

Yoga teachers' insights in working with dancers: pedagogical approaches in transformation.

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Abstract

The focus of this article is an initial investigation of general pedagogical approaches of local yoga teachers and their specific insights in working with dancers. I engage with broad themes of how we 'contemporise the past and envisage the future' as I explore the pedagogical challenges and transformations offered from learning about yoga pedagogy. Literature on yoga and dance pedagogy that focuses on experiential and embodied ways of knowing provides a broader context from which to understand my own and local teachers' practices. Framed within feminist and phenomenological perspectives, I draw on the qualitative research method of in-depth interviewing in order to delve into yoga teacher's lived experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand. I reflect on these interview findings to offer a consideration of pedagogical practices of yoga teachers in relation to dancers.

Keywords: yoga, dance, pedagogy, embodiment, somatic

Introduction

In this article I engage with the World Dance Alliance Global Summit theme of 'Contemporising the past, re-envisioning the future' (2014) as I explore the pedagogical approaches of yoga teachers and their insights in working with dancers. I focus on the general pedagogical approaches of local yoga teachers as part of a larger research interest I have in movement education. In my practice, much like others working in tertiary dance education in Aotearoa, New Zealand (and internationally (such as Brodie & Lobel, 2012; Dragon, 2015; Eddy, 2002a, 2002b, 2009; Fortin, Long & Lord, 2002; Green 2002a, 2002b), I bring together western contemporary dance and somatic education with yoga practice, seeking pedagogical transformations and insights. In particular, in this research I am interested in the approaches of yoga teachers working outside tertiary dance education and outside the context of western somatic education, aiming to understand more fully how yoga pedagogies might relate to and inform tertiary dance education. Research involving participation and observation in yoga classes and interviewing teachers, has offered me an appreciation of the range of 'traditional' and 'evolving' pedagogical practices of local yoga teachers (also see Barbour, 2013). It is beyond the scope of one paper to share the breadth of my research or discuss the relationship of this research with the body of literature within western somatic education and dance pedagogy. I therefore focus on sharing some of the responses of local yoga teachers to my interview questions about pedagogy, particularly on their insights in working with dancers in their yoga classes.

Feminist and phenomenological research

Feminist philosophies and methodologies provide a framework for my research and I operate within a phenomenological perspective that aims to develop understandings of lived experiences. I aim to validate embodied ways of knowing developed from experiencing knowledge as constructed, contextual and embodied, and as arising in the lived experience of combining different ideas through experimentation (Barbour, 2011).

In undertaking this research, I begin with some assumptions. Firstly, I have an appreciation of the cultural embedded-ness of movement experience and learning, in a similar vein to Csordas (1993, p. 140) who argues that 'the ways we attend to and with our bodies, and even the possibility of attending, are neither arbitrary nor biologically determined, but are culturally constituted'. Secondly, like yoga practitioner and researcher Smith (2007, pp. 30–31), 'I presume that a social and cultural analysis of the practice of modern postural yoga necessarily involves a study of yoga practice and the embodied experience of its practitioners'. I myself am therefore immersed in the embodied experiences of yoga, with practising students and teachers (Barbour, 2013, 2014; Desikachar, 1995). Furthermore, my pedagogy, which applies equally in whatever I am teaching—cultivates a somatic mode of attention as part of embodied ways of knowing, and so offer practices that develop awareness, responsiveness and understandings that privilege sensory embodied experiences in engaging with oneself, as well as with others and the world. In this endeavour I share practices with other tertiary dance educators and somatic practitioners nationally and internationally. Having been teaching formally in tertiary dance education for some time, I have brought my passion for dance, somatic education and yoga more closely together as I complete training with Sondra Fraleigh in the East West Somatics Institute (Fraleigh, 2009). While I am aware of the published literature in somatic education (Cohen, 2008; Hartley, 1995; Johnson, 1995), and specifically on dance and somatic education (Burnidge, 2012; Eddy, 2002a, 2002b, 2009; Dragon, 2015; Enghausser, 2007; Fortin, 2002; Fortin, Long & Lord, 2002; Whatley, Brown & Alexander, 2015), discussion of this existing literature is not the focus in this paper.

