

Shape Shifting: choreographic process as research

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Abstract

My paper presents findings from an action research project focussing on a series of creative dance workshops. The key question of this research is; *How may the collaborative choreographic process effect the participant's sense of identity as dancer?* Theoretical issues that are explored include a philosophical examination of cognition during the choreographic process as is related to educational value and also how the process of choreography itself, *is* research. Subtexts reflect on how this specific action research process may indirectly inform issues of sustainability of dance research, of dance education and of dance as a theatre art.

Introduction

The research centred on contemporary/creative dance workshops for a group of teenage girls. The dancers had backgrounds in classical ballet, jazz and hip-hop. They viewed their role in dance as passive receptors of set steps, timing and spacing. Their previous dance experience saw their teacher in the role of 'creator'. My initial three one-hour workshops were structured around a choreographic process, which was more collaborative, heuristic and dialectic than the dancers were accustomed to. Would giving the dancers more input into the choreography and allowing them to reflect on their creative actions, *shift their view of the dancer's role move from imitator to initiator?*

Conventionally, the process of choreography and the one these dancers were accustomed to, is perceived as dancers learning set movements, then through repetition, gaining increased

accuracy and expression. In this role dancers are required to think and perceive mainly through imitation. In the collaborative model, the *dancer* is involved in both roles of choreographer *and* dancer, thus, it is proposed, expanding the cognitive potential of the activity.

There is much to indicate that the professional world of dance has long used the method of dancer as co-creator, but it has gone ‘unseen’. One only has to look at the relationship of classical ballet choreographer, the late Sir Kenneth Macmillan, with his leading ballerina of choice Lynn Seymour to realise this. Seymour describes how they rehearsed together at the start of a new ballet:

He will perhaps just say... ‘I had this sort of idea’, and he will show something and say ‘Like this’... And you try it... And the problem usually becomes to translate this idea into rhythmic form that the music has, and make it possible. This seems to be the thing that I have been best at and I do it for MacMillan. (Crisp & Clarke, 1974, pp.56 – 57)

More recently choreographers such as New Zealander Neil Ieremia¹ have described the process of choreography as a blend of his ideas *with* those of the company dancers in *Black Grace*. From Ieremia’s point of view:

There are dancers who just want to be dancers and they do it really well.
And then there are people who dance, and who have the desire to make
dance; they make other people move. (Ieremia, 2000. p.29)

From my workshop experiences and conversation, it may be assumed that ‘making’ others move begins with Ieremia’s initiatives, develops through verbal and kinaesthetic dialogues with the dancers responses, and is further formed by the outside eye of the choreographer.

¹ During conversation between the author and Neil Ieremia and company during a dance workshop, September 11, 2002.

Opinion appears divided, but there is room to consider dancers as collaborators, interpreting the choreographer's images and ideas at various stages of the creative process and with varying levels of autonomy. Their contribution may be as 'performer' only, then again it may not be. A dancer's own preference for which role they prefer may also play an important part of how a dance is made. Indeed, a choreographer may select dancers on this preference.

The mind, cognition and choreographic process

In the collaborative model, the role of dancer as co-creator differs from the more conventional identity. It may be described *along the lines* of Howard Gardner's (1971), thesis of artistic process which suggests that when engaging in the act of creating, choreographers use kinaesthetic, intrapersonal, musical, visual, verbal and interpersonal intelligences. In a similar vein Rudolf Arnheim (1983)², a scholar whose work bridges the fields of art history, psychology and art education, identifies three key cognitive activities, in which humans engage. They are the abilities to *think*, to *perceive* and to *form*. As choreographer all three are of equal importance when composing dance. The creative process of solving a qualitative physical puzzle relies on:

- choosing images (*think*)
- drawing out appropriate movement to interpret and express the images (*perceive*)
- structuring the dance (*form*)

In dance education, this creative process employs constructivist learning in an holistic framework, and it is within this where the potential shifts in identity may lie. This model has a traceable lineage to research undertaken by dance analyst, notator and educationalist Rudolf Laban in the early part of the twentieth century. The dancer becomes a co-creator in collaboration with others to solve a physical puzzle in choreographing a dance. By engaging with kinaesthetic, visual and musical symbols, among others, the whole person is active and interactive.

² In this regard see philosopher, Jenkins, I., 1958. Also for an alternative view of the work of Howard Gardner see Best, D., 1999.

Peggy Schwartz (1993) in examining the parallels in the theories of both Laban and Gardner proposes that kinaesthetic intelligence underlies development of all intelligences. Further, Schwartz claims that;

Gardner and Laban from different domains and with different languages
address the idea of wholeness of being (1993, p.11).

