

Putting creativity at the center of dance practice, policy, and education

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Abstract

The traditional ways of educating and training dancers need to change. For too long, we have structured learning environments for elite performance outcomes, knowing that only a small number of students are likely to continue training at elite levels or indeed be good enough to succeed at elite levels. This paper argues that opportunities for novice dancers to practice in large numbers and in interesting and creative learning environments are few and far between, and this represents a considerable opportunity for the dance sector. Personal participation in an art form is essential for its appreciation. Therefore, if we want bigger and better audiences for dance, we need to maximize participation. Drawing on neurological research by experts in the field, as well as in recent publications, this paper explores how creativity can best be developed in young artists. The prevalence of rote learning and examination-focused dance classes may not be optimal in fostering the creativity of young dancers. Finally, the typically broad (and sometimes confusing) definitions of creativity and creative industries are both an opportunity and a challenge for advocates of dance. This paper explores the rise of the Creative Industries discourse and the opportunities this offers to bring dance from the obscure margins of policy discussion into mainstream debates about the future economic and social development of cities.

Keywords: creativity, dance, learning, policy, training

Dance and the rise of creative industries

The recent rise of creative industries as a policy and economic category can scarcely escape the attention of anyone even remotely connected with the performing arts sectors. The United Kingdom Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS, 2009) defines the creative industries as “those industries that are based on individual creativity, skill, and talent. They are also those that have the potential to create wealth and jobs through developing intellectual property.” Van der Pol confirms the growing importance of the creative industries from an economic perspective: “Organizations and ... economic regions that embrace creativity generate significantly higher revenue and provide greater stability into the future” (2008, p. 343). Further, van der Pol notes the expansive scope of the benefits that a healthy and growing creative industries sector brings to developed and developing societies alike: “The creative economy straddles economic, political, social, cultural, and technological issues and is at the crossroads of the arts, business, and technology. It is unique in that it relies on an unlimited global resource: human creativity” (ibid).

Such definitions of “creative economies” provide a broad base for arguing the benefits of having a sustainable performing arts sector. Rather than having to argue in one-dimensional ways for either economic, cultural, or intrinsic benefits of dance, we now have a much larger palette from which to draw when framing arguments for dance in policy, education, and culture. By putting

creativity at the center of our disciplinary discourse, we are able to argue across these fields of concern to generate interest and activity in the continuing struggle to achieve sustainability for contemporary dance in Australia.

As an economic powerhouse of the future, the creative industries provide impressive figures. As van der Pol (2008) notes, entertainment and media industries are “forecast to grow from \$1.3 trillion in 2005 to reach 1.8 trillion by 2010,” that the “growth of the cultural and creative sector in the European Union from 1999 to 2003 was 12.3% higher than the growth of the overall economy,” and that it “employed at least 5.8 million people in Europe in 2004” (van der Pol, 2008). These are compelling figures for those who wish to argue the economic benefits of supporting creative pursuits, but they present dance with other challenges: what is the place of dance in the economy, education, and culture? What is its general standing in the Australian creative industries? What combination of elements might go towards making contemporary dance a sustainable industry sector?

The typically broad (and sometimes confused) definitions of creativity and creative industries are both an opportunity and a challenge for advocates of dance. This is compounded by what Katherine Papas identifies as a core paradox in the development of audiences for dance:

When you look at the participation level in dance as a recreational art form, it’s enormous ... And yet contemporary dance often struggles for audiences, particularly in the small to medium sector ... It becomes an advocacy exercise for the whole industry to try and open up other avenues of dialogue and seek other avenues for funding and resourcing the arts. (Papas, 2005)

Yet at the same time, dance programming in the Australian mass media circuit is clearly increasing, with *So You Think You Can Dance* (1.3 million weekly viewers) and *Dancing with the Stars* (1.47 million weekly viewers) consistently topping ratings during their 2008 season on Australian television (Dale, 2008). While this is clearly good news for dance in Australia, the paradoxes that Katherine Papas identifies indicate that even while mass participation and mass audiences are realities for dance, small and medium-sized dance companies continue to struggle. Moreover, the placement of dance in creative industries discourse is clearly marginal. It tends to get lumped together in policy with puppetry, music, theatre, and performing arts (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2009), all of which have vastly differing demands for sustainability. As noted by Mitchell (2008, Slide 11), “Dance is always at the bottom of funding figures for creative industries.”