As a dance teacher, I appreciate that dancers (and some yoga students too), predominantly learn by doing—using their kinaesthetic sense—and that auditory and visual information reinforces this kinaesthetic information (Kassing & Jay, 2003). However, I am interested in moving dance students whom I teach, from the repetitive, rote learning movement approach that many of them bring to tertiary education, towards a critical and embodied practice (Barbour, 2013; Dolan, 2007; Dragon, 2015; Enghausser, 2007). I hope to foster the development of dancers capable of reflexivity and embodied knowing as well as social engagement and responsibility (Barbour, 2011; Olsen, 2002). Sherry Shapiro (1998, pp. 14–15) continues to inspire me with her comment, that in tertiary dance education the 'intent of the learning experience moves from one of learning movement vocabulary for the sake of creating dance to gaining an understanding of the self, others, and the larger world for the possibility of change'. I am well aware that there are many who strive towards some kind of critical feminist and inclusive pedagogy in tertiary dance education and recognize that pedagogical transformation is certainly underway in

this context. My intent is to enhance my understandings as a tertiary dance educator of yoga pedagogy through discussing findings from interviews with yoga teachers.

Yoga and pedagogy

Yoga developed as a practice over 4,000 years in India (Davies, 2013; De Michelis, 2004; Ergas, 2014; Iyengar, 2001). There are many forms of yoga with different styles and influences. Acknowledging the classical yoga text, Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, 'the practice of yoga is the commitment to become established in the state of freedom' (Patanjali 1:13, cited in Farhi, 2006, p. 9). The yoga teacher is responsible for conveying to the novice yogi the knowledge and practice of the eight limbs of Yoga, stated as

'1. Yama (universal moral commandments); 2. Niyama (self-purification by discipline); 3. Āsana (posture); 4. Prāṇāyāma (rhythmic control of the breath); 5. Pratyāhāra (withdrawal and emancipation of the mind from the dominations of the senses and exterior objects); 6. Dhāraṇa (concentration); 7. Dhyāna (meditation) and 8. Samādhi (a state of super-consciousness brought about by profound meditation)' (Iyengar, 1994, p. 21).

Pedagogically, yoga has been described as involving 'an oral tradition handed down from teacher to student in a model known as *gurukula* or teacher's household system' (Davies, 2013, p.41), utilising observation, dialogue and practice over many years. The novice yogi lived in the home of the teacher and although the teacher was the authority, the learning in the *gurukula* system was what we would consider 'informal'—'outside the paradigms of a written curriculum' (Davies, 2013, p.41). The contemporary manifestations of the *gurukula* system can arguably be traced in the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute in Mysore, India, established by Srī K. Pattabhi Jois.¹

In the last century, yoga spread from India to the west and learning and teaching transformed into a formalised curriculum and pedagogical practices rather than being transmitted through the *gurukula* system (Davies, 2013). In the west there now exist a range of 'modern yoga' practices (De Michelis, 2004; Ergas, 2014). One of the main Indian teachers who brought yoga to the West, B.K.S. Iyengar, commented that:

'... my own Guru refused to answer any of my innocent inquiries on yoga. He did not instruct me as I do my students, offering them step-by-step guidance in an āsana. He would simply demand a posture and leave it to me or his other students to figure out how it could be realized.' (Iyengar, 2006, p. ix).

Iyengar published significant works detailing a step-by-step method for westerners². Iyengar's contribution to the practices of modern yoga was significant and he was part of a pedagogical transformation that occurred in the shift from a 'guru' model to a modern yoga curriculum model adopted in the west. The modern yoga curriculum model available in the west forms the basis of yoga practice both within the fitness industry and the wider community. This step-by-step method tends to have a focus on the movement aspects of yoga – the āsana (De Michelis, 2004; Ergas, 2014).

