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Vital Entanglements: An Exploration of Collective Effort in the Dance Technique Class

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Abstract

Peers influence each other and learning can be shaped by shared processes. The purpose of this article is to pedagogically explore collective effort in the dance technique studio in a conservatoire setting. This practice-based research flows from the studio and has relevance for all higher arts education contexts. It is developed from the experiences of students and a teacher/researcher in the process of prioritising attentive peer observation as a strategy for shared learning. Qualitative data has been thematically analysed, through a feminist interpretive ethnographic approach, in order to bring insight to the complexity and interdependency of learning. Pedagogical roles have been reconceptualised and the influence of peers is discussed as embodied acts of recognition. Furthermore, the experience of disengagement among peers is

reframed as agential dissent and the dance technique class is articulated as a potential model of understanding what it can mean to live well among others.



Introduction

Peers influence each other and learning can be shaped by shared processes. This paper explores what it means for students to learn *with* each other rather than learning *alongside* each other in the dance technique class. This practice-based research flows from considerations of learning that involve the students in more than an individual competitive pursuit of personal goals in isolation, as perpetuated by neo-liberal values. Learning dance technique might be conceived otherwise, as both an individual and collective process; a group activity involving social interaction. Thus, the experiences explored here will have resonance for all teachers of arts education since they reveal the significance of pedagogical approaches that prioritise learning as a collective practice. Acknowledgement of differences among peers can enhance shared learning processes in the studio (Anttila, Martin & Svendler, 2019; Bannon, 2018; Mreiwed et al., 2017). Accordingly, dancing together with peers in appreciation of relationships that are interdependently knotted and interwoven, reflects the ideals of being part of a democratic society (Burnidge, 2012; Dyer, 2014; Kahlich, 2001; Risner & Stinson, 2010). As such, the dance technique class can be a place to practice what it means to be part of a collective and to better understand ourselves and our common humanity. Thus, dance technique pedagogy can enable creative ways of experiencing what it can mean to be part of a diverse and more socially just world (Risner & Stinson, 2010). These issues feel particularly pressing currently in the global pandemic and social distancing fallout due to COVID 19. Therefore, while pedagogy is discussed in this paper from the concrete experiences of the dance technique class in a UK conservatoire, the arising insights are pertinent to wider arts education settings in consideration of how shared learning processes can model ways of being for future artistic citizens.

I am a contemporary dance technique teacher in a UK conservatoire. As a teacher, I invite students to participate actively in the studio and encourage them to assume responsibility for their own learning and for our shared enterprise. This approach enables learning among peers that is generative of a deeper awareness of the particularity of their own dancing, as well as that of the diversity of their fellow learners. A particular teaching strategy that I call attentive peer observation, will be discussed later, as a means to encourage an expansive awareness of learning from the dancing of peers in the studio. Such ways of learning can generate diverse responses among the student group and consequently, learning affordances are dependent upon the contributions of each participant. The presence of disengagement by peers can be experienced as inhibitive for the learner, as in most educational settings. However, as will be discussed, peer disengagement can be alternatively conceived as opportunity for students and teacher to reappraise why we do the things we do together. Agential dissent, as a reframing of disengagement, can afford the tensile possibility for learners to deliberately reject, reconsider or commit to that within which they are immersed.



Transformative Aims of Arts Education

Dance is a creative practice and through its study, like other arts disciplines, learners might discover ways of understanding, making sense of and reshaping their world. Peter Brinson (1991), an influential ambassador of dance education in Britain during the 1970's and 80's, articulates the societal benefits of learning in the arts that continue to have resonance today. He highlights the affordances of appreciating cultural diversity through aesthetic and intellectual development, stating that "the arts offer direct ways of exploring values, of raising questions of personal, moral and aesthetic value and of discussing the ideas and perceptions to which they relate" (p. 70). This argument expounds that arts in education facilitate social

harmony, individual humanity and “wealth from which to nourish social living” (p. 73). Dance scholar Anne Burnidge (2012) shares a similar yet more provocative vision of the purpose of dance education to cultivate “critical, revolutionary, out-of-the-box thinkers and movers” (p. 46). Whereas contemporary dance scholar Fiona Bannon (2010) describes dance as “a self-actualising interdisciplinary, where individuals can become qualitatively transformed” (p. 58). Qualitative transformation, as Bannon frames it, signals an enhancement in the student’s perception of self and their role in society. Towards this end, teachers can help learners make connections between the dance studio and the world beyond the educational environment (Risner & Stinson, 2010, p. 19). Furthermore, dance can make a special contribution to the education of citizens because it is “a particular form of knowledge and experience [and] a way of organising and communicating individual perceptions of the world” (Brinson, 1991, p. 69). However, conventional pedagogical approaches to teaching dance technique have not aligned well with such transformative aims.

