

Engaging with touch: Transformative learning in dance

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Abstract

This paper explores the manner in which awareness of touch can inform, secure, and clarify facets of learning in dance for students. The discussion encompasses aspects of the manner through which interaction takes place between teacher and student, and student and student, when working with each other in dance. The theoretical literature that underscores this paper is supported by a series of rich responses generated during semi-structured conversations with students and teachers who are involved in current practices of dance in higher education in the UK. The aim is to reemphasize the positive benefits of leaning through touch as a distinct feature of learning in dance. This discussion draws on ethical issues that surround engagement through touch alongside the call for a re-evaluation of the ethical protocols informing teacher and learner interactions.

Keywords: touch, dance, education, cooperation, relational ethics

This paper discusses aspects of recent research into the manner in which we as dance participants, teachers, and students strategically and incidentally relate through touch as singular and plural experiences. Particular attention is given to what might be called “transformative learning” in the practice of dance as a discipline in higher education in the United Kingdom. This includes dance teachers giving information to students through touch, as well as students’ grasp of information received through touch. The discussion includes observations on the manner in which touch is an aspect of knowledge generation, the manner in which ethical concerns regarding touch might be addressed, and the impact of changing circumstances of dance education (i.e., new scientific understandings of the way the body functions, as well as ever-changing socio/political contexts). We conclude with some responses from students and educators in Higher Education institutions in the United Kingdom to our survey on attitudes to and practices of touch in the learning environment.

Engaged in learning

As a way to engage in this journey, we draw on experience in choreography and improvisation, which are illustrated by the careers of theorists and practitioners such as Steve Paxton, Anna Halprin, Nancy Stark-Smith, Sondra Fraleigh, Kirsty Simson,

and Gill Clark, whose person-centred work in dance has made significant the personal and social interactions available in the forms that they have initiated, nurtured, and developed. In this work, these careers are set in the context of the writings of John Dewey, who, in *Arts and Experience* (1934), argued for a rebalance of the compartmentalization increasingly evident in our modes of thinking, knowledge generation, and experience.

Throughout his work, Dewey promoted the need to move away from the dualism between body and mind or soul and matter, suggesting that these oppositions had only evolved from a sense of fear of how to address the “unknowns” of life experiences. These sentiments are not unfamiliar to us as present-day dance educators. One aim of this work is to reinforce ways to sustain interaction between sensory experiences, environments, and interpretations, thereby heightening our appreciation of experiences of touch that unite our sensual, intellectual, and emotional selves. This work proposes a fluid interlacing of memory, of experience, and of our “immediate” selves that can be found in learning in dance.

To have awareness of the experience of your body is indeed difficult. From the 17th century-onward, Westerners have been falsely educated in the belief that there is a division between the body as material matter and the mind as an entity with no spatial presence other than a generalized notion that it is somewhere within the human brain.

In the context of research in neuroscience, we remain plagued by a subtler dualism of a sentient brain as an organ of awareness versus a physical body as a mechanical operator. In the conception of our minds as a separate entity from the material world, including the body, we have become used to the idea that we are “other” than the world, that we reflect upon it rather than exist as a feature of it. And in light of this proposition, we continue to regard the body in much the same way: that this mind with its spirituality, cognition, and self-awareness differentiates itself from the body that houses it providing nourishment and transportation.

There are many dance scholars for whom this division has not been viewed as being productive in the context of learning through dancing, such as Sheets-Johnstone, (1990, 1992, 2009), Parviainen (1998), Rouhiainen (2008), and Ginot (2010), whose significant thinking in current dance scholarship has addressed this debate. This divisive philosophy causes a schism of self-perception; it obfuscates integrated action. Conversely in the immediacy and integrated nature of dance activity, this separation is challenged and in many ways denied by the experience of thinking while doing.

Into this arena, we introduce appreciation for what can be learned through engagements with touch as one of our most refined senses of perception. Touch, in which we remain most interested, is that which stimulates awareness, excites curiosity, and increases a facility to form accessible, active knowledge.