Not surprisingly, scholars have pointed out that '[t]he adaptation to Western palates of this Indian philosophical system has resulted in the stripping of much that defines yoga ... A large proportion of what is taught may resemble calisthenics ... or martial arts' (Davies, 2013, p. 42). Furthermore, the aspects of yoga that might be considered to integrate most obviously into tertiary dance education are also these movement aspects. However, to focus only on the movement aspects means that yoga potentially becomes comprised of only one of the eight 'limbs' of yoga – the āsana—and potentially the holistic life-long embodied knowledge offered through yoga is lost. I am interested in retaining the potential of yoga, within tertiary dance education and in relation to somatic education, to develop reflexive, embodied, socially engaged dancers. For this reason I have returned to yoga teachers to gain further insight into yoga pedagogy.

Some teachers and scholars of yoga in the west do embody the broader philosophical aspects of yoga alongside more contemporary pedagogical approaches. For example, teacher Donna Farhi (2006, p. 39), resident in New Zealand and training teachers internationally, comments that

one of the key premises that underlies my own teaching is a belief that instruction should always be moving the student in the direction of an interior reference point. I am not interested in a student's ability to be obedient to instruction but rather in [his/her] ability to inquire into the meaning and relevance of an instruction... This kind of pedagogic model helps students understand that...ultimately the source of wisdom lies within them.

Such comments align with somatic education principles and practices, and the cultivation of a somatic mode of attention and embodied ways of knowing (Barbour, 2011, 2013; Dragon, 2015; Eddy, 2009; Fortin, Long & Lord, 2002).

Researching yoga pedagogy

In conducting this research project, I undertook interviews with eight local yoga teachers in New Zealand who practice Ashtanga and Hatha yoga (most specifically Iyengar yoga). These interviews were undertaken in 2012 and 2013 in studios and community spaces in my local community in Waikato, New Zealand. I asked a range of questions beginning with the broad question: *Tell me about your overall philosophy or approach to teaching and learning in yoga?* While more specific questions focused on the use of demonstrations, touch, verbal information, the impact of the studio environment and other students on learning—specific practices familiar to many dance teachers and somatic educators (Erkert, 2003; Dragon, 2015; Fortin, Long & Lord 2002)—in this paper, I focus on summarising key points in response to the first broad question, before focusing on the particular question: *What insights do you have relating to teaching yoga to dancers?*

Overall pedagogical approach

The yoga teachers I interviewed considered their overall philosophy or approach to teaching and learning in yoga. In summary, they expressed their role as a mediator, facilitator, motivator, enthusiast and guide. They saw a yoga teacher as opening a door, offering a platform, a way of life, a space for yoga students to undertake their

own journey. Most of the yoga teachers acknowledged their significant teachers as role models. They also expressed the initial aim was to get learners moving and practicing yoga regularly, to situate yoga in a broader context, to develop a learning process, and to be adaptable as teachers. The following quotations illustrate the approaches of these teachers:

I'm quite like a mediator ... a guiding mediator, but I very much believe people are giving themselves their own medicine, learning about their own whole health, wellbeing, spiritual journey ...' (Ani)

I want to offer a platform for people to discover things themselves and I see that I could be a part of their journey as a motivator and an enthusiast ... someone who just guides students into discovering things for themselves. (Katie)

Yoga is a way of life. I feel like I am inspiring myself and others with a way to live ... We are responsible as individuals, to create, improve and serve our environment ... (Dee)

These comments echo those made by yoga teacher trainer Farhi (2006, p. 39) in 'moving the student in the direction of an interior reference point'. In writing about engaged pedagogy in the contexts of the feminist classroom and the yoga studio, Jennifer Musial (2012, p. 215), comments in a similar way that:

a facilitator guides knowledge rather than imparts it. A facilitator who works from a mind/body/spirit paradigm understands that teacher and student alike must engage in reciprocal healing as a way to dismantle the hierarchical epistemic structure of academia and decolonize Euro-Western ways of knowing that privilege rationality.

Like Ergas (2014), I focus on the ways in which yoga can become an embodied, lived, philosophical practice—an embodied way of knowing. Rather than using an instructional style solely focussed on movement, I argue that a yoga teacher who acts as a facilitator, guide and/or mediator working within their own embodied practice in yoga, may be able to engage students in a reciprocal relationship, and further help students become more critical, reflexive and self-aware to help themselves as engaged learners. Developing self-awareness while acknowledging the wisdom of guiding teachers is significant for dance teachers too. Jan Erkert (2003, pp. 5–6) writes:

Dance teachers develop a point of view over time by listening to the wisdom of ancestors and to the truths of personal experience within the body ... Establishing a point of view is rooted in core realities of the muscle and heart, spirit and bones, gravity and momentum. To know these requires research and physical exploration.