Authoritarian pedagogical methods are prevalent in Western Concert Dance, particularly in learning dance technique, and as dance scholar Robin Lakes (2005) highlights, this aligns poorly with “the liberating power that an arts education can provide” (3). Lakes states that authoritarian teaching in dance is both morally and ethically “indefensible”, fostering “emotionally (and sometimes physically) abusive atmospheres” (p. 16). Dance pedagogue Eeva Anttila (2004) asserts that authoritarian teaching methods perpetuate experiences of humiliation in the dance technique class due to strategies of correction, judgement and ideologies of deficit that evidence a lack of respect for the learner. Negative motivational strategies are sometimes normalised within studio practices even when this is incongruent with the way students expect to be treated in other settings. For example, in some dance contexts, shouting at students by the teacher is tolerated, expected and even desired (Dyer, 2010). The dance studio can, therefore, be a location where negative and disempowering behaviours by teachers towards students are not always challenged or even perceived as inappropriate (Green, 2001).

In some settings, student complicity with authoritarian teaching is perhaps not surprising given the prevalence of uncritically reflective ideas about dance training as necessarily harsh (Lakes, 2005). According to Burnidge (2012), “the expectation and acceptance—by both students and teachers—that dance instructors will or must assert control over students makes it challenging to establish a more egalitarian environment in a dance class” (p. 44). Lakes (2005) states that such teaching practices model “regressive, antidemocratic relationships” and do not “foster deep, higher-order thinking” (p. 16). Challenges to authoritarianism in dance education, however, have become increasingly established through Freirean critical pedagogical approaches wherein student and teacher roles are redefined (Burnidge, 2012; Green, 2001; Lakes, 2005; Risner, 2008; Smith, 1998).

Dialogical Learning

Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993) troubles hierarchical assumptions about the teacher's role as an expert with ultimate power to act, making decisions and dictating the learning process while the student, as novice, receives knowledge obediently, passively and uncritically. Such "banking methods" of education replicate normative and inequitable social structures and in dance technique classes, these approaches require "that students somatically detach from the inner messages of their bodies, consequently giving their bodies to their teachers" (Green, 2001, p. 157). However, through dialogical processes that enable reflection the learner can develop critical social consciousness by "challenging dominant educational discourses and illuminating the right and freedom of students to become subjects of their world" (Freire, 1993, p. 15). Learning approaches that aim to empower students, as with critical pedagogy, establish environments where autonomy, agency and inquiry are privileged alongside relationality, interdependency and building community. In the dance technique studio, redefining the expectations of participation in this way, can make possible more democratically conceived practices of being learners among peers (Burnidge, 2012; Dyer, 2014; Kahlich, 2001; Risner & Stinson 2010).

The transformative aims of critical pedagogy have been further developed through feminist perspectives. African-American activist bell hooks is an influential voice with respect to feminist expansions of critical pedagogy. Her conception of engaged pedagogy, described in her seminal work *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), is particularly helpful in foregrounding feminist concerns with the relational, personal, intuitive and embodied elements of education. Engaged pedagogy, as hooks defines it, re-orient critical pedagogy toward relational ways of learning and I mobilize this in consideration of active approaches to learning dance technique, discussed later as agential learning, and the manner with which peers influence each other, discussed later as embodied acts of recognition. In dance, critical feminist pedagogies have been used to reconfigure the relationships between teacher, learner and peers, in order that learning can be more democratic, equitable and just (Burnidge, 2012; Green, 2001; Lakes, 2005; Risner, 2008; Smith, 1998).

Dance scholar Becky Dyer (2010, 2014) utilizes critical feminist pedagogy as a research lens on her dance technique practices. She states that by encouraging learners to consider the consequences of their relationship with the teacher, the learner can shape their identity in the studio and this affects how they learn and the meaning of knowledge (2010, p. 114). Furthermore, dance researchers Julie Kerr-Berry, Karen Clemente and Doug Risner (2008) examine teacher identities when applying critical feminist pedagogy to dance defining it as 'an approach to teaching that seeks to help students question and challenge domination by exposing taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that limit, marginalize, and disenfranchise human agency and freedom' (p. 95). Dialogical learning is fundamental to this

approach and in the dance technique class the teacher can be instrumental in fostering this as an alternative to traditional expectations of the acquiescent student (Burnidge, 2012; Lakes, 2005).

According to Anttila, Martin and Svendler (2019), dialogue can be key for creating the conditions that make it possible to perform difference in/through dance. They discuss how dialogue in dance can function to generate greater understanding by allowing the voices of diverse parties to be heard and thereby enabling greater acceptance of difference. However, it is useful to highlight that while dialogue might be more immediately utilized in areas of creative dance activity where processes of collaboration are on the whole expected, it is less evidently applicable to learning dance technique. Conventionally, communication in the dance technique class has been limited to a one-way function of instruction and feedback by the teacher (Dryburgh, 2016). For example, while learners move together, they may do so formally in lines or in small groups facing ‘the front’ such that exchange is inhibited (Kimmerle & Côté-Laurence, 2003, p. 190). Dialogical learning conversely seeks out ways to turn toward the other so that learning may be engaged with expansively rather than mechanically. Anttila (2004) has described this turning toward the other as embodied dialogue and here I am considering it both as the physical act of turning toward peers in order to share reflections together and the metaphorical turning toward the other as recognition and appreciation of fellow learners involved in common project.

