



## Experiential learning: A narrative of a community dance field trip

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### Abstract

*In this paper, we offer a co-constructed narrative of experiential learning in the context of a community dance trip undertaken by tertiary students. We describe the unfolding experiences of a weekend field trip and reflect on community dance practices and values with a view towards articulating a shared vision for community dance. A framework for community dance (Kuppers, 2006; Peppiatt, 1996) provides a context for the students' learning and for situating our understandings of the interrelationships between art, education, politics, society and environment. Literature on community dance practice and from sociology, experiential learning, and environmental and cultural education provides direction as we interpret our experiences. While this paper is presented as a co-constructed narrative based on our observations during the field trip, we also include comments made by students, along with reflective interludes as we discuss the field trip in relation to dance education.<sup>1</sup>*

### Keywords

Community dance, education, experiential learning, narrative, environmental dance

### Beginnings

‘Haere mai, haere mai, haere mai’ the voice calls across the space between us. We are welcomed here to the retreat centre of Te Mauri Tau in Whaingaroa (Raglan), and we move as manuhiri (visitors)

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of narrative forms of research, see Ellis (2004) and Richardson (1998).



towards the tangata whenua (people of this land). We are a diverse group of tertiary dance students<sup>ii</sup> from all over the world enrolled at The University of Auckland, and two dance educators, Ralph and Karen. Some students shuffle, looking around them, seeming unsure of their place but others walk confidently in the lead of the kai karanga (caller of welcome). As we progress across the space, smiles and gestures indicate places to sit; our group settles and breath is exhaled quietly. While the ritual of powhiri (welcome ceremony) proceeds, the students sit respectfully, observing our hosts' warm body language and gestures. Perhaps listening to the cadence and tone, if not understanding the words of the whaikorero (speeches), we feel the students slowly relax. Tentative smiles touch the faces of some students and the unfolding process of this ritual seems to ease their nervousness. As the language shifts into more familiar English and Ralph responds to the speeches of welcome, these smiles expand and we observe genuine pleasure for all in meeting, hands clasped, noses pressed, breath shared and hugs exchanged. Over kai (food), the formal greetings develop naturally into sharing of personal histories and meeting of cultures. Through the ritual processes of powhiri the space between us has decreased. We have arrived at the beginning.

The wananga (live-in workshop) begins with our newly combined group of students, educators and local Whaingaroa artists all seated in a circle on the floor. Our first task, Whaea Tuihana and Te Mauri Tau Director suggests, is to discuss our respective needs and agendas for the weekend and to negotiate our activities. Food, water, wind in our faces, laughter, communication, appropriate behaviour, insect repellent, music, space, showers and fun, are all offered and written on the white board. Invited to roam the land immediately around the Putahi (retreat centre), the students are asked to actually locate the water tanks, gardens and bathrooms. We watch as they turn their faces into the Westerly wind, rubbing their toes into the coarse coastal grass and pointing out birds perched on surrounding fences. This invitation begins the process of encounter, of developing a sense of place, providing time to appreciate how we can become aware of, sensitive to and respectful of the land and this local community. Even in this initial activity, the ecological values of Te Mauri Tau are evident, as we notice rainwater catchments, compost, organic gardens and shared work spaces. We sense, too, that our participation and the cultural diversity within our group is valued here. Laughter is present already. During the meal that soon follows we are nourished by karakia (prayer), home-made organic kai and the view of the sea. The west coast sunset draws cameras from bags and the students delight in the wonder of this environment. Already we have precious memories to carry home and share with others.

## Sharing experiences

With bellies full and smiles wide, everyone meets to share in learning. Our focus as dance educators and students is on community dance: engaging directly with people, valuing and respecting who they are, their context and their dance. Community dance focuses upon process, shared ownership, equity of access, participation, negotiation and creation of shared experiences (Foundation for Community Dance, 2003). Sharing voices, needs and food provides a foundation for our emerging community. We

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<sup>ii</sup> A note on the field trip participants: Students were enrolled in the community dance paper taught by Dr Ralph Buck at The University of Auckland. Individual students are not described or identified specifically in this paper. Comments attributed to students are variously based on field notes, observations, quotations from follow up evaluative research interviews and our recollections. Te Mauri Tau is the umbrella organisation to which the community dance theatre troupe Soul Speed belongs and an integral organisation within the Ministry of Education EnviroSchools programme. A field trip to Te Mauri Tau provided an ideal experiential learning opportunity for dance students to appreciate specific community dance activities situated in socio-cultural and environmental context. Members of Te Mauri Tau and Soul Speed are identified by first name and comments attributed to them are based on field notes and observations, as well as published information about Te Mauri Tau, the EnviroSchools programmes and Soul Speed (Barbour, 2005; EnviroSchools Foundation, 2006). Karen Barbour attended this field trip in a collegial and educational support role for Ralph and for Soul Speed.