Relatively little research has been published to date relating to yoga pedagogy (and specifically to teaching yoga in tertiary institutions to dancers, although of course this is a common practice). Comparatively more has been written about somatic practices and dance pedagogy in tertiary education generally. However, this

paper focuses on the experiences of yoga teachers who are working outside these contexts.

Dancers in yoga classes

All but one of the male and female yoga teachers I interviewed were aware of having dancers in their classes. Two of the teachers had been contemporary dancers at some stage in their lives, but only one was regularly teaching tertiary dance students. The insights they offered related to a range of experiences in community studios of dancers being 'in' their bodies, as well as performance and not performing. I will focus briefly on insights about dancers being 'in' their bodies, and then discuss their insights about performance and not performing.

Dancers are 'in' their bodies

In brief, some of the yoga teachers identified a common characteristic of dancers as being 'in' their bodies. For example:

I find with dancers, they are able to bring a lot of lightness to a practice, a lot of exploration. They are in their bodies already. It is amazing how many people aren't there – there are so many people that are just not connected to their bodies. Their body is a machine, their mind is busy. Yoga is to bring union back between the two. It doesn't matter where your hip sits or hands reach, let's just see if we can bring mind back into the body. So a lot of dancers come to a yoga practice and they have already got that kind of connection.' (Dee)

'With dancers, the certainty is that they are in their body and their subject matter is around their body ... I feel like I can have that expectation that we are talking about their bodies, not any body or any posture. I feel like that's our right to feel our body. (Felicity)

The implication of these observations is that the work these yoga teachers do as mediator/ facilitator/ motivator/ enthusiast/ guide may not be about initiating somatic awareness as this may already be present in dancers, but instead in deepening awareness and guiding exploration of embodiment. These comments affirmed what I experienced myself as a dancing yoga student and my observations as a somatic dance teacher (Barbour, 2013, 2014). I was encouraged to discover that a somatic engagement cultivated through dance would be identifiable to yoga teachers outside dance contexts.

Performance and not performing

What was more interesting in the discussions with yoga teachers was the different ways they spoke about dancers and performance. Firstly, the obvious point was made about dancers participating in yoga with the intent to improve their performance, in the same way that additional stretching or cross training or running might improve overall athletic performance. Iyengar yoga teacher Matthew commented that:

Most of them (dancers and athletes), particularly the young ones, are mainly interested in performance. They want to improve their performance, that's their motivation ... (Matthew)

In the western world we just think immediately about the body and getting a better, stronger, fitter body: 'I want to improve my flexibility, 'I want to improve my strength'. We all start like that, but for me now, when I practice yoga, other greater benefits arise. (Dee)

Dee's comment reflects that while an initial motivation for dancers coming to yoga might be around improving performance in dance, she anticipates that this might well change as yoga students recognize other benefits. Research with students in my dance classes reveals that recognition of broader values of yoga grows over time, sometimes emerging years after dancers first encounter yoga. However, Matthew goes on to articulate:

Now if I could say anything for the dance fraternity I would say there is a distinct difference in what we do in yoga, even though a lot of the physical actions may have a similarity of stretching this way or that. In yoga you've got to have self-research or self-interest. You shouldn't be performance-based. It is different in that regard. We're not performance based. That's almost half of what I have to teach people—don't just go without consideration, go with consideration. That's the fundamental difference. The example that I can think of in classes is that the dancer extends and says 'how far I can go here?' Whereas the yogi actually has a resistive quality ... (Matthew)