Through inner-directed improvisation dancers engage a range of intelligences, the most pro-active being kinaesthetic, (what I prefer to call the ‘physical intellect’). The whole being is actively involved in structuring movement metaphors, and in metacognition - thinking and evaluating one’s own thoughts. This view has grounding in psychoanalytic theory, (Fromm, 1991), which claims that the transformation of ‘self’ during interactions with daily life drives us and determines our success or failure in playing a meaningful role in society. We must be clear that this is not the same as raw feeling or sensation of ‘free’ expression. As Suzanne Langer puts it, arts objectify ‘felt life’, (1957, p.26) Experiences from one set of *sensory modalities* are transformed through interpretation as part of an intellectual process and movement metaphors are formed. This process is known as *synesthesia*. (Eisner, 2002).

To layer this into the fabric of Laban and Gardner we sense that dancers may heighten and deepen self-knowledge during the choreographic creative process. This “...formative process, lies in the ability to objectify emotion.” (H’Doubler, 1957, p.xxv). Immersed in the oscillations between kinaesthetic perception, self-awareness, interactions with others and dance content (images, issues, concepts and ideas), individuals evaluate, re-evaluate, confront and reconstruct self.

As the student works to create or mold something that is his own, he
must clarify his feelings and sort out and organize his ideas. Through this
process he gains a new awareness of self and a feeling of integration.
(Hawkins, 1954. p. 92 - 93)

Before I describe the project in more detail I will summarise thoughts thus far. The creative process placed the dancers in a position that enabled them to consider a different perception of themselves in the role of dancer. This involved shifts in their thinking about the identities of dance, of what it is to be a dancer and of their own ‘selves’, (the actual subject matter of the dance being personalised). Therefore, there is reason to see this research into choreographic process as wholly relevant to education and as relating to appreciating dance as a theatre art. The research, as well as the dancers, shifted in shape during the project – more of which later.

The Project

Each workshop ran as follows:

- a 20-minute contemporary technique warm-up
- some structured exploration and improvisation based on the theme of the piece
- development of the improvisations to set them into kinaesthetic memory as a group dance
- group discussion and reflection on the session

The technical warm-up is important for dancers who are accustomed to behaviourist learning in dance. It orientates them and allows them to feel that the physical environment is one that they can relate to safely. Perhaps worthy of consideration here is that, with dancers who may be unfamiliar with conventional codified technique training, this type of warm-up is not always necessary, nor even desirable.

More open-ended, improvisatory activities relating to the ideas, themes and content of the composition are usually a more appropriate approach with creative dance. (Ashley, 2005. p.12)

The improvisations were on themes that were very personal to them; their own names and star signs, favourite colours and animals. There was nothing new here, dance educators have been using similar ideas for years, and it is interesting to see that relatively recently the professional dance world has adopted these approaches more overtly. A suitable example is *Signatures* (2000), choreographed by Siobhan Davies for her company, and based around the dancers’ own

names, using a process not dissimilar to the one at issue here. Another would be American Sean Curran's *Abstract/Concrete* (Gladstone, 2003), in which the dancers use their bodies to spell the letters of their names.

In the first two sessions, the dancers hardly spoke to me or to each other, but as the project progressed they gradually opened up and become curious and chatty. These choreographer/dancer/critics became more able to discuss problems and to pinpoint solutions to questions that developed within the sessions. The young dancers would work individually to create phrases. With support, they select and reject, gradually refining and improving until movements are committed to memory. Often this would involve performing for each other and this would always meet with their reciprocal approval and appreciation, in what grew into relatively sophisticated critiques.

The creative process was resonant with *thinking, perceiving and forming* as interactive activities in a spiralling matrix of thought and action. So, for example, on this project I asked the dancers to choose their favourite colour and 'dance' it, but to achieve this further clues and images were necessary. Dancers were then asked to describe the colour with three adjectives, for example, green; fresh, lively, spiky. This combination of thinking and perceiving then allowed the dancers to *form* appropriate kinaesthetic responses. These complex verbal, visual, emotional, kinaesthetic interchanges are essential to allow dancers access to choreographic territory. Thus interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue is generated as movement phrases are created individually and reflected on collaboratively during the dance making process.

Gradually the dance was pieced together with myself as an outside eye in consultation with the dancer/choreographers. Their ideas, (as with mine), would not always be adopted. The participants came to understand why some things are effective while others need to be discarded as part of the heuristic process.

This is creative exploration, the end point of which is to manipulate movement in order to express images and self. The benefits to the dancers go beyond the physical and, we may speculate, lead to greater self-awareness. Facilitating these young dancers so that they felt secure and able to participate in these ways was a sensitive issue. They may have turned around to me to say *"This isn't dance"*, and from their experience maybe it wasn't. It was the balance and combination of dialogue and kinaesthetic structures that empowered them to take more responsibility.