begin by sharing experiences. Whaea Tuihana offers a presentation in which she outlines more explicitly the kaupapa (shared agenda or philosophy) of the charitable trust Te Mauri Tau and its aim to foster Māori language and culture through creative work in health, education and environment (Enviroschools Foundation, 2006). This kaupapa translates into many activities for the local residents of Whaingaroa, including organic food co-op workshops, creative practices such as dance and weaving, parenting workshops, a re-cycling business, environment education resources and professional development. Wide-eyed, two of the young students comment quietly to each other that they had not considered how dance connected to broader concerns such as environmental issues.<sup>iii</sup> A timid question about this from one student moves the discussion naturally to dance and the activities of Soul Speed, the community dance troupe within Te Mauri Tau. Several Soul Speed dancers are present and take time to share how their kaupapa, “to reconnect people to their environments and to slow down to the ‘speed of the soul’” is the basis for their dance activities (cited in Barbour, 2005, p. 6). Voices full of passion and eyes sparkling, Ardre and Te Rawhitiroa describe their efforts raising community awareness of the endangered Hector’s Dolphin through dance performances in regional festivals. With pride they tell of how the World Wildlife Fund supported their performances at Te Papa (The Museum of New Zealand), and allowed the troupe to take their conservation message to Government ministers. Spread around the room, the students listen to stories of audiences’ tearful and joyful responses to these performances. In Soul Speed’s work, environmental politics and education intertwine with art as they deliberately take their work to the people, providing access to dance through festivals, and performances on beaches, in parks and town centres (Peppiatt, 1996). Another Soul Speed dancer, Hannah, describes how dancing has offered an activist’s role for herself and other young parents who care about their children’s environment. In this way, Soul Speed members describe how dancing brings a kind of ‘truth’ to their lives. This community dance troupe is engaged in what Petra Koppers described as “movement work that facilitates creative expression of a diverse group of people, for aims of self expression and political change” (2006, p. 1).

There is no discussion of issues more familiar to tertiary dance students, such as the value of specific training techniques, critical debates about recent professional performances or who recently received Creative New Zealand funding. We do notice that professionally trained dance graduates and new dancers work side by side in this community dance context. We hear how these dancers practice together in the town hall in Whaingaroa, each finding expression and purpose within the group, and striving to make their performances the best they can be. All of these stories involve pragmatic concerns about family life, balancing creative desires with finances, fulfilling personal needs within group processes, adapting to different performance venues and communicating with each other. Being able to undertake multiple roles, being receptive to ideas and responsive to other’s needs are personal qualities valued in this community dance group. We educators, exchanging observations quietly, notice the students’ awareness increasing of the ways in which dance can be more than studios, theatres, auditions and professional dance companies. Our observations support Koppers’ comments that “community dance artists challenge dance practice beyond the category of ‘amateur’ dancing, and destabilize the boundaries of professional and amateur, ‘proper’ stage and alternative venues, and the place of dance in culture” (2006, p. 2). It seems clear to us that Soul Speed dancers aim to raise awareness and to engage politically in creating change through their participatory dance activities (Barbour, 2005; Koppers, 2006). Soul Speed’s activities are consistent with the way in which Peppiatt

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<sup>iii</sup> While environmental issues or environmental education agendas are important for us as dance educators, it is not the focus of our paper to explore these in detail. For useful discussion of issues and agendas see Chapman, Flaws and Le Heron (2006), Hay (2003), Jensen and Schnack (1997), Ministry of Education guidelines (2006) and O’Loughlin (1997). The focus of this paper is to reflect on what a specific community dance experience offered these tertiary students in relation to understanding dance differently and supporting them in developing a vision for their future in community dance. We hope that their visions may also include awareness of the importance of cultural sensitivity and respect for community (Kana & Tamatea, 2006), and environmental concerns.

(1996) describes community dance, as increasing participatory access and involvement in dance at every level but without necessarily focusing on professional dance performance.