Dialogical approaches can be used to enable all learners to speak and be heard, seen and felt (Dyer & Löytönen, 2012). Thus, interaction can function expansively in the dance technique class as on-going communicative act between all participants rather than didactically as instruction and feedback from the teacher (Akinleye & Payne, 2016; Dryburgh, 2016). In this way, dialogue can serve an expansive and enhancing purpose in dance education that works against the universalising and isolating competitive function of dance technique as body skill learning alone. Consequently, dialogue can facilitate the conditions through which students feel part of the learning process as collective effort.



Collective Effort and the Meshwork

The experiences of dance technique where learning happens with others rather than simply alongside them are considered here as complexly interwoven. A centralising feature of hooks' (1994) engage pedagogy is collective effort which conceives of educational empowerment as a "field in which we all labor" (p. 14). The acknowledgement and inclusion of contributions by all participants is central to creating a stimulating learning environment (Dryburgh, 2019). The influence of peers on/with/through each other can be galvanised to realise collective effort and consequently peers can become accountable to each other for their learning.

Being part of a learning community in dance involves "appreciating learning from each other [...] and engaging with self and others in a sort of responsive somatic awareness and responsibility" (Dyer & Löytönen, 2012, p. 143). This responsive somatic awareness concerns bodily sensing/feeling/being with other learners as we move together; it is an attunement of self in relation to others and the wider environment. In the dance technique class, students are involved in generating dancing's commons through participating in a shared and mutually beneficial process. As stated by Indian classical dancer, choreographer and scholar Ananya Chatterjea (2011):

Dancing's commons is the shared space that is enlivened through the bodily labor of dancing, where the meaning and significance is in the doing, in the engagement, in the connection we can then create between you and me, and in the way we then learn to share space and rhythm. (p. 12)

The enlivened shared space of the dance technique class that Chatterjea discusses here, can be thought about as a weaving together of that which is generated among the participants. And,

as we will see, dancing's commons may still be generated despite the perception of disengagement by some peers. As such, collective effort can help us to think through how we approach learning in the dance technique class as a process that is mutually beneficial. Peers are not just other learners who happen to be present in the class, but rather similarly invested people with whom to reciprocally engage, energise and enable.

My thinking about the experience of shared learning is expanded by drawing from the work of social anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007; 2011; 2018). He defines social interaction dynamically as a complex entanglement of movement in relation with others that emerges "from the interplay of forces that are conducted along the lines of the meshwork" (2011, p. 92). He develops the metaphor of lives being lived along lines in time and space and consequently fluidly evolving threads rather than fixed and static entities. He describes how through our interactions with others, we join with, knot, wrap around and pull away from each other as a tangle of threads; the meshwork. In considering peer relationships in the dance class as an entanglement of interwoven threads, we can appreciate the complexity and interdependency of the learning process (Mreiwed et al., 2017). This acknowledges that peers influence and are influenced by each other in ways that are collectively entangled. Through processes in which relatedness of interactions inform social situations we can find valuable ways of living and learning together (Bannon, 2018; Rouhiainen and Hämäläinen, 2013).

Dance pedagogue Doug Risner (2009) states that what is worth learning in dance is to address marginalization, privilege, prejudice, equity, and social justice. He also acknowledges however, that these things remain our biggest challenge. In order to address these issues in the studio I encourage shared learning, mutual respect and collective achievement. Collectiveness is prioritised in critical feminist pedagogy through ways of learning that acknowledge the learner as an individual among diverse others. This can be characterised in educational settings by respect for difference, integration of multiple perspectives and facilitation of belonging (Macartney, 2012). Therefore, relational learning concerns, acknowledgement of pluralism, respect for diversity and building communities. Thus, the intention to prioritise collective effort is not to diminish the agency of the individual learner. Rather that learning develops from the personal and is enhanced by an engagement with peers for the benefit of all.

I am mobilising the concept of learner agency within the context of a dance technique class as the possibility to act, unencumbered by the coercive forces of the authoritarian teacher. This is to counter the hierarchical roles of the banking method, as discussed above. From this perspective, agency has to do with a shift from constraints of assumed learner compliance and perceptions of the teacher as an all-knowing expert. In order to consider agency in this way, I utilise the conception of agential learning proposed by pedagogy scholars Reeve and Tseng

(2011) as a component of educational engagement. Agential learning, they state, includes the intentional and proactive behaviour of learners to ‘personalize and otherwise enrich both what is to be learned and the conditions and circumstances under which it is to be learned’ (p. 258). Conceptually agential learning is useful for thinking about collective effort in the learning process, as it is intended by hooks (1994), because it builds upon the foundational conceptions of learner empowerment, active approaches and participant voice (Dryburgh, 2019). With respect to terminology, I wish to note that the concepts of agential learning and entanglement used here, while overlapping, are not intended to assume a post human frame where agential realism theoretically argues that enacting a state of being is inseparable from the surroundings (see Barad 2003; 2007).

