe reflection assists in developing and creating a teaching relationship that empowers student dancers to trust their innate intelligence and release artistic expression with confidence and pride. Reading students' reflections gives an extra drive to my belief in the use of this teaching method. I believe there is a need to use established dance pedagogies that meet the needs of teaching different dance genres. However, there is no doubt in my mind that ongoing reflection keeps dance pedagogy dynamic and effective whilst remaining open to changing contexts and influences. I re-iterate the need to set a teaching relationship that is equally firm yet inclusive; demanding yet sensitive; motivating yet constructive; and empowering and challenging.

Reflective practice allows the dance educator to observe movement, and perceive how to work with dancers' energies, actions and thought processes of imagery. I have found that the students' responses to my dance pedagogy are never the same, which indicates it is relevant to a wide range of learners. Through

mutual collaboration in reflective discourse, either verbal or written, the dance educator and students can transform inner imaginative visions into dynamic forms of expressive bodily text.

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