However, as the policy emphasis on creativity as an economic and cultural force continues to grow, and while dance continues its popular renaissance in mass media, we have ample opportunity to carve out a sustainable future for dance based on the various ways in which it contributes to our creative life. Rather than bemoan the current placement of dance in creative industries discourse (or, more generally, the rise of creative industries discourse), we have the opportunity to leverage the movement to reinforce the very fundamental placement of dance in promoting and sustaining creativity.

Education

Art ... cannot become a language, and hence an experience, unless it is practiced. To the man [*sic*] who plays, a mechanical reproduction of music may mean much, since he already has the experience to assimilate. But where reproduction becomes the norm, the few music makers will grow more isolated and sterile, and the ability to experience music will disappear. The same is true with cinema, dance, and even sport. (Waldo, cited in Mumford, 1934, p. 343)

These comments by Frank Waldo were made at a point in history during which a mass mediated cultural sphere was emerging on the heels of radio, film, and the phonograph. His point is no less valid today, especially in the context of the arts in Australia. Education is a critical area where broader thinking and new arguments about the value of dance would advance the sector as a whole, especially in terms of widespread participation. Our traditional ways of educating and training dancers need to change. For too long, we have structured learning environments for elite performance outcomes, knowing that only a small number of students are likely to continue training at elite levels, or indeed be good enough to succeed at elite levels. Less than one percent of all children who study dance, mostly girls, will ever derive their primary living from it. Dance in contemporary life, however, is a much more encompassing and popular art form, and harnessing this activity, and the corollary identification with dance through the education system, is vital. To paraphrase Waldo Frank, personal participation in an art form is essential for its appreciation. Therefore if we want bigger and better audiences for dance, we need to maximize participation.

Our teaching efforts over the past few decades represent a huge lost opportunity for the vast majority who did not advance to the top. Those a part of that vast majority feel a sense of failure, failure that their dream of becoming a dancer was not realized. Rarely does dance classroom learning link to learning and knowledge outside of the studio, and therefore the rich opportunity for young people to learn about the world through dance is extinguished. Compounding this is the lost opportunity to engage many more people in dance: adult learners and people of all ages who want to use dance as a form of exercise or self-expression. We need to find ways to build the community of dance practice and to dispel the myth that dance is only suitable for a select few. As one teenager told me in a 2008 interview, "I dance all weekend but would never consider taking dance as a subject at school." Most people dance, but the dance they do is outside of the academy. Implicit in this person's wisdom is the recognition that dance is primarily cultural and has only relatively recently begun its confinement in the realms of elite physical and intellectual pursuits.

The uptake and quality of the dance experience in our schools is limited in terms of coverage, quality, and content. This is not surprising given the small number of teachers who leave university with specialized dance teaching skills.

For those in middle or old age, there are few ways to participate. There are times when folk dance forms are practiced, or where teenagers gather to practice popular culture dance forms like hip-hop. Social dance is gaining popularity, especially since the rise of mass media dance programs. But opportunities for novice dancers to learn and practice in large numbers, or in

interesting and creative learning environments, remain few and far between. This represents a considerable lost opportunity for the dance sector. Online social networks like Facebook and YouTube are gathering and connecting largely amateur dance enthusiasts of all ages. The dance clip titled *Evolution of Dance* on YouTube has been downloaded over 112 million times (Laipply, 2008). Swing dance is enjoying an online-led resurgence with clubs across the world promoting workshops and friendly competitions. Many older dance forms and, importantly, early footage of these forms, are surfacing through online networks.

All of this speaks to the future role of dance education, dance *in* education, and the many and varied pathways in which we might make participation in dance available as an everyday experience for Australians of all ages. The rubric of creativity has, however, given new value to dance as its role in cognitive, social, cultural, and personal development has come to be better understood and appreciated due to creative industries discourse.

Creativity: A new paradigm

There has never been such a focus on innovation and creativity as there is today. Education has traditionally placed importance on left-brain functions, which are logical, sequential, and linear, as opposed to right-brain synthesizing, empathy, broad thinking. This is the age of creativity. Creating meaning and significance is what artists do. As academics so cleverly caution,

Business has inappropriately used the concept of creativity as a metaphor for efficiency and profit. However, creativity is as much a process of failure as of success, of imagination as of procedure. Business leaders and management gurus need to look more closely at their disciplines. And artists and policymakers need to guard those aspects of creativity that are at once non-commercial and priceless, to identify its absolute essence. (Glow, Minahan, & Gahan, 2006, p. 12)

Economic policy has come to realize that the basis of future prosperity and sustainability is creativity, in all its forms. People want personal experiences, not mass-marketed commodities. Dreams and narratives have therefore become increasingly more important in marketing. There is a growing – some describe it as exploding – recognition that those who illuminate significance and bring meaning to the world will flourish as we move from the information age to the age of creativity. These are the claims made throughout business, policy, and academia in the name of creative industries. They are based on a radical rethinking of the role of cultural production, which has brought art, culture, and entertainment from the obscure margins of the economy to its very core as a major potential for sustainable growth.