Situating the Research

I am a dance technique teacher and scholar with over twenty years of experience in varied professional, educational and participatory settings. Currently, I teach dance technique at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London, UK from where this research has been conducted. Therefore, in this practice-based pedagogical research I am situated as teacher/researcher and co-participant. The focus of this paper, the influence of peers, has arisen from the importance attributed to it by the participants through the process of conducting my PhD dance pedagogy research at Middlesex University. This strand of my research considers the ways in which students’ relationships with each other can be impactful in the development and enhancement of learning in the dance technique class.

The term ‘dance technique’ refers to the development of bodily capabilities (Diehl & Lambert, 2011; Spatz, 2015). These capabilities can be thought about as body skills that are attributed specifications based on diverse codified dance styles such as, Ballet, Graham, Cunningham, Bharatanatyam and Release technique among many others. Learning dance technique is often a central tenet of dance training and is considered fundamental to the honing of bodily proficiency for a professional performance career. The emphasis on technique is particularly relevant in a conservatoire context where technique excellence is an expected outcome of training (Ford, 2010; Miller & Baker, 2014). However, it is argued that processes of learning that foster individualism and competition among students in order to achieve such results may not be the best way to prepare students for life as an elite performer if the cost is of a life well lived (Tregear et al., 2016).

Dance technique is largely taught through movement materials that are generated by the teacher and taught to the students as ‘set’ exercises, tasks, phrases or sequences. These materials can provide the matter through which processes of exploration, discovery and honing deepen embodied knowing (Dryburgh, 2018; McWilliams, 2009; Spatz, 2015). Such processes involve the development of skill ‘to hone the matter/the material of movement, to

sustain a working and reworking process from an initial sketch towards a deeper perception and more detailed articulation' (Diehl & Lampert, 2011, p. 223).

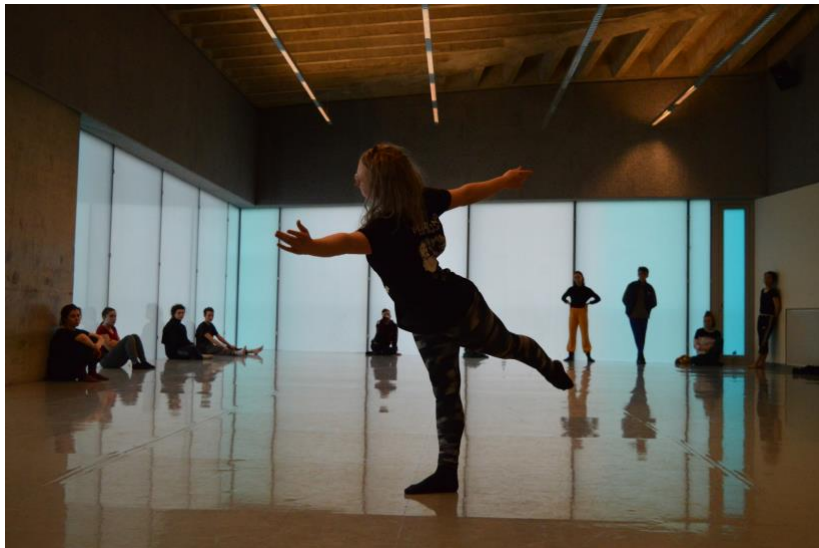
I teach a style of contemporary dance technique called "release-based" which aims primarily to develop efficiency of movement that prioritises an easy and fluid quality of dancing with loose joints, non-tensile musculature, flow of weight and travel at floor level (Diehl & Lambert, 2011). This style of dance technique encourages individuality of movement by dancers rather than replication of teacher demonstration. As such the learning approach can encourage exploration of movement concepts, specificity through inquiry and honing of details as particular to the individual. Thus, the dance technique class 'gives the dancer a possibility to embody movement in multiple, divergent ways' (Anttila, 2004, p. 58). Consequently, the movement materials can be utilised as a framework through which to experiment with their multidimensional features (Dryburgh, 2018).

As researcher/teacher I utilise feminist interpretive ethnographic approaches, acknowledging my imbued co-participation and situated positioning in the research process (Alexander, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Haraway 1988; Harding 1991). A feminist interpretive ethnographic approach prioritises subjective and embodied knowing and facilitates inductive processes. Thus, the research focuses on experiences, definitions, meanings and subjectivity while maintaining awareness of contextual factors that inform the actions of the participants. Epistemologically, this approach adheres to the perspective that 'all knowledge is situated, partial, contingent and interpretative' (Skeggs, 2001 p. 435).