Touch has been prized as the parent of the senses: light *touches* the eyes, air *vibrates* the eardrum, and particles *touch* the nasal hairs and the taste buds. Yet in many contexts, touch is increasingly marginalised for associations with pain and abuse. In the UK, engagement in and through touch has become an increasingly sensitive issue in education and broader social contexts. As stated by Furedi and Bristow (1999), physical interactions between people have become increasingly formalized, ranging from the manner in which incidental, often accidental contact might be socially managed within the realm of ethical protocols similar to those associated with therapeutic interventions as suggested by Nathan (1999).

Within this increasingly difficult arena, we see a growing importance for a re-evaluation of ethical protocols between teacher and learner in interactions where touch might happen. In order to do this, we need to explore the complex intermingling of experience, perception, and knowledge in relation to our understandings of touch. Alongside this, we may need to consider aspects of our working practice, where ethical considerations are deemed to be implicit in our engagements as opposed to existing in explicit statements of intention, purpose, and constraint. If we can come to know more of what goes on within the range of the relational qualities of touch, we might garner more support in our argument for the value of an education realised through bodily processes.

What is perhaps most distinct in our review of literature in terms of touch is that it is the quality of touch rather than the quantity that is of primary importance in positive human development. That we touch and are touched is important, but it is how we are touched that affects us, thereby teaching us how to define social and interrelating boundaries in response to information gathered through the senses. Ellsworth (2005) argues that “to be alive and to inhabit a body is to be continuously and radically in relation with the world, with others, and with what we make of them” (p. 4). This reinforces our central tenet, that in the notion of being, we can come to understand ourselves as sensing, thinking, and embodied beings.

Knowledge gained through such interaction and negotiation ideally heightens our awareness of our lived bodies, of our “selves” as part of the world, and in the case of dance practitioners, informs and forms our work as communicating artists. These processes can facilitate access to both an attentive and contextual knowledge.

There is never a complete absence of touch; instead, we each remain bathed in touch as a constant feature of our phenomenal selves. Sensation might fade from our attention and then recur and then to fade again in multiple cyclical evolutions of experience. This is something Ratcliffe (2008) captures when he suggests that, “No part of the body is ever in a tactile nowhere” (p. 303).

This brings to mind the notion of change as the means of differentiation. With change comes motion as opposed to fixity, and with motion and variation come the orderings of rhythm as properties of the experiences of touch from which we acquire interpretable data. This we connect across a range of such experiences, and in that connection, we form what might be called knowledge that can be learned. With that,

we find the potential for understanding. This enabling knowledge leads to the potential for transformative development in persons.

Tactile knowledge is gathered serially through cumulative understanding. This enhancement through time allows for the understandings of the “toucher” (i.e., the one doing the proactive touching) to settle and develop in relation to all previous experiences of touch and other sensory perceptions. It also allows for the “touched” (i.e., the one being touched) to do the same, but from the opposite perspective. This occurs for both individuals at one and the same time, in their individual experience of the same shared event. Retaining awareness of this close interrelation is important in appreciating how individuals relate to their own bodies, to the proximity of other bodies, and to the world. Therefore, what we have is a continuity of connection in a world in constant motion – a continuous mode of existence. To *be* is to *be in motion*. Touch is part of this continuity providing an active and engaged sense of proximity and agility in our knowing as well as our actions.

Unlike vision, taste, hearing, and smell, which rest in specific specialized organs, touch is embodied across all of our surfaces, constructing a bodily idea of the whole self, often lying dormant in our perception until brought to the forefront by incident or accident, via pain, arousal, or other stimulation. According to Aristotle, touch is said to be everywhere and nowhere (Montagu, 1986); he considered it to reside deeper than the skin, almost to be the property of “flesh” and the root of life itself. In this, we are not dealing with abstract concepts, but, rather, with a force of lived inquiry. It is through sensation that we access the possibility of perception as the starting point for knowledge. If we were to limit our opportunities to learn and form knowledge through touch to the point of becoming insensitive to the rich scenarios of our interactions, we would forego a vivacity for life that we can ill afford to be without. As individuals, we are at risk of becoming “dispossessed” of our bodies (Lefebvre, 2004).