Here Matthew speaks to the dancer's desire to improve performance skills and mastery, and then he moves to another point about how dancers have often learned to push, to extend, to go beyond their normal limits and range of motion in performing dance, and that they bring this attitude or approach into the yoga studio too. Matthew identifies a 'resistive quality' in yoga practitioners and this is something that most of the other teachers express in a range of ways, some specifically around neutral alignment, stabilizing or supporting joints, establishing boundaries and relieving dancers of hyper-flexibility by balancing with strength, stability and safety. Ani offered the example of dancers gradually finding themselves 'more neutrally aligned' and 'stabilizing joints'. Tony commented that dancers are 'quite flexi but a little unstable in some of the poses ... often they're so stretchy that they can't find that point where the joint is held in a supportive way.' Dee commented 'I see some dancers with beautiful 'open bodies of freedom'. But where are the boundaries? Flexibility is about exploring boundaries, to make safety zones and build strength at the same time.' Felicity remarked that 'if you are flexible it's problematic as it's really easy to dip into a pose rather than get a sense of the extension through the pose.' Katie observed that: 'There's been a few dancers that, in some ways have terrible flexibility—a sort of awful lack of awareness of pelvis integrity. I sometimes really want to pull their reins in a bit and let them see that they don't need to do that. And very possibly it could be relieving for them; it could be a breath of fresh air.' Peter had been concerned when observing that 'young women come along who are dancers and ... [thinking] 'Oh my God, you shouldn't be able to do that'. I think it could be a bit dangerous.' These comments reveal these yoga teachers' perceptions that learning about moving safely within limits and moving with greater awareness

is valuable for dancers. This perception also aligns clearly with somatic education principles (Fraleigh, 2009).

As a dancer previously herself, Katie identifies a difference in her experiences within dance to those in yoga and specifically about learning not to push performance. She comments about not performing that:

Unlike dance, for me, when I began yoga, it wasn't about me showing something, it was something for me to internalize and I loved that juxtaposition. I loved that, it was like a relief in a way too. As much as I loved being on stage in some capacity and showing art, I loved the quiet and the fact that it was movement work for myself. It didn't matter who was watching ... (Katie)

As a dancer, Katie draws on this experience as she considers pedagogical issues when working with dancers.

I don't want dancers to run the risk of needing to perform. It's very important that yoga is not like that, and yes, they do their best and they drive a little where required, but they internalize and they come deeply within themselves, and they do not have to present some ideal structure or pose or anything like that...

I think one of the things that I want to offer dancers is kindness. Just a kindness, that they can be kind to their body. I think that with dancers the opposite can happen. Maybe they've come from a history of abuse to the body. So maybe they see that in yoga the opposite could be possible in how they approach their body and what is available to them. (Katie)

For Katie then, she acknowledges possible common experiences of dancers relating to 'abuse' of the body; whether this refers to joint instability, misalignment and imbalance mentioned above, or to over-training, performing with injuries, poor body image, anxiety or eating disorders. This empathy generates a commitment to kindness for dancers through yoga, reflecting an ethic of care (Noddings, 2003). The point about kindness seems particularly insightful in the context of the western world in which young people, particularly women and most particularly dancers, are constantly bombarded with expectations around beauty, fitness and body image (Macdonald, 1995).

Other yoga teachers also raised concerns around dancers performing yoga and how they might modify their language to support a different approach in dancers. Mandy identifies that, while she likes to avoid making assumptions about what dancers (or any yoga student) might do, she considered that:

Initially just being careful so that it doesn't become a performance—which is very, very easy ... Instead of saying 'levels' or 'modifications', I always say 'options', taking out that performance aspect and the assumption that something is lesser if I don't obtain a certain pose or what I think is the perfect one. (Mandy)

Ani expressed this differently when she explains that she might say to dancers:

You're the boss, you can choose level one, you can choose level two, you can change your mind when you get in there. Your breath is telling you what's right for you today. It's different every day, don't expect anything from this hip that you've had from that hip ... (Ani)

In these ways, Mandy and Ani offer dancers another way to engage in yoga and most particularly, their use of the words 'option' and 'choose' suggested a commitment to offering dancers the opportunity to release expectations of performance (virtuosity and perfection), and instead somatically engage in personal reflection about what is appropriate for them in each moment. Ani commented further about supporting yoga students to not perform yoga. She suggests that this unlearning and undoing might actually help dancers to drop the 'mask' – the pretense, persona and expectations of being a performer, potentially allowing them to offer more of a connection when they do return to the stage.

