

Moving to Think: Knowledge Generation Through Dance

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Abstract

The paper explores a vision of dance education through dialogic engagement with aesthico-ethics, self-knowledge, and collective creativity. With dialogue at its core, the discussion addresses potential ways to identify “learning to learn” and to think through bodily interaction and embodied knowledge. The relevance of sociality is evidenced through improvisation and choreographic practice, where makers and movers generate material out of a commonwealth of their shared endeavors. These combinatorial relationships — between what is embodied, felt, thought, and shared — could arguably be said to identify dance as a self-actualizing discipline.

With increased scholarly attention now given to sensorial awareness and bodily perception, there are opportunities to further explore the role of self and collective knowledge as identifying features of dance education. In order to do this, we consider ethics as something more than the operation of agreed moral codes, preferring instead to acknowledge relations through ethics, exploring what “I” and “we” can come to know through participatory learning.

In terms of consolidating dance as a form of arts education, we can do more than assimilate earlier experimental or revolutionary approaches to moving. It is important to consider how we move and are moved with others, to appreciate how we deal with uncertainty together and, through the practice of “being human,” argue for the relevance and impact of dance education as an agent for positive change.

Keywords: movement, aesthico-ethics, mindful, critical thinking

The body is not a thing, it is a *situation*: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our projects. (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949, 34)

My aim in this paper is to revisit and share the themes I addressed in my presentation during *Twist & Turn*, the 13th daCi international congress. I, like others at the event, shared experiences of working in various sectors of dance education with the hope that together we might find ideas to help sustain the discipline and move forward. In revisiting these experiences, I have tried to recapture some of the ideas I have witnessed in order to weave them together with others that I continue to explore as a teacher, researcher, and mover. My route in this task is via the dialogic relationships that exist between aesthetics and ethics, something arguably found in movement experiences and something I continue to respect as integral to our identity-making. Each of us experiences the world differently. Our individual physicality effectively and affectively informs our ways of being in the world. This sense of “reality” helps us to facilitate ways in which we recognize experience as intimately integrating, a blending of all that we do and all that we are. In turn, these thoughts have led me to consider dialogue as something with which we all live as individuals in relation with our environment and with others. This is where the possibility of recognizing the generation of shared knowledge arises and where the experiences of dancing and learning together are vital. This is a place where we can appreciate differences and where the significant contribution of dancing as a “mindful” education becomes clear. The challenge I spoke of in Copenhagen and still hold onto is that of forming a 1,000-word summary that I might use when talking to a university vice chancellor, a director of education, a manager, potential funder, think-tank analyst, politician, and even UNESCO, the host of people who often seem perplexed by the very idea of physical learning and who we spend so much time convincing.

During *Twist & Turn* (2015), we heard from artists fostering dance in a shared world through their work in schools, providing windows of opportunity following the education directives given by ministries of education. As I sat and listened to what sounded like many amazing opportunities and inspiring arts-in-schools projects, I wondered about our struggle as a discipline to convince governments through evidence-based research why the information they are willing to accept is so often different from the evidence we believe to be vital. I wonder about their ability to listen to the details of positive change and of the opportunities taking place.

I remain unconvinced of the value of building dependence on numeric evidence and more convinced of the stories we need to hear of the variations of approaches to learning through participatory practice. Our social dependence on short-term policy initiatives leaves us vulnerable as we attempt to equate significant learning with the crude market of averaging and economic imperative. So I refresh the invitation to forge a response to be held in reserve, ready for when I need to once again speak of the societal and cultural values of dance in a shared world.

The ideas revisited here center on a range of impressions of what “dialogue” might mean. These ideas inform the untapped potential found in movement knowledge and experience and that explicitly explore the ways in which we can “learn how to learn.” So these 1,000 words of disciplined wisdom are to be a statement of why dance education matters to all of us.

In the process, we have to understand that we think through bodily interaction and embodied knowledge. In dance education, our key advantage is that we prioritize learning in/through moving, and so sustain constant dialogue with bodily intelligences. This is all-fitting, with the body being the very source as well as the residence of the “mind.” As thinking dancers, we combine various forms of knowledge in speculative ways. We articulate choices made and ultimately revealed as informed insights evidenced in our movement choices. Included in such avenues of thinking, we address our ability to conceive of the potential of sociality, something recognizable in a host of improvisation and choreographic practices, where makers and movers generate material out of their extending and deepening “commonwealth” of endeavors. While I have tended to think of this in terms of the combinatorial relationships shared through practice, others may view it as instances of material thinking or a form of confederation. These are all places that embrace moments moving between what is embodied, felt, thought, shared, and always in-flux. If we miss fostering these opportunities in the work we share with students — with the opportunities we offer for their futures — then we are not recognizing the potential of the praxis of dance as a self-actualizing discipline.

