

Raw board working style, pedagogical love and gender

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Abstract

In this article, I am reviewing my dissertation research (Turpeinen, 2015) and subsequent post-doctoral study in the ARTSEQUAL¹ project at the University of Arts, Helsinki, Finland. My special field of expertise as a practitioner was boys' dance education. In the dissertation, I reflect on pedagogical love, childhood, dancing boys, and the working style developed through practice. I discuss my working style (raw-board working style) and the critical reflection of the experiences brought forth through the practical work conducted in the academy. In simplified terms, I articulated my research question in my dissertation: "What have I learned as a boys' dance instructor?" This question has its roots in my work as a dance instructor researching my own work in the 1990s at the Vantaa Dance Institute in the Helsinki metropolitan area. At that time, I got to understand the meaning of a good dance studio atmosphere through practice with reflected experience. Accordingly, my activity related to my mission was an attempt to work as a better-skilled dance teacher.

Working as a post-doctoral researcher in the ARTSEQUAL research initiative, I am focusing on questions of gender in arts education. ARTSEQUAL examines the arts — in my case dance and performing arts — as a public service, with equality as the starting point. The ongoing research project asks, in general, what if the arts were understood more widely as a public service with equality as the starting point? One of the basic research questions is, what mechanisms in Finnish basic services in arts and arts education sustain unequal participation, and how should practices in basic services in arts education be changed? In my research, the question of gender is crucial in investigating the arts in schools and basic arts education. The gender divide in arts education in Finland is an alarming phenomenon.

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The use of the phrase “raw board” originated in the production press information for the dance piece *True Stories: Facts and Fiction* in February 2000. The production on stage was the last part of the trilogy *Boys’ Adventure*. The other parts were the dance productions *Star Track — Space Adventure* (1996) and *Kalamari Union — A Shortcut to Adulthood* (1998). These productions were the main arena (*phronesis*) for the construction of my working style. The last part, *True Stories*, was an advanced process. We started with a general understanding of the working atmosphere. The topics and ideas arose from the boys’ group. The process was rough and bumpy, although the collaborative work rolled on well with the drama teacher, Eija Velander, and with the group. We started with one word: *hero*. A lot of talking occurred within the working group: we shared ideas and respected each other’s views. The press information showed a rehearsal with 60 dancing boys aged 8-16, three girls, and six fathers.

The dance critic, Auli Räsänen, from the biggest Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, watched some rehearsals. We saw something happening, which was transformation with *dynamic complexity*. Räsänen’s immediate comment was *raw board method*, and the article later included the phrase. The term *raw board* was published. It also was framed as an on-going reflection. The matter of a “raw board” is a metaphor for transformation and for a process of construction. It can be seen as Aristotelian *hyle* (“wood”), which has the idea that everything (physical) is made of the same basic substance. Here, “raw board” as *hyle* is an immaterial construction space for transformation and encounters.

Raw board working style

My doctoral research project, *Raw Board and Pedagogical Love. Three Perspectives on Personal Dance* (Finnish: *Raakalautaa ja rakkautta. Kolme sommitelmaa oman elämän tanssista*) (Turpeinen, 2015), is a verbal interpretation of my work as a dance instructor, facilitator, and researcher. Through my career as a dance instructor and my critical reflection on it, I have established a conceptual model of encounters, experience sharing, and transitional spaces. This area of research is art pedagogy, which is all about reflecting on the practices of arts education. The reflection and deliberation in my work is both aided and impeded by practical

experience at two levels. The opening account looks at my history as a boys' dance instructor. The raw board concept began to emerge from the conflict between the institutional ethos of dance instruction and the life-world of the boys who are the dance pupils. The second level comprises the three artistic perspectives of the study through the artistic-practical aspects conducted and evaluated at the Theatre Academy, Helsinki.

After critical reflection and consideration of the conceptual resonances, the *raw board working style* reverted to a more activity-based view in these artistic parts in academy. I returned to the roots of the model in order to answer the question: what have I learned? My doctoral work is an artistic pedagogical study in which the practical realities of the raw board working style become evident by transforming actions into words, and are thus shared.