One of my main things I say to people is 'please don't be a good student'. Please drop all expectations of performance, of achieving things. We're actually trying to unlearn here, we're actually trying to undo years and years of being a good student ... I want yoga to help other people not perform, whether it's rules in their life or whether it's a dancer's performance. Forget the mask. I think all that helps a dancer, because when you're watching a dance show you're getting less and less 'performance' and more and more of a connection with the real story of the dance. (Ani)

Tony, a yoga teacher and Feldenkrais Method facilitator, was particularly interested in the practice of unlearning and speaks in language close to that of somatic education and likely familiar to critical, feminist and inclusive dance pedagogues. He commented that

I've nearly always got dancers coming in... Often they'll be quite flexible ... the challenge is to get them to do it in a different way, trying to downplay the way that they do it and to say 'this is a different way'. I would try and give them a sense of a slightly different sort of awareness, like the idea of a line force in a standing pose, a sense that you can bear weight in a particular pose ... I'd say, 'What would be the benefits of doing it this way? What could you learn from doing it this way? (Tony)

For Tony this reflected his interest in learning processes and his perception of his role in guiding, suggesting, facilitating in yoga, similar to learning in the Feldenkrais Method and aligning with research by Fortin, Long and Lord (2002).

Concluding reflections

A great amount of transformation has occurred in yoga pedagogy as teachers who journeyed to the west, morphed their approach into a modern curriculum which was applied in various communities within education and fitness contexts. However, the local teachers I interviewed represented those who approach teaching yoga in a manner that attempts to acknowledge the broader purpose of yoga beyond repeating āsana, and instead gradually work towards developing embodied ways of knowing. Initial findings from interviews with yoga teachers, aligns with aspects of somatic

education and affirms some of the intentions of critical feminist dance pedagogy. It is affirming to hear from these teachers situated outside the context of tertiary education, that they were able to identify that dancers bring a somatic awareness to yoga practice—being 'in' their bodies. It was insightful to hear their comments about kindness, about choice and about 'not performing' as these seem valuable enhancements and alignments with critical feminist and inclusive pedagogies in tertiary dance education. My personal experience has been that moving in contexts like yoga in which the outward form is no longer the major concern, fosters expression of dancers' unique potential and the embodiment of alternative subjective positions, particularly important for women (Barbour, 2013, 2014; Orr, 2002).

Operating with a feminist ethic of care, in which kindness and choice within movement practice support embodied ways of knowing, and offering opportunities to dancers to drop the 'mask' of performance and reveal honesty, integrity and vulnerability are aims that align with my own values as an educator. These insights are reasons why continued research beyond our familiar contexts of western education is valuable. In interviewing teachers to reflect on their yoga pedagogies more fully, I can gain an understanding of and affirmation for further pedagogical transformation in the tertiary dance studio to enhance the embodied knowledge of dancers.

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1. Those working with an Ashtānga Mysore-style practice include more physically intense, flowing and continuous *vinyasa* (flowing sequences of āsana) practiced in a specific order and learned progressively over time (Leledaki & Brown, 2008).
 2. Iyengar yoga classes have a slower focus on the technique of various āsana (poses or postures). Both Ashtānga and Iyengar yoga teachers draw on Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtra* as a classical text to which both B.K.S Iyengar and his teacher Śrī T. Krishnamacharya refer, as do those who practice Ashtānga yoga and follow the teacher Śrī K. Pattabhi Jois.

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Biography

Dr Karen Barbour is a senior lecturer in The Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato, New Zealand. She is committed to fostering qualitative dance research, specifically in feminist choreographic practice, contemporary dance, site-specific dance and digital dance. Karen has published in academic books and journals including *Cultural Studies–Critical Methodologies*, *International Journal of Arts in Society*, *Brolga* and *Emotion, Space and Society*. Karen is editor of *Dance Research Aotearoa* (<http://www.dra.ac.nz>), author of *Dancing across the page: narrative and embodied ways of knowing* (2011), and of edited book *Ethnographic worldviews: transformations and social justice* (Rinehart, Barbour & Pope, 2014).