The initial sessions saw the dance only partially completed and other commitments meant a delay of three months at which point a further four one and a half hour sessions were required. It is interesting to note here that the total working time of nine hours is a fairly minimal one in which to create a four minute piece ready for performance. It is therefore revealing that this creative process can work effectively at speed. The dancers commit the movements to their motor memory much faster, and one may claim with more expressivity, when they 'own' them, that is, when they have created the movement themselves. Also, it is important to realise that the choreographer/director/teacher acts as outside eye, 'editor', engaging dancers in a continual dialogue of reflection, evaluation and refinement during the creative process.

Data collection

Data, in the form of a video diary, interviews and questionnaires from the dancers, was collected to track shifts in their mindsets. The video diary recorded and dated early comments such as, *"I'm not very creative"* and, *"How can I do that? How can you dance a colour?"* The questionnaire was completed at the end of the project, (just before performance).

The shifts are tracked and summarised in diagrammatic form, (see Tables 1 & 2). The diagram displays the dancers' comments from the questionnaires, tracing how, if at all, the dancers' perceptions of themselves as creators or recipients shifted. Prior to the project the dancers took the role of passive learners. After the project they were able to participate as active learners, as well as understand, if not totally identify with, the artistic and intellectual responsibilities and challenges of the choreographic process. Two of the four dancers could see themselves as

‘choreographer’ within limitations. They had choreographed their own short solos but had not assimilated the bigger picture of being an ‘outside eye’, even though they had engaged with that role occasionally. Prior to the project they saw the teacher/choreographer as an authority figure from whom they took directions. After the project, although their identity was not significantly shifted (it was a very short project), there was certainly *some* shift.