As the evening presentations draw to a close and everyone snuggles into sleeping bags in the meeting/sleeping/dancing room, video footage is screened of Soul Speed performing amongst shoppers and pedestrians in a town square. Answers to questions from students reveal that Soul Speed draw on diverse community networks to help create costumes, compose and perform music and video their performances. There seems to be no end to the bartering of skills, energies and time possible even within this small Whaingaroa community. The Soul Speed kaupapa becomes clearer to us all during the evening's encounters, and an understanding of their processes in producing community dance emerges. Sleepy eyes and relaxed bodies indicate the students have had a tiring day but all we've really done is listen, talk and genuinely pay attention. Perhaps paying attention is elemental to community dance. Listening to each other's small talk, eventually everyone falls asleep.

### Exploring the environment

The rustle of sleeping bags heralds the morning, as do Whaea Katarina's careful culinary preparations in the kitchen next door. The quiet activities of showering and dressing, and the eating of wonderful kai prepares everyone for the day. Patti, a core member of Soul Speed, begins the day's activities. Revealing her self-styled teaching and learning approach—'Patti's dance pedagogy'—she affectionately describes her children's dance groups within Whaingaroa Youth Movement, adult dance classes and her love of the local community and environment. The basis of Patti's pedagogy is to 'learn by doing' and to 'forge on', collecting the mistakes and successes. Patti expands on her investigative teaching style, describing the value of nurturing self-expression, fostering individuality, connecting dancers to their own movement, maintaining balance between safety and challenge, developing relationships, being fluid and ensuring accessibility. Within her talk, Patti also reveals her background as a mother, film student, business woman and dancer, and how her past experiences in their totality matter. Nodding, we educators understand that Patti's self-styled pedagogy finds resonance with the principles and practices of experiential education (Carver, 1996; Kolb, 1984). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle suggests that we engage in a process, constantly moving through the stages of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. In dance education, when creating choreography for example, we engage students in movement experiences in a safe studio context, we encourage reflection on experiences and facilitate a process whereby students can relate their experiences to theoretical knowledges. Then we support planning and experimentation, leading students back into movement that fosters self-expression. Within experiential education more generally, Carver (1996) articulated four salient pedagogical principles: authenticity; active learning; drawing on personal experience; and providing experiences that may connect to future opportunities. We hope that today's activities will be 'authentic' and connect clearly with prior learning for this group of dance students.

With Patti's guidance, we all find ourselves walking slowly along a bush path towards the beach with the invitation to 'be present'. 'In being present, can you find space, detail and stillness?' Patti asks us all. Although offered a bush walk that would normally last 10 minutes, Patti suggests that we take our time to notice what we notice, what we respond to and how. A couple of students giggle a little nervously, one holding a cell phone at the ready but they set off individually. Following along the path some time later, we pass a student squatting comfortably inspecting fern fronds, another paused with head tilted towards the call of a Tui above and another resting at the lookout taking in the view of the headlands and harbour mouth in the distance.

One and a half hours later, everyone emerges from the bush and re-groups on the hot black sands of Ngarunui Beach. We pause together to share a little of our experiences on the walk: each a personal and slow dance through the bush. Patti asks, 'What did you notice?' So much detail unravels from the

students' experiences: the cool of the shade and the play of light in the leaves overhead, the smell of the damp earth, the silvery undersides of ferns and textures of bark, soft foot falls and slow breaths, the calls of the birds, cicadas singing and flax rustling, the sudden warmth of the full sun and the reward of the open beach. 'But is this community dance? Walking through the bush and doing 'nothing?' Several students rather sceptically ask us this, perhaps finding this 'dance' too removed from their experiences in the studio, stage, their church and classrooms. Yet they do reveal trust in Patti's process and some seemed to enjoy the realisation that, as O'Loughlin (1997) commented, paying attention to self and the environment in this simple walk did offer a rich experience. The efficacy of this deceptively 'nothing like' task can be found in the authenticity of directly experiencing the environment, along with the consequent reflection (Carver, 1996). We educators trust that eventually the students will be able to assimilate these new experiences with their past knowledges in such a way that compliments the experiential learning focus we desired for the weekend. We hope that the students will be able to transfer their learning from a dance studio context to walking through the bush and vice versa. We both acknowledge that this grappling with movement and process is core to community dance and we trust that frowns will turn to smiles in good time. However, the students' scepticism about this being 'dance' is real right now and, in our attempts to understand their scepticism, we privately discuss whether they might have needed an 'initiating' studio experience that more easily connected with their prior dance practices and assumptions.