The working style is rooted in the sharing of experiences by pupil and instructor in a dialogue-based relationship. Growth and its nurturing make this possible, backed by a desire that life should be good. To lead a good life, you need to build your identity and a physical and spiritual state that is your own. Concern and shared experiences are important ingredients in nurturing growth in a teaching environment, based on what I call in Finnish *kattoatmosfääri*. The direct translation from Finnish to English includes the words *ceiling* and *atmosphere*. These two words together are somehow not immediately suitable, but narrate the occurrence with *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1994). I have also called this concept an *embracing atmosphere*, which is a state with Buberian dialogical relations (Buber, 1923/2013).

Eeva Anttila (2003, pp. 294, 301) introduces the concept of a *dialogical atmosphere*. According to Anttila, this means the *possibility* of entering mutuality or dialogue. Therefore, there is an atmosphere of feeling or possibility, but it is not yet a dialogue. The other side of this is a conception of dialogue (or *love*, or *good life*). Dialogue cannot be reduced into a coherent icon. In that respect, the icon is too static in a lived situation, where the qualities related to the dialogue are dynamic and in constant movement. Anttila sums up the discussion by the array of dialogue and with the idea of critical pedagogy, "encouraging children to become aware of their life situation and [to] affect it" (Anttila, 2003, p. 309). In the array of dialogue, Anttila shows the possibilities for a person to first have a relation to the body, sound, and image; to continue in relation with others; and finally to be a part of a dialogical network.

This qualitative atmosphere is nurturing *good life*. In my interpretation, this is love. In the case of (art) education, I mean *pedagogical love*. Even though there are opinions about *love* as a

concept being dated, clichéd, or confusing, there are lots of difficulties in defining love, such as *good*. Love escapes definition. Here I am wondering whether “my love” is my devotion to my work as a teacher, or in general my affection for human beings. How do you grab something that flows in constant movement? Going back to Plato’s definitions of love, there is *eros*, associated with the erotic; *philia*, a brotherhood or siblings’ love; and *agape* as altruistic. I see reaching to grab hold of or pursuing an understanding of love as beneficial. Even though “essentially love is not a theory” (Skinnari, 2004), love permeates our lives in different situations. To Buber (1923/2013), love is inclusive and lies in experiencing the other. To phenomenologist Max Scheler, love is a base of being human: a newborn child is a loving being. Without love, she or he will not live. Love is the “primal essence of all essences” (see Varto, 1991). Living as a dance teacher is based on love: pedagogical love. There is love of the *good life* (using Greek words) with ARETE — goodness, virtue; DIKAIOSYNE — justice; SOFROSYNE — moderateness, and KALON — beauty. There is the love of dancing and seeing dance as a part of good life.

The key concepts of the *raw board working style* are dialogue, experience, and a teaching environment based on pedagogical love in the form of an “embracing atmosphere” (see Fig. 1). The ideal way of working is the sharing of experience of both learner and a teacher in a dialogical relationship. This connection is respected in real life as real, not in an imaginary way (Weil, 1949/2002). Concern and care are connected with an idea of good life and shared experience (Heidegger, 1927/2000). There are requisite conditions for a good life: a project of self (*becoming*) and a physical-spiritual personal space. I understand this as the responsibility of and respect for the *other*.

The heuristic model of the *raw board working style* is a spiral that starts from action (dance). A present moment is meaningful for a learner’s life-world in relation to the past and evolving into the future. An experience, here and now, will be perceived and verbalized or described (danced). There are moments of sharing in a dialogical relation or a dialogical network. The represented experience is continuing the construction process through action following spirals.

The implications revealed and experience gained with this approach are depicted as they appeared to me in the context of this study.

The artistic practical aspects of the study in the academy

I framed the artistic practical aspects as *episodes* with the following themes: First *the process of dance performance (Miss Julie 2010)*, secondly *growing up as a dance student (Lost Boys 2010)*, and lastly *young boys' dance lessons (2011)*. With these episodes, we were in the process of testing the working style in practice — *phronesis* — the circumspection of the dancers' experience and existence in action. The ideal was to return the shared experience to action, or in other words, to study critical reflection and dialogue as serving what is revealed through action. The concept of the *episode* is a series of events. An event is something that occurs in a certain place during a particular interval of time in this study.

With *young boys' dance lessons*, my basic idea was to work with the roots of the working style. Therefore, once more, as 50-year-old dance instructor, I was starting from scratch. Ten dance lessons were held with 12 boys, approximately 5 years old. I had been in the same situation around 20 years earlier, reflecting on my teacher's practice. We started again with *running, walking, jumping, and turning*. By using the *searching* tool, the boys' group shared and named the actions in the raw board spiral. A process of transformation was occurring. The teaching setup had an arrangement with the parents of the boys. They were present in the studio, watching the lessons. Thus, the parents were sharing experiences with the group. For example, the parents were reflecting with the boys on "what dance might be, or what it is not."