In my teaching of undergraduate students and postgraduate candidates, I am aware of a struggle to avoid reiterating formulas; I have side-stepped the mass of literature that provides recipes for making a “good” dance. Instead, and I have no doubt that there are many of us, my aim is to facilitate ways that students might delve into their own particularities as makers of unique and distinct work. The preference is that they become investigators of habit, engaged

through trial and error, to forge new opportunities for reasoning and conceptual agility. The preferred outcome is that they find possibilities that they did not know they had when the process began.

For some, this is tremendously liberating, an increasingly rare opportunity for independent thought, but for many, it is unfathomable and seemingly needlessly difficult. There is a growing sense of aversion for such independent thinking, a fear of failing set against the financial costs of even trying. Students are apt to say that the module aims and objectives were not clear because they were not told an efficient route to a “good grade.” While seeing them even reluctantly recognize that there is a task to achieve might be music to my ears, it doesn’t help the student module evaluation questionnaire by which so many of us are summarily judged.

There were positive aspirations for the Bologna Process (1999), with its aim to create a European Higher Education Area and enrich education and employment mobility. However, arguably what we have is a streamlined system that focuses on productivity and assimilation rather than diversity and critical thinking. Rudi Learmans (2012) makes reference to such learners as, “first and foremost ‘self capitalists’: they possess a human capital in need of development for a possible future position (p. 150). He tells us that students are increasingly presumed to act as a “ ‘Me Inc.,’ as individual entrepreneurs” (Learmans, 2012, p. 150). They act as buyers in an educational market seeking to procure the correct balance of credits for a targeted end-gain of salaried employment. What this procures is a fast standardization of assessment-monitoring and the division of learning into modular structures that compartmentalize knowledge, which, in turn, reinforces the strategic learner who targets, plans, and purchases discreet pockets of information with little if any time for synthesis and critical engagement.

For Anders Kreuger (2012), in his explorations of the ways we might consider thinking together, students no longer want to engage with this speculative thinking. He laments that we have reached a state where “Curiosity for curiosity’s sake is something that many of them have ‘unlearned’” (p. 168). Thankfully, this is not always the case. Personally, I look to wisdom in the ideas of David Bohm (1996) in terms of collaborative and co-creative communication, Anna Halprin (1995) for collective creativity, and always to John Dewey (1934), Ellen Dissanayake (1995), and Arnold Berleant (1995, 1998) for thinking that concerns somatic, sensual, and cognitively-felt aesthetic education.

There are of course other questions to ask ourselves. For example, how do we deal with apparent contradictions of preserving and supporting the development of individuals exposed to an educational system that serves more readily its economic and political “masters” rather than the social, cultural, and ultimately ethical questions of our futures? How might we more forcefully argue that in our habits of mind, in our sorting and judging, we show ourselves to be fixed in our interpretations when a worthy alternative prize is to seek to deal with the complex, the uncertain, and the problematic?

As an educator and mentor, I expect to be more than a provider and keeper of factual information. The aim remains to evolve progressive, cohesive education frameworks, where the time to develop critically reflective habits of mind is given a prominent place. This is not about intellectual indoctrination in terms of passing on what I think it is important to know; it is about facilitating intellectual emancipation, where transformations are paramount. Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles (2000), and similarly Land, Meyer, and Smith (2008) promote these ideas as constellations of competencies and include the use of creative thinking, fluency, originality, focused perception, and imagination as identifiers. Taken together, these artful routes to knowledge require us to draw upon a broadening range of perspectives with the aim being to realize and express meaning that is unifying in terms of representation. These higher-order competencies are further “accompanied by dispositions such as: risk taking, task persistence, ownership of learning and perceptions of accomplishment” (Burton et al., 2000, p. 252). For arguably to comprehend what you have learned, to recognize when subsequent further changes take place and to appreciate the potential of what might come next, is what we can recognize as mindful arts education. With this said, what we need are ways to evaluate activities such as unpredictability, intuition, and indeterminacy as part of our learning outcome’s culture. This is where relational dialogues, with outcomes not known in advance, are of paramount importance; indeed, the quality of the journey toward any potential clarity is the key feature.

The challenge, as understood by Rosi Braidotti (2002), concerns how we can find ways “to continue to represent in-between zones and areas of experience or perception” (pp. 173-74). Here is the crux of the issues with which we are presented in terms of the education economy. We need to find still more platforms for the ideas we debate in daCi, that “it is ... crucial to learn how to think about processes and not only concepts” (Braidotti, 2002, p. 174). This attention to pedagogy needs to be rethreaded throughout education, and from my perspective

working in university settings, needs to become more evident as a place of independent critical thought.