Following a picnic lunch on the beach and play at the water's edge, the students learn a little from Ardre about Karioi maunga (the overlooking mountain) and Whaingaroa moana (the harbour). With these shared, local cultural understandings of this environment (Kana & Tamatea, 2006) foremost in our thoughts, we are invited to continue walking the beach and, as Ardre outlines, 'to be present without being a spectator, feeling movement and breath in your body'. Encouraged to interact, see, touch and smell, everyone is to collect 'data' (images and information) during the walk. Collecting information together and meeting where Ardre has drawn a circle in the sand, the students then present and reflect on their experiences in movement. Watching the students stirring the sands as they dance solos, duets and group improvisations we wonder if an understanding will emerge for these students of how lived experiences in a local environment can provide a vision for community dance and activism.

In this context, community dance is strongly connected to paying attention and so taking the time to acknowledge who you are dancing with and where you are dancing is crucial. A stronger sense of 'group' or 'we feeling' is apparent as we return to the Putahi in the mini van. McIver and Page (1961) describe 'we feeling' in terms of identifying with feelings of others and with locality. Clarke (1973) describes 'we-ness' as "solidarity" (p. 34) and notes that this feeling is a fundamental ingredient of any community activity. Another vital ingredient is described as "significance" (Clarke, 1973, p. 34), alluding to the maintenance of the participants' individuality. Balancing solidarity and significance is a pedagogic focus that we dance educators seek to communicate through community dance education.

## Reflections from the educators

Finding some time together back at the Putahi, we two dance educators 'catch up' in short bursts of conversation punctuated by laughter and more herbal tea. We share resources – articles on community dance compiled for the Auckland dance students and materials on environmental dance used in Waikato dance workshops. Debating whether we should have provided readings in advance that reveal the philosophies and practices supporting the weekend's movement activities, we ask ourselves, whether the students needed to read about Nancy Topf's space walk improvisations, for example (cited in Gibson, 2000) before today's activities in the bush and on the beach? Are we right to just trust in this experiential learning process and in ourselves as educators (Kolb, 1984)? Are these concrete experiences rich and authentic enough to allow students to develop new understandings that they can try out in their everyday dance contexts? As educators, it has been our observation that lived experiences are integral to dance students' understandings and that, before the processes of reflection,

conceptualisation, experimentation and future planning can be undertaken, students need to experientially encounter each other and the world. We agree that

‘Encounter’ is the notion we need to recover in order to do justice to our fundamental relationship with the world. This entails a multi-faceted ebb and flow of attention and involves all shades of obliviousness, attending to, taking notice of, and intensified contact ... Emphasis is on watching in new ways, noticing, opening oneself to and attempting to see the world as it is in its own fashion so that person and world ultimately emerge. That world is to be explored experientially. (O’Loughlin, 1997, p. 29)

For us both it is clear that the ritual processes of powhiri and of developing shared kaupapa, created a context for encounter with each other and with the world (Kana & Tamatea, 2006). This context for encounter was created from the beginning of our community dance experience and was continuing as the weekend progressed. Student feedback included comments that revealed that the ‘hands on experience was amazing’ and ‘that actually doing it, not just talking about it was the most important thing for me’ (Buck & Simon, 2007, p. 5). Mulling over our beliefs and considering responses from students, we are reminded of our colleague Alison East’s research (East, 2001, 2006) and the way in which consciousness, attention, intention, relationship, locatedness, transformation and self-actualization were all foundational to today’s experiences. Smiling together, we recognize that East’s words have lodged themselves somewhere deep in our bodies and have found resonance in this weekend with Te Mauri Tau. East wrote, “I would like to place the teaching and practice of dance-making within a social and community context and to foster the notion of socially responsible dance” (2001, p. 32). We hope that the students’ willingness to engage in and develop a sense of place in this new environment and community might help them to reflect on their familiar environments and communities and the way in which they are specifically located (O’Loughlin, 1997). As Majorie O’Loughlin commented, “education must involve recognition of the inherent order of human locatedness. It must create a lifeworld which supports a satisfying human existence grounded in a liveable environment” (1997, p. 29). Perhaps we can foster an awareness of responsibility for community and environment this weekend, a kind of ecological subjectivity (O’Loughlin, 1997). Having undertaken some community dance activities together in the past, we wonder what meanings will unfold for these students during this weekend in Whaingaroa (Plummer & Buck, 2003).

That night we deepen our understanding of Te Mauri Tau’s ecological philosophy and thoroughly enjoy their organic food. Discussion of Soul Speed’s work continues informally and, importantly, the students start playing their own ‘self-styled’ dancing games as they unwind and consolidate their own community. In a quiet moment, three students sit with us, questioning how walks in the bush and on the beach relate to their study of dance at tertiary level. We turn the question gently back to them: ‘What did you do today that could inform your dancing? What activities might inspire choreography perhaps, or research or activism?’ With realisation dawning on her face, one of the students describes how she felt when she noticed the diversity of trees, plants, birds and insects and how each had their own place, types of movement, sounds and colours in the bush. She comments that for her, going into an unknown environment enabled a “shift of thinking ... a broadening of understanding” (Buck & Simon, 2007, p. 6). While the meaning of the day’s activity was perhaps not immediately apparent for all of the students, we trusted that they would come to understand their experiences with time and reflection.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>iv</sup> Several weeks later in the follow up interviews they did reveal that time and reflection had been crucial for understanding the experience (Buck & Simon, 2007).