The parents had the opportunity to be present in the lessons, and this was a more versatile experience than just listening to their son telling them what had happened in the studio. The parents challenged themselves to understand dance in general. Notions were changed through this experience. In her research project about embodied learning, *The Entire School Dances!* Eeva Anttila (2013; 2015) writes how her study aims to elucidate how embodied learning works in practice, and how is it experienced by the students and teachers. She makes note of notions about dance. The collected feedback of the students and parents had questions about "real dance." Dance is sometimes seen as a genre, with the steps and the practicing in accordance with the genre. The parents gathered their views on the students' stories and narratives (see also Turpeinen, 2015, p. 153). I stress the difference between these cases as lying in the parents' possibilities to reflect their perceptions and construct their understanding. In both studies, some changes in notions were seen. The parents' presence in the dance lessons is a way in which a dancing child may be viewed and regarded, and an interpretation about dance in general may be

constructed. The other side was the child: “I learned something important about my son,” was the crucial aspect for one mother, “and it happened nicely.”

The second practical part was a two-year working process ending with the staged performance of *Lost Boys* (2010). The performance was an arena in which the young men were performing (*sharing*) their experiences and searching for the *not-lost dance*. The process group was composed of six adult men aged 19-24. They had stopped dancing after their basic dance education. They had 8-13 years’ experience in the dance institute and had then stopped dancing. The process of *Lost Boys* required these young men to reflect on experiences and meanings related to dance in action. We found that a horizon of meanings was not clear at a young age. The process opened the horizon to reflect and understand more of what dance itself was or is for them. The dancing boy group — the group of peers — was underlined as important or even a major motivation factor. As one group member said, the group was a *space* in which “you did not need to be afraid of anything”: your body, sexuality, everyday life, or social relations. The most important physical space was the *dressing room* between home, school, and the dance studio. There was space for peers to share experiences “when everything sucks.” The dressing room was “the free zone” (see Kumashiro 2000, pp. 27-29). The physicality, performances, and dance itself were found to be important. Through dancing, they found meanings of being, or just a way “to spend good time together.”

The most important agents of the boys’ dance hobby were the mothers. There was a scene about this in *Lost Boys*. The dancer asked a question after a scene of post-modern dance experiments: “Who wants to watch a dance like this?” The immediate answer was, “My mother!” The following comment was, “As a matter of fact, I think my mother is in the audience right now.” The mothers were the decision-makers. But as the findings of the process showed, a dancing boy is not a monolith. The histories of the individual dancers were different. The reasons for dancing — both starting it and stopping it — varied.

The process of the dance performance *Miss Julie: Memories — Good, Bad and Ugly* (2010) opened a *space of becoming* with the dancer’s life-world. These group members — a dancer, a dance-acrobat, and an actor — were young performing arts professionals with the same basic dance education background. They had more or less experience of raw board working as children at the dance institute in 1990s. We had been in the same working process in 1997.

We started the *Julie* process with profane meditations (Varto, 1991). The ideal ambition was to lose the grip of daily life experiences. I was interested in first-person observations: how I am aware of myself as a person, as an individual, and as a dancer (Anttila, 2009). The second area of interest was the first person as a sensitive surface, where she/he is not originally “knowing and wanting” (Varto, 1991). In brief, we challenged ourselves to lose our presence with a daily kitsch experience. After these sessions, we continued the raw board rehearsals using a well-known drama text, August Strindberg’s *Fröken Julie* (1888). The process continued within the frame of the classic drama. The performances opened the process to the public and were reviewed by research peers.

Our ambition was to make the classic drama resonate with the performers’ own life-world (without a daily kitsch experience!). This process was characterized by unpredictability and enigmatic steps. The concrete actions opened possibilities of understanding one important point of the working style. There were empowering moments for all of us when the space of becoming and shared experience started to politicize our everyday lives. One crucial point was the young professionals’ relation to the professional dance field. The questions handled matters such as *power*, *audience as employer*, and *gender*. The young performing professional is stepping toward the next production all of the time. Choreographers and producers — the employers — are in the audience. These findings of the *Julie* process were part of the discoveries when group members described their personal rehearsal experience connected with their life-worlds. Personal experience is partly a mystery to others, but we had moments where we could share it with and without words. There were moments with “desire and enthusiasm.” One group member mentioned with regard to the transformation: “I found my body and my dance again, my own movements and dynamics. My legs, my back. Trusted my own experience.”