Feminist ethnography works to make transparent the ways in which power operates within the context of the research (Maher and Tetreault, 1993). Furthermore, individual experiences, beliefs and influences are recognised to be constituted by a complex matrix of factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age. Ethically, feminist ethnography is concerned with the non-exploitation of the research participants and this is made tangible through processes that prioritise reciprocity, transparency, accountability, responsibility, and equality. As stated by researcher Mary Evans (1997), realities are often complex and contradictory and therefore feminist research draws attention to ways of thinking about the world which do not impose absolutes upon relationships. Approached in this way, my research positions the dance technique class as a situated cultural site (Alexander, 2003). Consequently, studio practices are appreciated to be socially negotiated and constructed. It is a means of coming together, to dance with each other, through which diverse lived experiences and disparate ways of being can be negotiated as a collectivizing, cultural practice of education.

This research project was conducted with a group of second year contemporary dance

undergraduate students. I was one of their contemporary dance technique teachers for the first half of the academic year which comprised of 15 weeks, three classes a week and each class was 90 minutes in duration. All ethical permissions were approved and 18 of the 24 students volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews toward the end of the learning process. These data alongside teacher fieldnotes, have been critically reflected upon to enable thematic analysis of issues arising (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Quotes from participants and teacher journal are used throughout the ensuing discussion of findings in order to offer nuance of experiences and bring insight to the learning process in the dance technique class. The participants are named with pseudonyms that they chose for themselves and all identifying features have been amended in order to protect their anonymity. The interspersed illustrative figures are photographs taken from two connected projects; from within the studio taken by the students, and a practical exploration of entanglement undertaken by the researcher as a means of thinking through theory.



Results and Discussion

The ensuing discussion brings insight to the vital entanglements of the dance technique class using participants voices, theoretical framing and teacher/researcher reflection in order to do so. Through what follows, I critically reflect upon the experience of learning dance technique in reference to the impact of attentive peer observation, a particular teaching strategy used to privilege collective effort in the studio. I articulate, as embodied acts of recognition, how the learners' sense of their own contribution to learning shifts as a result of acknowledging the influence of their peers. The conception of collective effort is troubled by the impactful experience of peers who behave in ways that appear disengaged. Further, this is reframed as

potentially agential acts of dissent and the arising discomfort, for learners and teacher, is reflected on in terms of being collectively entangled in learning and the ensuing affordances of the dance studio to model citizenship.

Attentive Peer Observation

In order to privilege collective effort in the dance technique class I have incorporated activities that encourage the students to engage in watching each other. These activities task the learners with observing each other attentively so that they might ‘see into’, witness, and appreciate the affordances of the dance materials through the explorative dancing of their peers. Through attentive peer observation each learner may attune to the particular and diverse ways in which their peers negotiate the materials. As part of an inquiry-oriented process, these materials can enable students to enter into a shared process of discovery and reflection toward greater embodied knowing. Consequently, the students may also further recognise the ways in which their own explorative dancing of the materials contributes to the collective experience. Observation, in this respect, is not to objectify but rather to attend to, draw from and ‘enter into’ the practice of each other.

This is one way in which I encourage peer dialogue in the studio and I find that it is useful because of its immediacy of application. Peer observation can initiate processes of reflective learning from which embodied knowing can flow. For example, Attentive peer observation can be utilized for peer feedback, setting individualised objectives and sharing different understandings of embodied experiences. The application of attentive peer observation supports its incorporation in the studio practice so that learner resistance to new ways of learning are minimised. Simultaneously the strategy helps to engender a culture of shared endeavour. In the dance technique class, watching each other is not in itself very different from usual studio practices where learners might incidentally watch each other while waiting from the side, for example. However, what is particular about what I am highlighting here is the priority and space that this otherwise incidental activity may be given.

In my teaching practice I make time for attentive peer observation. As can be seen in the studio photographs, learners position themselves around the space so that they might have different perspectives from which to ‘see into’ the dancing of their peers. The students dance the materials alone or in pairs so that their individual embodied inquiry might be afforded space and time. In practice, this focus signals my belief in the potentiality of attentive peer observation to enhance embodied learning for all. The following participants comments indicate the ways in which observing peers has influenced their experience of learning:

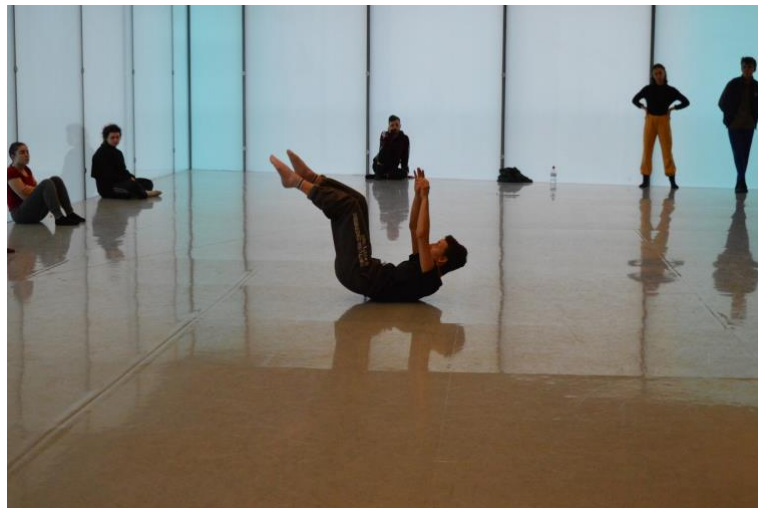
I know that I always notice things that other people do, that maybe good things and things that they need to improve on [...] Sometimes I find I watch somebody and