Table 1

Shapes Shifting

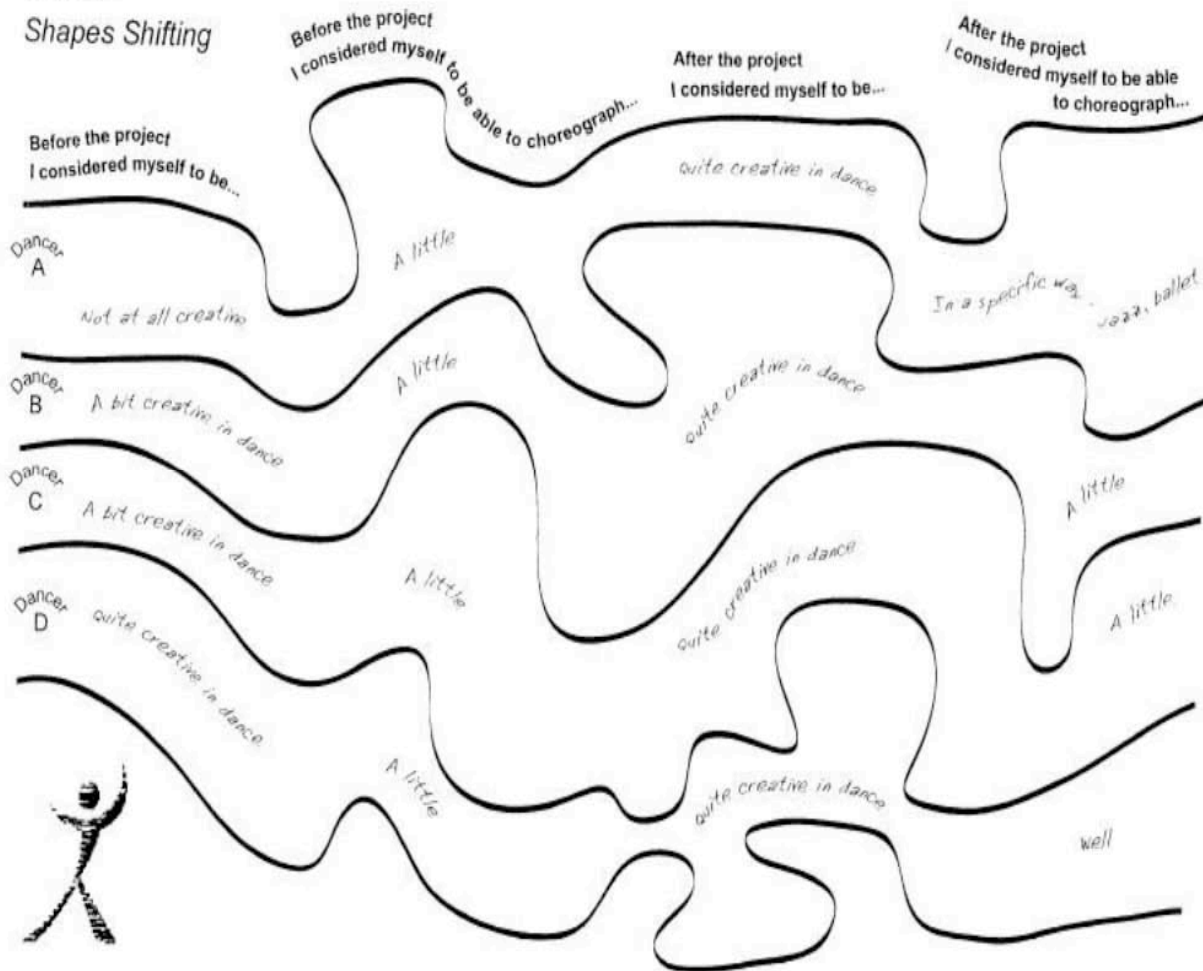
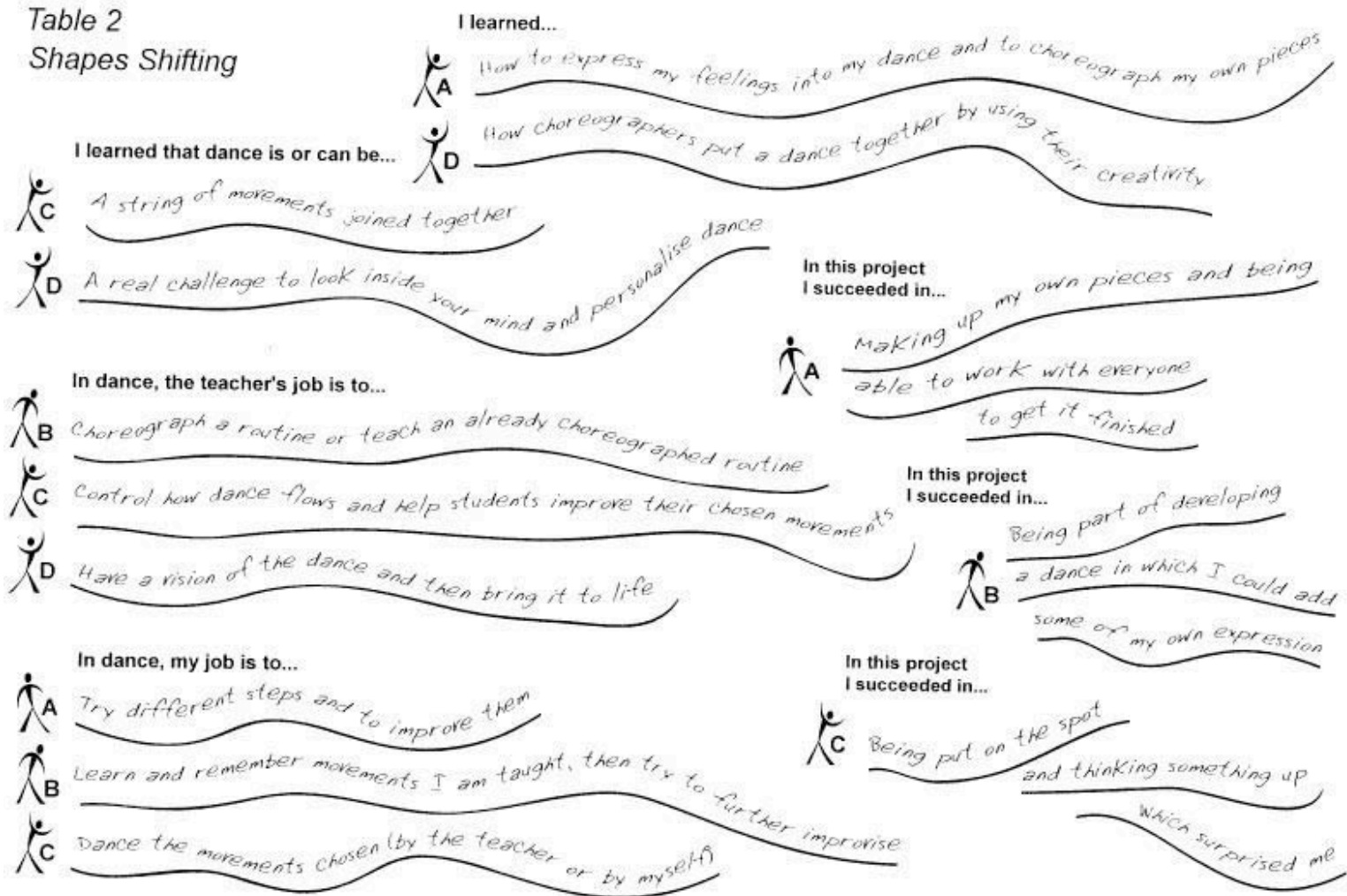


Table 2
Shapes Shifting



Summing Up

As I mentioned earlier, during the project the research itself shape shifted unexpectedly. It genetically modified itself! What started as educationally focussed later seemed that it may have implications for sustainability of various fields of dance.

