

Developing the expressive artist: Constructive creativity in the technique class

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Abstract

Creativity in dance is most commonly conceptualised in terms of movement outcomes, including, in finished choreography, choice of movement or expression in performance, or as a result of creative movement tasks. Creativity is, though, a broad, complex, multi-faceted, and nebulous concept that can be conceptualised in many ways, including in dance. It can equally be given life in a new teaching strategy or curriculum, or as a new way to approach a problem, a means to an end, or an end in itself. It is always bound by context, time and place, and personal knowledge, prejudices, and values.

In the teaching and learning of codified dance technique, constraints are often imposed by the dance genre itself, usually implicitly through history and tradition. Those traditions often dictate how classes are taught, as well as what is taught. By adopting the notion of constructive creativity, creativity and technique can be partners.

The adjective “constructive” entails such connotations as being open to all ideas and experiences. Constructive creativity does not focus solely on creative outcomes, but, rather, highlights the importance of building creative behaviours and minds and encouraging creative attributes, such as critical thinking, not the least through personal expression, personal discovery, and personal construction of personal knowledge.

Personal experience, especially during formative years, plays a major role in determining artistic beliefs, values, and understandings. Research at the Cloud Gate Dance School suggests that by adopting an interactive and experiential approach, and engaging students in reflection, enquiry, critical thinking, and problem solving, all important elements in the creative process, teachers can encourage them to be daring, adventurous, independent thinking, and self-motivated expressive artists rather than movement machines.

Keywords: constructive creativity, technique, teaching and learning, Cloud Gate Dance School

The arts, including dance, are often considered inherently creative. Indeed, Alma Hawkins (1988, p. 11) said, “creativity is the heart of dance.” Creativity is, though, a very nebulous term, and a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be conceptualised in many ways. It takes on a multiplicity of meanings in different contexts. While everyone recognises it when they see it, making any satisfactory general definition is inherently difficult. It’s been described in many ways and from many perspectives, and while there is a consensus about many of its features, such as the outcomes of creativity having to be new and appropriate, much disagreement remains. Arriving at a definition that covers all the bases is highly problematic. Even the word “new” presents problems. What do we mean by new? How new does it have to be, and in whose terms?

In dance, creativity has many faces, although perceptions of it tend to be focused on visible movement outcomes, including those from creative movement exercises, improvisation, or more

formal performance, whether in terms of finished choreography, choice of movement, or expression (Press & Warburton, 2007, p. 1273). It can, though, just as equally be given life in a new teaching strategy or a new curriculum. It can be discovering a new way to do something or approaching a problem, a means to an end, or an end in itself.

Although creativity is always bound by time and place, it is very much a personal construct dependent on personal knowledge, history, prejudices, and values. It is often conceptualised differently in different dance forms, where constraints are imposed implicitly through history and tradition. Furthermore, creativity does not mean “anything goes.” All dancers and teachers work within boundaries imposed by curricula, syllabi, guidelines, examinations, other assessment methods, participants’ expectations, or even by our own experiences and history.

As former Royal Ballet dancer Lynn Seymour (2012, p. 36) observes, creativity is a “chaotic, troublesome, gloriously messy business.”

Constructive creativity does not focus solely on creative outcomes, but, rather, highlights the importance of building creative behaviours and minds and encouraging creative attributes such as critical thinking, not the least through personal expression, personal discovery, and personal construction of personal knowledge. The point is not to create choreographers or teachers, but to encourage dancers to “tune in” to what the body is expressing, consider other ways of expression, and to get them to think about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they are doing it. Only then can they develop as individual, rounded artists rather than imitators.