What becomes evident here is that we need to secure an appreciation for the potential to be found in ways we generate and subsequently manipulate ideas. This echoes the work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999) when she suggested that in the movement of bodies, we can become,

... caught up in the flow of kinetic thought, perceptually experiencing the dance as an unfolding kinetic drama, a dynamic form-in-the-making. (p. 249)

What Sheets-Johnstone usefully identifies as distinctive in terms of thinking generated in movement is that thought itself is kinetic: “it is motional through and through” (1999, p. 486), and something Gaston Bachelard (1964) refers to as a “muscular consciousness” (p. 11). With increased scholarly attention being given to sensorial awareness and bodily perception, there are opportunities to further explore the role of self and collective knowledge in the making. This is important, as once again we face the turning tide of political short termism and mismanagement of education policy with respect to the place of the arts and humanities in the core of the curriculum. So it is time to address what “I” and “we” can come to know through participation in embodied learning. My current exploration concerns ways that ethics becomes part of this journey as something more than the operation of agreed moral codes. In this, it is preferable to acknowledge what *I* and *we* can learn together through ethics, where mutuality and complementarity occupy increasingly significant roles.

In consolidating dance as arts education, it is important to consider how we move and are moved with others, to appreciate how we deal with uncertainty together, and through this practice of “being human,” argue for the relevance and impact of dance education as an agent in acknowledging us as “human becomings.” Movement may not be straightforward, but what we return to in terms of the value inherent in study through motion is that for each of us, it is our body that is the center of our existence in the world. It is through this bodily, emplaced self that we “literally are selves expressed” (Schenck, 1986, p. 46), and here that the inherent value of “mindful” motion can be recognized. There are of course further nuances to this argument in the work of Siegesmund (2004), who reminds us that,

...the arts are not simply about the mastery of technical skills, but that the technical skills we might strive for can offer gateways or portals into non-linguistic thinking. (p. 80)

His basic position is that at the center of any enduring case for the arts in education is the development of facility that engages qualitative reasoning, producing somatic knowledge. Thus, learning to create ourselves and learning how to learn.

These thoughts return me to my own journey in researching aesthetic education that is contested by many and used differently just about everywhere. I understand the idea to be a facet of our being, integral and interwoven throughout our experience of living. It is evident in the confederation of facets of being and evident in the movement of thinking. For me, to learn in and through movement is to be engaged with aesthetics as a means of experiencing form and content, context and purpose, where we can take time to scrutinize and investigate the depth and detail of felt thought. It concerns fluctuating identity, change through time, persuasive relations between theory and practice. In making the case for “mindful” dance practice in the curriculum, I continue to argue that the culmination of the aesthetic in dance education includes an “intellectual” knowledge of ourselves as moving, thinking beings, accessible from all aspects and across all the organizing strands of the multi-focused discipline, including our critical, imaginative, appreciative, and perceptive faculties.

In blending aesthetics and ethics within our dance practice, we can strive to change how and what is taught in the discipline. We can explore how the assessment of learning is carried out and, importantly, the breadth and interconnectivity of what is learned by our students and by ourselves.

The problems of trying to encapsulate a discipline that is itself identified by a diverse range of practices makes arguments for any strategic guidelines problematic. I now recognize my approach to dance having shifted in focus and intent toward a nexus of artistry and aesthico-ethics. In uniting the cognitivist and sensualist, what emerges is an approach that unifies feeling, individuality, reason, and cognition. Through it, we might persevere to achieve “cognitive feeling” as the “wide awakesness” urged by Schutz (1967), and so achieve a succinct vision of the potential benefits of “mindful” dance education.

In *Experiencing Every Moment: Aesthetically Significant Dance Education* (Bannon, 2000), I wrote about what appeared to be a narrowing of the view of how “intelligence” is manifest and that this should not be allowed to restrict the development of dance within academia. In what arguably is primarily an ethical drive to examine who we are, who we might come to be, and what ultimately we find ourselves capable of doing, there is opportunity to take possession of ourselves, engaged in what Foucault (1988) explores as a production of the self. In dance education, we have access to such determinations by acknowledging multiple narratives, which together produce one’s identity. In these terms, an education in dance might be understood as a process in which we can learn to hone our ability to address a range of “propositions,” a term used by choreographer, theorist, and educator William Forsythe (2008). He extols the virtue of learning to work with a range of differing ideas, letting them coexist as contrary threads, to be explored and reconsidered for the potential relational connections they might generate. Such experiments in movement can in turn provide building blocks for further engagements and provoke contemplation in realms of our unknowing.

What I recognize in my work is a continued interest in finding ways to help students realize such concepts-in-action. My aim is to support them as they define and refine ways to give attention to processes of dance making and in so doing, generate discriminating and sophisticated outcomes. The challenge remains the same, to investigate the forming and content of ideas rather than merely learning how to follow instructions remoulding previously constructed form. This, in turn, can lead to suspending a rush to “finality,” something that can be difficult to achieve with ever-diminishing resources, and an increasingly strategic approach to learning and assessment. Learning takes time; it is a process not an event, and yet what many of us experience is a steady decrease in time spent with students. Working in these ways can provide some of our most fulfilling learning experiences, for such in-between places can be where students find their idiosyncratic voice. It can allow us to realize and cope with self-identity as something that is always in flux, always unstable and in the making. In seeking what it might mean to persevere, we, in turn, can arouse and sustain curiosity and in the process cultivate vital features of knowledge generation as “mindful” movement of arts education.

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