I'm like Oh! if they just do that a little bit differently that would be so much better. And I feel that's probably what they're doing for me. (Louise)

When we look at each other, we look at each other to give feedback and to learn from each other. (Amy)

You do watch people from the side but it's not until you have to pick something for every person that you do really watch them with attention to detail [...] When you're made to watch it with that eye it really helps in the sense that you really do pay attention to what everyone is doing. (William)

There are some particularly rich opportunities for encouraging attentive peer observation in the dance technique class. The most relevant, in my teaching practice, is afforded when students are dancing the materials in small groups in turn. It is at these moments when time spent at the side, not dancing, might be refocused toward learning through attentive peer observation rather than simply waiting for the next turn to dance. Self-directed and inquiry-oriented learning might be further enabled through peer feedback, group dialogue, individualised goal setting and reflection based on what has been observed. Active participation by learners, positioned in this way, becomes an ongoing process of involvement; and engagement with embodied learning even when not moving oneself. As stated by Patrick Howard et al. (2018) students “are motivated intrinsically by pursuing what they find most interesting” (p. 851). Through attentive peer observation, then, the dance student can become further “attuned to attend to critical features” (Ingold, 2018, p. 33) of that within which they are immersed. This immersion is a knotting with, a joining up, an entanglement of one's own bodily learning process in relation to those of one's peers.



Embodied Acts of Recognition

In her articulation of collective effort, bell hooks (1994) discusses the importance of listening to each other's voices in the classroom. To hear each other, in terms of what each person contributes to the learning dialogue, is an act of recognition. In the dance technique class, attentive peer observation is a means by which students might appreciate, recognise and place worth in the contributions of their peers. As Bannon (2018) posits, learning through attunement that engages with cooperative action "relates to a felt sense of interconnectedness, to be recognised by any one individual and between individuals as they relate in social settings (p. 77).

Embodied acts of recognition are a reconceiving of that which becomes apparent through attentive peer observation in the dance technique class. It is necessary to move beyond simplistic comparisons between peers, where one student might judge the display of skills by other learners (Burnidge, 2012). Through acts of recognition, the dancing of materials is reoriented from concerns about external validation achieved through successful performance to teacher and peers. Instead the acknowledgement of each other's contribution toward greater understanding might enable learning processes characterised by shared discovering, mutual exploration and finding together. This is what collective effort can mean; that together students might appreciate the affordances of interdependent learning as it entwines. The participants discussed drawing from each other in the following ways:

There are certain people I watch and how, dynamically, they do things [...] I'll take their focus, I'll take his dynamic movement, how sharp it may be, how sudden, and then play between the balances of being sudden and being soft [...] Take in what someone else has done and try that next time. (Christopher)

I was watching Amy very much because she's always really, really light. Which was something I didn't have because I was always using too much energy or force. It helped me, looking at her. (Ino)

When I watch Marcus [...] I'm like; "Oh my God! He's really amazing". I love the way that he moves. And there are things that he does that I think I might try moving that way. (William)

I saw William do something and I was like Wow! I want to try that. So, I tried it and, I don't know but, maybe someone would see me and be like I want to try doing it that way. Everyone contributes like that when you're watching someone dance. (Rose)

Through attentive peer observation as embodied acts of recognition students can expand, provoke, and inspire embodied knowing with each other. In this way the dance technique class enacts a “gift economy” where learners ‘share a sense of a common project and contribute what they produce to it’ (Nonini, 2007, p. 7). The involvement of each participant increases rather than depletes the resources, in this case embodied knowing. For example, the way one dancer “plays with” the articulation of a movement might stimulate a peer to do the same, not as replication, but as a way of thinking-through-bodily that which a peer has proposed.