It is now over 20 years since Dance UK’s Dancer’s Charter called for teachers to develop “thinking dancers able to respond intelligently to all aspects of their training, including new ideas, rather than dancers who react as puppets” (Brinson, 1992). The technical training of young dancers has become increasingly eclectic since the publication of the report, especially in contemporary dance. More enlightened teachers have also moved in that direction in ballet and the more codified forms of modern dance. However, and although many would claim otherwise, in the majority of such lessons, traditional teacher-centred approaches still tend to prevail, especially among older teachers. Here, the teacher selects the movement and demands attention, absolute imitation, and discipline. The steps, it seems, are supreme, an approach that, as Royal Ballet soloist Geraldine Morris says, can significantly impact students’ personal dance development, tends to emphasise the mechanical aspects of dancing over the qualitative, and nullifies personal expression and thought (Morris, 2003, p. 26). I consider that such approaches can also lead to the cultivation of habits and attitudes that later impede the capacity to sense, perceive, and change important aspects of creativity.

There is nothing wrong with technique, although it is a tricky term. Its use often implies a single, fixed, “correct” way of performing movement. It is worthwhile to note that most technical dance terms are in fact verbs, yet are treated as nouns. I am sure that every dancer feels that he or she has benefitted at some time from teachers who plied them with information and technical regimens for polishing skills. Care is needed, though. As Raman (2009, p. 77) argues, while repetition may enable learners to build speed, stamina, and confidence, pure repetition does not promote critical thinking and rarely promotes understanding at more than a superficial level. There are also many ways of performing a movement, any one of which may be correct in given circumstances.

As Morris (2003, p. 19) rightly observes, recognising that movement is open to personal interpretation and has consequences. It undermines objectivity and makes dance more subjective. That causes a particular issue for children learning ballet in contexts where there is a near exclusive focus on passing examinations dominated by centrally-set exercises. Exams do provide milestones and are a way of celebrating progress, but guidance is often written in such a way that similarly suggests that conformity to very specific rules is paramount, with little room for individuality. Far too often, students are effectively conditioned to merely reproduce movement to given music.

Based on research at the Cloud Gate Dance School in Taipei, I suggest that it is possible to help students get beyond technique, and that creativity and technique learning can be partners by using a constructivist approach that emphasises that experiential learning, personal construction of knowledge, and the use of reflection can be effective in the technique class (Mead, 2009).

The lessons in question were in the School's Pre-professional Senior Level 1 course. Children here are generally aged 8 to 9, with lessons being a mix of ballet and Graham technique. Students may only take the course if they are also taking the parallel Life Pulse course, which is largely creative movement-based.

Anyone peering into the studio would have seen recognisable exercises with the usual demonstration, explanation, and repetition. However, these were not lessons where children were passive receivers of knowledge or merely a vehicle for someone else's movement or some 'perfect' style. They were lessons that allowed for creative engagement with the material and the development of a personal artistic voice as knowledge was being gained.

Demonstration is particularly effective among novices. It gives learners a visual image and a great deal of information about movement in a short span of time. In these lessons, though, it was less than expected and somewhat different. First, it was always accompanied by an explanation of why a movement was being practiced, where, for example, it might lead. A *tendu*, for example, was never being practiced for its own sake. Second, there was a focus on what Gibbons (2007, p. 11) calls notional qualities, such as use of weight, smoothness, dynamics, and particularly the specific use of breath and thinking how actions are motivated or initiated. All too often, pedagogy textbooks ignore these points, but such an approach emphasises dance as movement, rather than dance as steps, and balances focus between the internal and the external. The specific use of breath is a particular feature of dance in East Asia, where dancers are often reminded to "breathe out" or "breathe in" rather than to simply "breathe," as is the case in the West.