## Dancing our experiences

Heavy ongoing rain on the roof of the Whaingaroa town hall on Sunday morning helps to shroud and nurture our movement community. Karen and Patti take a two hour dance workshop that builds on the previous day's experiential approach of 'paying attention' by focusing on bodies, movement and use of weight and trust. Dancing in the hall correlates more closely with the students' established or 'authentic' meanings of dance (Carver, 1996). Yet even here the students are extended as they experiment in contact improvisation exercises, paying attention to who they dance with and how they invite and respond to movement. We observe the students moving beyond their comfort zones as they dance in contact with each other, back to back, taking small risks in releasing their weight onto another's body, and offering supportive positions for each other. Reflecting together while they undertake improvisational tasks, we agree that trust is growing between them as they negotiate and resolve ideas through movement. As the morning unfolds, the students are invited to draw from the previous day's experiences in the bush and on the beach, refining one or two movement motifs for a group improvisation. Each offers his or her movement motifs and we educators observe the delight on their faces as personal movement motifs are enthusiastically explored by others. There is a playful quality and shared engagement in moving together that we have not observed develop so quickly with a group of students within the University environment. Their dancing has become a community activity that supports individual expression while also allowing each student to encounter and learn from each other. We experience a sense of peaceful engagement at this local level (Magill, 2004) and a sense of growing security within this community of shared understanding (Clarke, 1973). Throughout this workshop, a process has emerged that draws on the students' prior dance experiences, blending them with new experiences so that they reflect, begin to conceptualise and to develop a vision for community dance. This vision for community dance arises from a process of beginning together, encounter, negotiating diverse needs, engaging in local shared concerns and environments, paying attention and sharing motivation to respond as a community.

## Farewells

Returning to the Putahi for our poroporoaki (farewell), there are speeches of thanks and learnings, laughs and tears and talk of what was rewarding and puzzling. Time is provided through this ritual to allow us all to speak and be heard, to share and reflect on experiences, and to thank each other through generous hugs and smiles. Completion of the weekend's experiences is negotiated within this time, and it is with some sadness that we pack our things and prepare for leaving.

The banter in the back of the mini van on the return to Auckland reveals that the students did broaden their horizons in terms of understanding what communities can do, what dance is and how 'community' and 'dance' may support and extend each other. As dance educators we could not have communicated these experiences through lectures and reading materials alone. Being there was everything.

So, did we find a vision for community dance? Well, we shared in Soul Speed's kaupapa to express concern for and raise awareness about environmental and cultural concerns through community dance. We shared in Te Mauri Tau's aim to foster Māori language and culture through creative work in health, education and environment. We shared in Patti's pedagogical approach to community dance and experienced a process of paying attention to environment that could inspire dance activism. The students together found embodied expression of their experiences through movement and contact improvisation activities that championed process, time and respect for others (Barbour, 2001, 2002).

We did not find one vision for community dance: instead the students began imagining their own visions. As a group, they used past knowledges combined with what they experienced with others over the weekend and what they hoped to learn as they moved forward to begin personally imagining

community and environmental dance in the future. In paying attention to what each person offered and desired, and negotiating individual and group needs, they were able to democratically begin building their own visions for community dance. As a result, we educators could describe such visions of community dance in terms of

- engaging with others respectfully;
- allowing for difference;
- allowing time and space for togetherness or ‘we-ness’ to emerge;
- balancing the ‘real’ with the abstract and risks with security;
- growing relationships at a local level; and
- emphasising the journeys (process) rather than the endings (product).

Perhaps this is partly why defining community dance practice is difficult (Kuppers, 2006) and why experiential learning is so important—because visions of community dance need to be made to order locally and, by their very nature, involve a journey of discovery. The value of community dance is revealed when the participants pay attention to the qualities present and desired, and engage in the moment in the processes of working with others. We believe then that the phenomenon and practice known as community dance exists. Our visions for community dance did begin to reveal themselves through the weekend field trip with students and these experiences still live on in all our memories and bodies. We felt it as it unfolded in our lived experiences that weekend and we hope to feel it again.

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