Dissenting Contributions

In thinking about collective effort as recognising the contribution of all participants, it becomes necessary to reflect on the influence of peers whose behaviour would suggest that they are not engaged with the shared learning process. I will first discuss such behaviour as disengaged and then reflect on what it might mean, pedagogically, to redefine such ways of being as agential dissent. The research participants discussed the behaviour of peers who appeared to be disengaged during the dance technique class as distracting, demoralising and in some ways disturbing. This is reflected in the following participant comments:

I’m really trying to learn everything and I’m really trying to just be open and stuff, which is really hard when other people around you are not as enthusiastic as you are. (Syafiqah)

I find it sometimes challenging if people are reluctant to join in or reluctant to try things. I find that a little bit disheartening. (Lauren)

There are a few who I wonder if they really want to be here because I don’t think they’re taking it seriously [...] And I know I shouldn’t let this affect me, but it creates a certain atmosphere. (Katherina)

When those people who don’t like [the class] as much get in a mood about it or something and they sit out that doesn’t put me off but that’s a different atmosphere [...] It can affect the way I’m thinking. (Amy)

Disengagement by peers impacted the learner’s sense of what was being contributed to in terms of its collectiveness. Behaviours that suggest disengagement by students are also troubling for me as the teacher because I want to generate a learning proposition that is compelling. However, I appreciate that as with all pedagogical approaches my teaching will not be encountered in equally accessible ways, for many varied reasons (Dyer, 2010). At the same time though, behaviours of disengagement need not necessarily diminish the potency of

what is being collectively realised in the studio. Student engagement is currently a pedagogical focus in higher education globally, and while I believe it is important that the standards of teaching and learning should be as good as they possibly can be, it might also be useful to recognise that disengagement with learning is not necessarily negative.

In thinking about behaviours that appear to be disengaged we might consider the agential choice of dissent. As pedagogy researcher Bruce Macfarlane (2017) states, students that dissent can be making deliberate decisions of noncompliance with learning as it has been proposed by the teacher or institution. Similarly, scholar Herbert Kohl (1991) described ‘willed not-learning’ as a conscious and chosen refusal to assent to learn (p. 41). Therefore, while dissenting behaviours may not seem to comply with what feels like collective effort, they might not be dismissed as dysfunctional. Instead the “deviance” of dissent might challenge both teacher and peers to reconsider how what is generated between us can exclude some learners (Dyer, 2014). The following account is taken from my teacher journal and reflects on my experience of working with one particular student, Emily, whose engagement with the learning process was intermittent.

I felt a level of disrespect from Emily that was disquieting [...] Often when I was offering information to the group instead of paying attention she would be looking away or having a private conversation [...] She was part of a group of friends whom I observed getting distracted by her at times [...] Emily made comments about her interest in moving in other ways (than we had been doing). While this is not in itself offensive, I felt manipulated by her demeanour as someone who needed to be treated with special attention. She stated at one moment that “It is all shit!” [...] I am left feeling somewhat unresolved in relation to Emily. I feel that I was not able to reach her and for some reason there was a disconnect between us [...] a sense of wasted opportunity and offended pride in my ability/value as a teacher. (Jamieson)

In their discussion of the changing role of the teacher, Howard et al. (2018) highlight the importance to develop a more thoughtful approach to “the needs of young people that defy the certitude of teaching methods and educational theories, and is an inherently risky way of being in the world” (p. 857). I was often conflicted about how to respond to Emily’s behaviour in the studio and managed an awkward balance between active ignoring, directed inducements and celebration of curiosity located elsewhere. However, this felt unsatisfactory and the relationship remained unresolved and uncomfortable throughout our learning together. I continue to hold feelings of responsibility for Emily’s lack of engagement with the learning offer and recognise her disinterest as a rejection of my teaching approach. Encounters in education with that which disturbs us, such as dissenting behaviours and their residual feelings, can inspire change for both the learner and the teacher (Boler, 1999). In this way

learning collectively, states Hala Mreiwed et al. (2017) entails experiencing a “community of difference and togetherness” (p. 51 italics original) “that is in pursuit of finding commonalities and joint achievements” (p. 52). This pursuit is not however, always easily achieved as entangled threads pull apart.



It is important to bear in mind that consenting behaviour by learners may not be an act of compliance to the collective but rather a learned behaviour to obey despite one’s dissent. Therefore, by expanding our conception of agential learning to include dissent we are able to focus on student freedoms to learn rather than a compulsion to be engaged. According to Macfarlane (2017), students’ freedom to learn is ‘to exercise freedoms that will promote their personal growth as independent thinkers’ (p. xvi). Student engagement defined in this way extends beyond performative behaviours to include the complex, disruptive aspects of learning that can lead toward student autonomy, choice and agency (Kahn 2017; Klemenčič and Primožič 2015; Kohl 1991).

Collectively Entangled

Threads of the meshwork that pull apart can create tension and friction that opens up the possibility for individuals to transform in ways that go “beyond the sharing of our differences” (Bannon, 2018, p. 86). Through the discomfort of encounters that require us to listen, respond and make choices we might modify our perspectives. Howard et al. (2018) state that through exposing processes of risk taking and spaces of vulnerability teachers are “open to self-understanding and to the possibility of change, growth and discovery” (p. 856). For the teacher, any such discomfort can be important as it can deter complacency about the effectiveness of the teaching approach (Burnidge, 2012). In their discussion of addressing the challenges of higher education in the contemporary neoliberal landscape, Jennifer Fraser and Sarah Lambie (2015) state that it is pedagogically important for teachers to “distinguish between when we have good reason to “push back” and when we are being unnecessarily

rigid, defensive or unreflexive in our practice” (p. 73). Through their UK-based queer theory research, they explore what role pedagogical practices can play in contesting the marketisation of higher education. Such praxis seems necessary for a pedagogical practice that seeks to include all participants as it requires a re-thinking about what is vital in the learning moment.