The case remains that the inherent relational context of touch has profound effects on our learning and the development of our sense of self. An education that does not utilize the perceptive aspect of touch that so purposely affords the possibility of forming and informing our perceptions and ultimately our knowledge is an insufficient one. Our argument is that if we, as educators and as societies, diminish or become fearful of the negative implications of touch in our daily working/dancing lives and in this fear do not teach and learn with touch, we devalue one of our most basic and informative sensations. For Rudolf Laban (1958), this was the case; when reflecting upon his career, he noted that he had:

Advocated and experimentally tried to pay more attention to human movement – bodily and mental – which is obviously at the basis of all human activity. Movement research and movement education have been neglected in our time and some failures of our civilization are surely influenced, if not produced, by this neglect. (Ullman, 1984, p. 9)

What we may need in order to address the growing fear, evident through legislation to constrain touch activities, is a renewed moral framework and ethical ethos within which to promote a safe place to learn from “sense-full” experiences.

On-going research

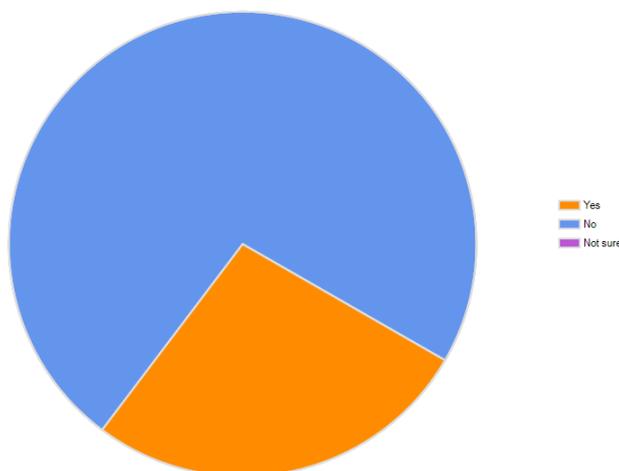
In a current research project conducted on behalf of the Higher Education Academy (UK), we have explored ways in which we might align and enrich our appreciation of ethics as a relational attitude that underpins teaching, learning, and the preparation for professional practice in dance. Valuable contributions have been gathered from a range of practicing academics with current experience of teaching in the disciplinary field of dance in UK higher education institutions. Particular attention has been given to the value of the use of touch as an important feature of dance-based lifelong learning. We have included a selection of responses from students and colleagues below.¹

A sample of student comments

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when students were asked about the use of touch in their studio work in dance, they all expressed familiarity with the practice. They noted that this experience was most common during improvisation classes in their work with peers, and most notably in the use of Contact Improvisation (CI), which appears to be increasingly present in higher education dance programs in the UK (Bannon, 2012).

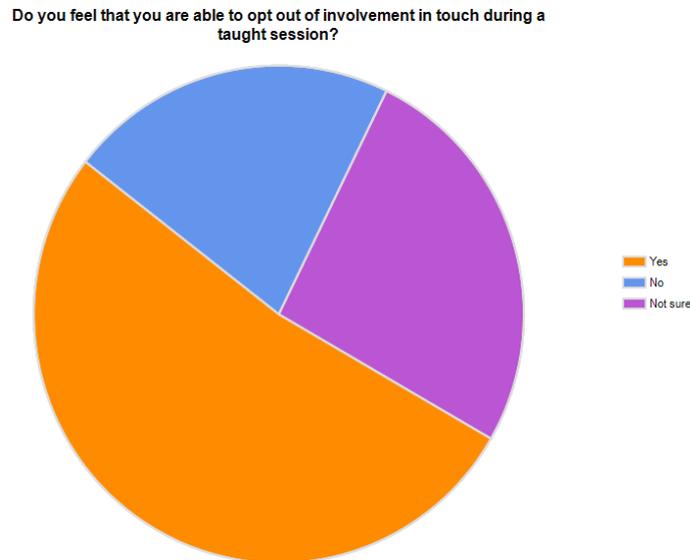
Interestingly, nearly three quarters of the students had not felt uncomfortable about the use of touch in their sessions and had not felt the need to opt out of the use of touch.