Firstly, as dance education research, the project demonstrated that through the collaborative creative process model the quality of learning experiences may be improved and is more autonomous. In turn, this facilitates greater exploration of the world through dance and discovery of more about self and about making dances. This may resonate into the classroom, giving clues about how *generalist* teachers may be empowered to cope with teaching dance. With some

understanding of the verbal language of the Dance Elements, and equipped with some basic choreographic skills, teachers can collaborate with the children to create dances. In the rush to teach dance ‘as we know it’, when the thought of making up a whole ‘routine’ is all too much, many schools hire a professional to teach a specific genre such as Jazz or Salsa. The collaborative strategy moves away from ‘teacher as model’- ‘student as imitator’. Another challenge to the generalist teacher might be the students who *are* well trained in the codified techniques such as ballet or hip-hop, but if teachers can see dance as springing from the children’s own movement ideas, rather than from preordained steps, then including dance education in their classroom will be more approachable, achievable and inclusive.

Secondly, the project reflected on dance as theatre art. One of the noticeable areas of improvement in the dancers was their ability to critique their own and each others’ work. Although the aim of dance education is not to ‘produce’ audiences of the future, there may be some inevitable spin-off. In a similar vein the parents and the ballet teacher began to view dance differently.

These days, as noted by Lee Christofis at *Unspoken Knowledges: A Research Forum on Contemporary Dance & Choreographic Cognition*, (2003), the democratisation of dance can in fact *disengage* audiences. Perhaps, he suggests, we need to *re-ritualise* dance in order to allow viewers into the purposes and processes that are held within the movement metaphors. Is it conceivable that involvement *with* and understanding *of* choreographic process may be *one* way to nourish dance audiences?

This is not a new idea, as far back as 1976 choreographer Robert Cohan opened his rehearsals for *Khamsin* to the public. He described this as ‘nerve-wracking’ and as producing a:

...dance of continual highlights, (one for each day!), which did not follow the correct proportion or pace that the sections needed for a balanced structure. He stated that he would not attempt this process again. (Ashley, 2002, p.135)

In 1990 Laura Greer founded a scheme to nurture audiences in New York. *New Faces/New Voices/New Visions*, set in a predominantly black neighbourhood featured the work of Bill T. Jones who, although local to the invited public, was unknown to them. Open rehearsals, discussions and classes were included in the scheme. There was even a refreshingly delightful discount scheme for tickets: the first two for \$5 and the third free. All rehearsals sold out.

Finally, in relation to dance research itself, my 2002 action research project was small scale, but it touched many people. This included the parents, (whose feedback could have provided a separate research project in itself), and the ballet teacher, as well as the dancers themselves. Many minds shifted.

The shifts included understandings about:

- what dance ‘is’ and ‘does’
- what a dancer ‘is’ and does
- what choreography is and how it’s made
- what audiences are ‘seeing’ and/or ‘expecting’

Again referring back to the *Unspoken Knowledges* conference, Shirley McKechnie drew attention to the need to record creative development during the making of dances, and to parallel this with academic endeavour. In this regard my small-scale project did that. It allowed dance research and dance as art to become a weekly part of everyday life for a group of ‘ordinary people’. In their eyes the profile of dance research itself, was raised. They actually saw in action the creative rituals, the “*complex creative system*” and “*a community of creative minds*” (as referred to by McKechnie). The young dancers were the focus of the research and their parents often stayed to watch rehearsals. I should have pursued the parents’ perceptions further with another questionnaire.

Keeping dance research accessible may be one of the ways of sustaining it. Allowing people ‘in’, (dancers, parents, teachers or audiences), either directly or indirectly involving them in creative research projects, may be a methodology worth pursuing further. As we go out to them

we may raise the public awareness of the ‘rituals’ that make dance theatre. Similarly by such pro-active strategies, the profile of dance as a field of knowledge, as worthy as any other of serious, meaningful and valuable study, is raised.

In this regard, I wish to thank the dancers, the dancers’ parents, and Petrea Harding, for their co-operation, support and interest during the research project.

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