The impact of behaviour by peers that suggests they are not engaged with the learning process led some of the participants to question how they should be as learners themselves. At such times the learner needs to make decisions about how they might pursue learning, what it is that they want to preserve for themselves in the process if it is not in alignment with some of their peers. For example, how might a dance student continue to invest energy and enthusiasm in exploring materials that have already been dismissed by their peers, or how can the learner attune to sensorial awareness if peers do not seem to value learning dance technique in that way? At such times the student might need to recommit to contributing to collective effort. This involves the dynamic vitality of entanglements in learning among others when threads might tie in or pull away.

For the student, confronted by the discomfort of learning amongst dissenting peers, what it means to contribute to collective effort can feel uncertain. As teachers, however, it is not our role to shield students from such discomfort but rather provide the conditions through which they might successfully “dwell in discomfort” (Howard et al., 2018, p. 861). Such learning experiences can give rise to emotions that “play a constitutive role in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities and in creating possibilities for individual and social transformation” (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012, p. 41). In establishing learning conditions conducive to resolving peer dissent the teacher must struggle to create respectful and trusting relationships among participants.

Acknowledging the interwoven complexity of influences among peers in the dance technique class reconceives hook’s notion of collective effort as relational entanglement. Thought about in this way, the dance technique class reflects democratic society (Dyer, 2014; Schupp 2018). In making decisions about how they might proceed as a learner amongst other learners, engaged or not, each student acts as part of the collective and consequently influences others. This process model’s living among others in a society of diverse perspectives and consequently being-in-the-world, as student or citizen, involves consideration of what one wants to be part of and the way in which one wants to go about being a part of it.

Learning in the dance technique class in ways that allows others to claim their space while simultaneously assuming one’s own (Chatterjea, 2011), is a practice of embodied exchange generative of experimentation, collaboration and risk-taking (Rouhiainen and Hämäläinen, 2013). Through this we can practice how, in the vitality of entanglement, to balance

assertiveness of self and support of each other in shared endeavour. Chatterjea (2011) states that dancing can ‘suggest to us strategies and tools of action, being-in-the-world, and material hope’ (p. 16). This signifies the wider potentialities of the dance technique class in terms of learning how we might live well among others. In considering “what it might mean to be-in-common and to be an individual who is part of collaborative action” we can “focus our modes of thinking and responding together, and do so in ways we might recognise as having value for our being human” (Bannon, 2018, p. 89). As such the dance technique class offers opportunities to participate in collective effort as human functioning among others with whom we live and move. This resonates in the following participant’s description of our learning process.

[The focus of the class] was more about gaining confidence and working together, watching the others doing their dance and analyse their work. And then just bring something to our work as well. So, it was really more about sharing, I think. It was not individual but just connect with others, I think. It was about the individual but being aware of the others as well, just being inspired by the others. (Davina)



Concluding Thoughts

In the dance technique class, collective effort matters because pedagogical approaches that encourage learning *with* each other rather than *alongside* each other can stimulate the learning environment and enhance shared understanding. On a social level the entangled nature of learning that privileges a range of peer interaction can support students’ appreciation of the valuable contributions they each make; the synergistic ways they can positively influence

their own learning and that of their peers. Similarly, in realising vitality, the confrontation of peer disengagement and/or dissent might not destabilise but reinforce student's commitment to the learning process. As such, collective effort is not to be reductively imagined as some sort of easily achievable collaborative intention. Instead collective effort, among peers in the dance technique class, is a struggle; a commitment to realise ways of being together that manifest relationality of people being together in common project. The common project of learning among peers, privileged through strategies such as attentive peer observation, opens up the possibility to learn exponentially through the influences of each other in the dance technique class. Collective effort, expressed through embodied acts of recognition, then is the knotted togetherness that makes possible the vibrant tension of threads that pull apart and entwine as students and teacher weave through the shared learning processes.

What has been revealed in this paper is that by emphasising the collective, teaching can inhibit competition and isolation and thus learning can be expansively realised. This can open up the accumulative possibilities of shared learning that utilise dialogical strategies. Such strategies can afford ways of recognising the contribution of peers that appreciate and welcome difference. In this way, dissent is not necessarily compromising of the collective endeavour, it is not dysfunction, but rather an opportunity, albeit 'discomforting', for the teacher to reflect on what is essential and for peers to recommit to their own participation. Through this messy human relating of the meshwork learners might find ways of living/learning together that model affirmation of their differences, resilience through discomforting encounters and non-defensive readiness to respond on their own terms. Collective effort then affords learning experiences through which the learner is able to appreciate their own particular contribution to the unfolding process as vital toward the expansive realisation of our shared common project.

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