If Pink (2005) is correct in his prediction, the creative industries will be worth \$6.1 trillion dollars in 15 years' time. He says,

The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of mind – programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBA's who could crunch numbers. But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands. The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind – creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people-artists, inventors, designers, storytellers,

caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers – will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys. (Pink, 2005, p. 1)

This begs the question of our creativity in teaching dance. How infused with creative challenges are dance classes and teaching approaches? The dominant class structure of rote learning exercises in preparation for exams does not engage people’s creativity. Dance classes have to do more to help people learn and be less about preparation for examinations. There must be room and time to create something new and unique rather than just repetition and imitation. Creativity is the wellspring of innovation. Sophisticated novelty is the engine of progress.

Fascinating research is emerging about the environments and techniques that help to develop creativity. Robert Knight points out that there are two critical periods of brain development that occur in children during the ages of 4-6 and 11-14. The biggest drive to activate the brain is the process of creating something new or discovering something new. On the question of whether creativity can be taught, Knight says that the key to developing a creative mind is to allow learning to occur in unstructured environments where experimentation can take place and children are allowed to fail and try again: “There is a beautiful window when children are young to expose them to learning modes (choice and variety) which helps them to be creative throughout their life” (Knight, 2004).

Interestingly, Knight believes that a child who has never been exposed to flexible mental processing experiences is very unlikely to be creative later in life. In explaining his theories, Knight helps us to understand the complex and eclectic nature of the brain, which is made up of multiple systems, each with specific tasks, working together. Different sides of the brain control this global and local processing. Children are generally global thinkers until language comes along and they become more local processors. Knight says that people should think less and be more aware, that spatial skills are important, and that the increasing use of the Internet will stifle creativity because it is too structured. He advocates giving young people more sensory stimulations by getting them to experience nature. Greenfield (2008) reassures us that there is no single gene responsible for creativity, which suggests it must be taught and learned, or at the very least cultivated. It is also clear that the search for a scientific explanation for the link between the individual brain and creativity is still a long way off. Greenfield further says that “creativity is surely the ultimate expression of individuality, and a characteristically human activity: it is deeply fulfilling for those who achieve it, and usually of some kind of incidental benefit to wider society” (2008, p. 255).

Reframing arguments about the value of the arts

As a result of the high value being ascribed to creativity, how do we navigate the world of opportunity we are faced with? Clearly, we need to sharpen our arguments and take the opportunity to leverage the full potential of this encouraging discourse. There is a worrying trend among some artists and arts workers who are dismissive of, and in some cases hostile to, arguments that seek to support the arts based on economic or public benefit grounds. The personal or intrinsic benefit of arts participation is and will remain the primary reason that people continue to engage in the arts. Many artists will tell you that they are driven, in fact *compelled*, to engage. This is unlikely to change. Dance is likened to a calling by many and for such people, any suggestion of financial motivation is offensive. But the personal and intrinsic arguments,

such as self-expression, self-actualization, and aesthetic excellence, are only a few of the potential arguments that can be made for dance:

The emergence of the Creative Industries has assisted in establishing the link between creative output and commercial opportunity. However, the challenge for many is to see creative output as both artistic and valuable in its own right, as well as a commercially oriented activity that is valued by others. One does not necessarily compromise the other. (Howard, 2008, p. 16)

This suggests that the discursive framework of “creativity” and “creative industries” can support and help articulate *all* arguments in favor of the arts, as well as provide coherence for them in relation to one another. However valid and profound, older arguments that foreground the transformative, life-enhancing, life-affirming aspects of the arts can seem tired and clichéd. More importantly, they often fail to convince people who have not engaged in the arts. Promoting the value of the arts for its intrinsic, cultural, and economic benefits using the rubric of creativity is far more likely to gain us broad-based support and provide coherence to our arguments.

Dance is, and will continue to be, a staple of human creativity, whether as expression, training method, or elite artistic practice. Positioning our arguments and advocacy within the framework of creativity can help communicate our various positions in terms of relevance, accuracy, clarity, and coherence. The rise of creativity as an economic and policy paradigm is a historic opportunity for contemporary dance, just as it is for the arts. In education, training, policy, and practice, understanding creativity as a paradigm for advocacy, debate, and artistic communication is essential to realizing the fullest potential of dance.

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