In lessons, exercises were never presented as a series of impersonal movements to be performed in a single, absolute, "correct" manner perfected by another, an approach that Blumenfeld-Jones (1987) argues submerges or negates the self. Rather, personal discovery was encouraged, the students being guided to find and discuss problems. Sometimes this was done using humour, for example the teacher asking, "What happens if I do it like this," as he deliberately demonstrated incorrectly. Enghauser (2003, p. 93) suggests that learning from observing the teacher's deliberate mistakes, or another learner's mistakes, is often more effective than watching a perfect demonstration. Students were effectively being given what Salosaari calls "multiple performance solutions" (2002, p. 222). Teachers could also take matters further and allow them to discover the multiple solutions for themselves. Whichever, such open questions encourage problem-

finding as well as problem-solving, both important features of creative thinking, thus encouraging very personal engagement with the material. The teaching did not “squench the self,” as Blumenfeld-Jones puts it, but, rather, required “a self which encounters, not a self which disappears, and the experience became a dialogue” (p. 21).

In lessons, students were given opportunities and encouraged to think critically, to compare, interpret, observe, suggest, criticise, and evaluate themselves and each other. Not only that, they were encouraged to do so aloud, and receive feedback on those thoughts. As Vygotsky (1978, p. 30) argues, speech is our primary means of communication and an indispensable tool for thought. Yet, in traditional technique classes, its use is inhibited. Johnston (2006) asserts that such use of private speech is important in the cognitive development of young dance students, in particular. She considers that if learning is to be maximised, students should be encouraged to use all of what she calls the “tools of the mind,” particularly private speech. She adds that inhibiting speech leads to reductions in the ability to think, remember, and reason, which in turn leads to inhibited dance performance (p.13).

Teacher-on-student and student-on-student touch was a further learning tool. On several occasions, students were asked to gather around while the teacher discussed and physically guided a student through an exercise. On occasion, students were also asked to guide each other, unusual in dancers of this age. Discussing a tendu, for example, each student followed her partner’s foot with her hand, then put her hand on her partner’s hip, so that both could focus on what was happening in that joint. The observing student thus became far more than a spectator. It’s something of a truism that we learn best from mistakes. Brodie & Lobel (2008, p. 24) consider that such a strategy helps students perceive movement accurately and allows them to focus on the more important aspects of the image being presented.

Students criticised and helped each other unprompted, as well. On several occasions, when the class was split into two groups, some in the observing group quite clearly mouthed or signalled corrections to their friends in the performing group. According to Adams (1986), learning by observing a fellow student, and then being actively involved in correcting that student’s mistakes, is more effective than watching a perfect demonstration by the teacher, since the student is part of the process of correcting and improving performance. Although there are issues with students having the requisite knowledge, Raman (2009, p. 77) suggests that students tend to be more comfortable giving and receiving criticism from each other, and in small groups, than from the teacher. It moves the focus to active participation without putting them under a spotlight or making them self-conscious. It is also all critical thinking and problem solving, all part of the creative process.

I agree with Hayes (1964, p. 70) and Whittier (2006, p. 132), who consider that such strategies result in learning becoming a creative process as dancers are challenged to explore the possibilities and significance within movement, sense and listen to their bodies, and use higher-level thinking to analyse and evaluate their own movement and that of their peers. Students become contributors to the learning process, which makes them more apt to engage critically and creatively in their own development as the technique learning becomes a springboard for their self-discovery as a person as well as an artist (Whittier, 2006, p. 124). This is something we should be striving for.

There are many other possibilities. Most teachers have watched students fall off a turn or pirouette many times. Most will have given advice, such as, “your weight is too far back, “lift your eye line,” or “don’t wind yourself up.” But why not ask, “Which way are you falling?” “What are you doing with your arms,” or “What could you be doing with your arms?” Such questions support students’ problem finding and problem solving skills, rather than their simply relying on the teachers’ thinking. Students should be given space and encouraged to be autonomous, with teachers open to the ideas that result.