Some findings about dancing boys in Finland

I have made some findings through my dissertation work and based on my practical experience as a boys’ dance instructor in Finland. One of the findings is that the availability of and access to boys’ dance instruction are built on three principal elements. In my interpretation, the ultimate restriction is an evolutionary one (*evolution*), where the availability of dance instruction is based on the limits defined by economics and geography. In Finland, there are only a few basic art education schools where boys make up 10-20 percent of the dance students.

These institutes have governmental grants and are situated mostly in centers of population (e.g., in the Helsinki Metropolitan area). The wider viewpoint outside this frame shows the reality. The mostly private dance schools (without grants and subsidies) have few or no boys. The other side of this evolutionary barrier is loneliness. There will be no peers, and cultural support is mostly missing. This means that there is a pressure to hide dancing or to seek respect by emphasizing, for example, masculinity (see Lehtikoinen, 2006). An emphasis on the masculine features of dance is needed in order to create an image of dance as an option and pursuit for boys. There is a temptation to compare dance and sport, mostly using ice hockey or football in Finland. The image is built on some kind of picture of a tough guy or one who is extremely “laddish.” In this frame, we will find a “boyish” action group, but there is a threat of delimitation. By copying a tough sports guy, a boy with another kind of temper or life-world will be marginalized. Thirdly, the restriction element is the dance instruction itself. There can be a *conflict* between the dance institutional *ethos* and the life-world of the boys. One part of this conflict is *boy code* (Pollack, 1999). The coded picture of boys is narrow, with attitudes and notions about what boys are or what they should be. Risner (2009) notes that dance is understood as a feminine art form. In addition, the art of dance or dance education is not widely understood. The narrow image has its roots in culture in general, but in the case of dancing boys, there is “an inner marginalization.” In my interpretation, there is a coded attempt to prove some kind of image instead of just being a dancer, as a boy with his own space and temper. Thus, and after these three elements, my suggestion is to develop the pedagogical dance atmosphere, a dialogue-based relationship. If possible, an atmosphere of pedagogical love. In encounters, therefore, I am looking for presence and waiting — a shared experience.

Resonating with the ideas of the French philosopher Simone Weil (1949/2001), I must distinguish the *food of the soul* from poisons which may temporarily seem nurturing. Weil writes about obligations and rights. She asserts that obligations are more fundamental than rights, as a right is only meaningful insofar as others fulfill their obligation to respect it. So there is an “eternal” obligation applied to all human beings: respecting the essential needs of others — the “needs of the soul.” In my interpretation, the essence of the opportunities afforded by teaching and instruction lie in an understanding of spirituality: what the heart can offer to nourish the soul. By this I mean a pure and firm understanding that children are cast into this world as caring, affectionate beings (Varto, 2012). There should be an awareness, too, of the roots and the diverse

complexity that grows from these roots. The ideals of education, like the *raw board working style*, have heuristic purposes for its practice. For me, the challenge with everyday experience is to see the threat of the ready-made world as the state of the future, or respect for human dignity valued in monetary terms.

ARTSEQUAL

The ARTSEQUAL project addresses one of the central questions for the future development of the Finnish welfare society: rethinking the role of the arts (see www.artsequal.fi). Working as a post-doctoral researcher in the project, I am focusing on questions of gender in arts education. The on-going research project asks in general, what if the arts were understood more widely as a public service with equality as its starting point? In my case, the more precise the question, what mechanisms in Finnish (arts) education sustain unequal participation? The gender divide in arts education is an alarming phenomenon. The question of gender is crucial to my research interest. In the broader sense, with basic art education in Finland, “boys continue to participate in basic art education a little: only a quarter of pupils are boys. In dance and crafts, the pupils are mainly girls” (Southern Finland Regional State Administrative Agency, 2014).

For this, the research interventions open first a space with a critical atmosphere, deconstructing unquestionable reality in arts-based processes. The background meta-level gives an examination of developing gender and culturally sensitive pedagogies in the arts, and investigates good practices in basic arts education institutions.

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