Have you ever felt uncomfortable about the use of touch in dance classes?



¹ The full report is available from the Higher Education Academy (UK) (www.heacademy.ac.uk/).

In the pie-chart below, it is evident that when asked if they had ever felt able to opt out of involvement in touch during taught sessions, they were less clear, with just over half saying that they felt able to do so. Perhaps this is caught up in a desire to please tutors or not to stand out among their peers, or maybe a combination of these, as well as other factors.



It is worth noting that when asked for the reasons for opting out of the use of touch, students primarily responded that it was because of incidents where there had been unclear communication about the set task, rather than a feeling of discomfort about the touch/interpersonal contact involved, or the actual assignment that had been set. Unfamiliarity with some or all of the people in the group was also cited as an inhibiting factor.

When asked, “In what ways has touch been a positive feature in your learning?” a student replied:

Contact improvisation has given me a deeper understanding of the density of the human body and how balance and weight can be transferred through the body. The bodywork exercises have allowed me to experience more feeling and a developed awareness of some of the more internal structures of my body and the movements that are available to me.

Another commented that they had:

Never really thought about dancing without touch being part of the activity; it seems ordinary and everyday. I can remember thinking what a difference can happen when someone helps you to find how a movement or a position should feel rather than look.

Whilst another suggested that:

Getting a sense of weight or resistance by someone working with you can make a real change in your understanding.

When asked about discomfort the impressions were somewhat different:

Usually when we are just starting in new groups and don't know each other very well. I can remember thinking that the teacher might expect me to be able to stretch more than I can and being fearful of what they might do – but mostly this has been fine because you work together within a range.

It can be difficult when new members join the group if they haven't been involved at the point when we started to get to know each other but you can quickly get over that. Sometimes people are frightened of their own weight when working together.

A sample of teacher comments

A number of lecturers/teachers of dance in several UK higher education institutions replied to a survey addressing their professional points of view.

They all replied positively about the use of touch activities in their teaching, commenting that:

In the teaching of contact improvisation, touch is a fundamental part of my teaching. Touch in this context may not (or is rarely) given solely through the hands, but through a fuller physical contact. Touch here provides a means to teach skills and provide instantaneous feedback in the one moment.

It plays an invaluable role in my teaching of both technique and choreography.

I use touch from the very beginning with first years and have never had an adverse response, but it is a quality of touch that is about listening as opposed to doing, to enable the students to have and find their own experience as opposed to imposing something on them through touch.

Transformative learning in dance

If we frame dance as a self-actualising field of study, then “conceptual knowing,” rich in relationships, is an important feature of the discipline. As teachers, we support students in becoming versatile and articulate in recognizing shifts in their knowledge that help them to explore and explain complex interactions. In this collaboration with students, we facilitate engaged learning that Meyer and Land

(2003) suggest are “transformative,” in that they offer a shift in the perception of the individual with respect to themselves and their learning in the discipline. It is the critical leadership from tutors, by way of opening doorways to be explored, that helps nudge students towards deep learning. Such experiences are available within practical explorations of touch, evidenced through spatial, rhythmic, and bodily awareness in dance, and strengthened further when combined with concepts of social and cultural mobility and collaborative practice.

To enhance the long-term impact of learning experiences available through dance, we need to continue to seek liberty in an education that supports the development of versatile thinkers. Monni (2006) helps us to reaffirm this endeavour by identifying what might be seen as key features of dance in higher education. According to Monni, the changes that we need to acknowledge concern:

Much more than just a change from one dance aesthetic to another, or just the introduction of ‘soft’ body techniques and unique bodyliness. It is about a change in the understanding of reality. (p. 170)

Understanding our current work in the context of Monni’s comments reaffirms the potential for positive developmental change in the philosophical grounding of dance education. In this, we continue to argue that a key feature of dance education is its enabling us to access the generation of co-constructed knowledge founded in the relationship between students and teachers, and between peers. In this admittedly complex arena, we should not ignore that knowledge via touch connects us with being in-touch with our sentient selves as socially aware communicating artists.

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