Taken as a whole, the approach at the Cloud Gate School moved away from a product model, in which dance technique is the content, the teacher is the expert model, and towards one that emphasises high-level technical skills and the ability to emulate given dance forms. The teaching was more akin to a process model in that it was the subjectivity of the experience that was emphasised. The students were guided closely, but were engaged in individual exploration, creative discovery, self-reflection, and critical thought. They were constantly challenged to explore the possibilities and significance within movement, sense and listen to their bodies, and use higher-level thinking to analyse and evaluate their own movement and that of their peers as they built knowledge in a far more personal way, which is usually the case in technique classes. The evidence suggests that they did so without diminishing their technical development. In incorporating ideas of individual learning and the construction of knowledge into technique classes, the teacher was, in effect, drawing on the traditions and ideas of developing and creating a unique voice found in postmodern dance (Lobel & Brodie, 2006, p. 70). I believe such an approach allows dance to become alive and relevant, rather than merely remain a type of training based on a given aesthetic.

Each student’s performance of the exercise was still important, since without such a product, students’ private processes and progress cannot be assessed. But by exploring exercises as fully as possible, I consider that students were allowed to find new or deeper understanding and greater kinaesthetic awareness (Gough, 1999, p. 43). As Hayes (1964, p. 179) proposes, the students were challenged to observe and sense movement critically and discriminately, which she considers cannot happen if steps are imitatively taught. The students certainly learned the exercises quickly and soon performed them to a high standard, much more so than has been my experience with similar-aged children in other contexts, although cultural attitudes to learning may also have a role here.

Of course, no methodology or approach can guarantee creative student responses or the development of creativity skills or attributes. They only increase the probability that creativity will occur. There will always be students who are more concerned with doing what they think their teacher wants rather than expressing their own ideas, or who feel embarrassed to speak out, or who are simply shy. There are almost always some students who give up quickly and wait to be told what to do. But where does that attitude come from? One source is anxiety. Another stems from elements within society and within school and studio cultures that unwittingly instil anti-creative, anti-constructivist habits.

An essential foundation for such approaches to work is an appropriately supportive and friendly studio atmosphere. That was certainly true at the Cloud Gate School, where the emotional warmth in the studio contributed greatly to the students’ openness and willingness to vary their approach, or try new ways of completing a task. On the whole, lessons were perceived by the

children as fun, with humour and a sense of playfulness present in most. Psychologists call this “positive affect,” which is recognised widely as important in encouraging creativity and the development of creative attributes.

It’s easy to see why teachers might think twice about building creativity into technique classes. It takes time. It involves risk. It causes uncertainty. But as Kenneth Tharp (2005), director of The Place in London, says, we should be leading dancers to become creative, intuitive, and curious individuals, not merely well-trained and obedient bodies. He continues:

As teachers we should be feeding the curiosity of our young dancers but equally we have to be curious ourselves. If our teaching simply consists of instructions ‘do this,’ ‘like this,’ then however skilfully done, we are not enabling the real process of ownership, and we diminish the possibility of turning young dancers into artists instead of well drilled machines. If we expect our dancers to be daring, adventurous, independent thinking and self-motivated, then we as teachers have to be equally daring. (p. 7)

Perhaps the most daring thing we can do as teachers, Tharp says, is to not always feel we have to know all the answers, but to be able to say sometimes, “I don’t know,” “What do you think?” or best still, “What if...?” (p. 9). Questioning is important because it may lead teachers and students to new places. That applies in dance technique as much as in other areas of the art form.

As teachers, we should be teaching students to dance. Seymour (2012, p. 36) observes correctly that dance in any form is not merely a formulaic system of exercise, but a living, breathing, growing area of creativity that should be adapted, explored, and experimented with. It should be made personally relevant. Telling dancers of any age or level what to do, instead of guiding them through a variety of choices so that they arrive at a valid performance unique to themselves, is disempowering in the extreme. It denies them of their creative function. We should be seeking to encourage dancers to express their individuality, albeit within boundaries. We should not be trying to train it out of them.

As dance educator and choreologist Rosemary Brandt (2004, p. 26) says, we should not be separating training from education, body from person, technique from expression, doing from making, physical from perceptual properties of motion, actual from virtual, position from motion, theory from practice, and steps from dancing.

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