# Teaching and Learning Dance
# in a Culturally Inclusive Classroom

**Elizabeth Melchior**
Victoria University of Wellington

## Introduction and background

Dance is the fastest growing curriculum subject in New Zealand secondary schools, with increasing numbers of students attempting to gain The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in Dance (Bolwell, 2009). This is to be celebrated. It also presents a challenge to dance teachers in the classroom, many of whom have students from cultural and educational backgrounds very different from their own. It is important to recognise and understand these differences and find ways to effectively manage them (Ho, Holmes & Cooper, 2004, cited in Baskerville, 2008). In New Zealand, current educational research and government initiatives are concerned with raising achievement for Māori students, especially at secondary level, where a high proportion of students are leaving school without any formal qualification (Ministry of Education, 2003).

As a dance lecturer and adviser in pre-service and in-service teacher education I have a responsibility to develop teachers who are able to cater for diversity in the classroom. Aware that my own values and beliefs are informed by a western world view, I work collaboratively with my drama colleague to look for ways of incorporating *tikanga* Māori (a culturally sensitive approach) into our courses. We do this by making our teaching strategies transparent; getting the students to reflect on *how* we teach as well as *what* we teach, in ways that promote participation and engagement in learning. Establishing a relationship as 'critical friends', we examine our own beliefs and values in order to be more effective as lecturers and facilitators. When we received a request for professional development in dance and drama from two secondary teachers co-teaching in the same school, we saw it as an opportunity to work together, with a view to encouraging the teachers to examine their own values

and beliefs in order to provide a culturally responsive environment for their students in dance and drama.

In this paper I discuss pedagogy from a broad perspective, and in relation to dance, and introduce the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy from a Māori world view. I describe a process that my drama colleague and I co-constructed with two teachers' and strategies implemented by the dance teacher to enhance student participation and engagement. I hope dance educators will find connections that resonate with their own world views and beliefs about teaching and learning dance.

## Pedagogy

Atken (1994) defines teaching as 'the complex art of facilitating the growth of individuals,' identifying the two main elements of teaching as *developing relationships,* and *designing learning*. She describes relationships between teacher and learner in terms of production and reproduction of knowledge through two distinct models of teaching: the *transmission* model and the *interaction* model (cited in Melchior, 2005, p. 24). Transmission teaching is focussed on *product,* or delivering knowledge – the teacher has the knowledge and passes it on to the students, who passively receive it. Interactive teaching is focussed on *process,* or creating knowledge – the teacher and the learner actively participate in the construction of knowledge, exchanging values and validating personal experience as they engage in the learning process. Irrespective of the teaching model, all students need a supportive and challenging environment in which to learn.

Pedagogical knowledge is crucial in determining a teacher's ability to interpret the curriculum in the classroom situation, and for students to see the purpose of the learning in relation to their world of understanding (McInerney & McInerney, 1998). Linda Darling-Hammond's (2000) study of teacher quality in relation to student achievement (cited in Buck, 2003) found that teachers' subject matter knowledge had no consistent relationship to student achievement, while pedagogical knowledge was shown to have consistent and strong links. A teacher's ability to interact and communicate with students is of prime importance. These findings have implications for dance in the classroom and how it is taught.

## Dance pedagogy

Research literature focusing on dance pedagogy reveals concern among dance educators about the way dance should be taught (Bolwell, 1998, Buck, 2003; Fortin, 1993 Hong, 2000; Melchior, 2005; Smith-Autard, 1976). Dance pedagogy has traditionally followed a transmission mode of teaching, in which the students learn by imitating specific movement vocabularies modelled by the 'expert' teacher. This is the way many teachers feel most comfortable teaching dance in the classroom, as it is also the way they were taught. It is now widely accepted that transformation of dance content knowledge into knowledge for teaching and learning involves far more than dance technique and control (Buck, 2003; Fortin, 1993; Hong, 2000; Shapiro, 1998).Teachers

need a wide range of teaching strategies to actively engage their students in dance learning.

Shapiro (1998) describes how the current shift from *disembodied* knowing to *embodied* knowing changes the relationship between the teacher and the learner. She argues that teachers in the classroom need to recognise student diversity and relate movement vocabulary to their experiences. This requires an interactive approach where the teacher constructs learning through the relationships s/he develops with the students and with the curriculum. By exploring movement concepts within a structured learning environment, through guided improvisation, creative problem solving, sharing and responding, and critical reflection, shared meanings are constructed within the context of the learning (Buck, 2003). Social constructivism, which emphasises the importance of social context in the construction of knowledge, is the theory that underpins dance in *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (2000) and the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) statements, and reflects my own beliefs and values about teaching and learning.

## Culturally responsive pedagogy

Research concerned with underachievement of Māori students in schools also highlights the importance of the teacher's role in creating a culturally inclusive environment for learning and the impact of teacher expectation on student achievement. (Baskerville, 2008; Bishop & Glynn, 1999 Bishop, 2001; Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy, 2007; Alton Lee, 2003; Macfarlane, 2004). Alton Lee (2003) found that teaching in ways that are responsive to student diversity and cultural identity can have a positive impact on low and high achievers at the same time. In their studies, Bishop and Glynn (1999) and Bishop and Berryman (2006) concluded that the essential ingredient for improving student engagement is the creation of socio-cultural contexts for learning… 'where students safely bring who they are and what they know into the learning relationship, and where what students know, and who they are, forms the foundations of interaction patterns in the classroom – in short, where culture counts' (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, pp. 165-166). Macfarlane (2004) explored the role that culture plays in education and identified factors for successful culturally responsive teaching. His *Educultural Wheel* explains how a culturally responsive pedagogy is realised through five cultural concepts encompassing the Māori world view. The first concept *whanaungatanga* is about building positive relationships; the second, *rangatiriatanga* is concerned with teacher effectiveness; the third *manaakitanga* explores the ethic of caring; the fourth, *kotahitanga,* the ethic of bonding; and the fifth and central concept, *pumanauratanga,* acknowledges the importance of school tone, classroom morale, and teacher attitude in establishing a culturally inclusive learning environment.

## Pedagogy in practice

<u>A case study</u>
The setting for this study is a co-educational state secondary school, situated in a lower socio-economic, semi-rural community in New Zealand, where one third of the school population identify as Māori. Two teachers were co-

teaching in a multi-level (Yr 11-13) dance and drama class of 22 students working towards NCEA Dance and/or Drama Achievement Standards. The teachers were concerned that many of the students appeared to choose the performing arts as an 'easy option' or had been placed in the class as a 'last resort' by school management and therefore lacked motivation to achieve. This impacted on the teachers and resulted in some deficit thinking, as reflected in one teacher's comment, 'The students just sit like puddings.'

Both teachers had considerable knowledge and experience in their respective disciplines; the dance teacher had been a performer and teacher in the local community for many years and the drama teacher was a beginning teacher with a background in professional theatre. They were enthusiastic about the professional development and were happy for us to observe them teaching and interacting with their students, and to critically reflect on their practice in order to make change.

Rationale
Research in New Zealand has shown that professional development for teachers is most effective when it is negotiated within the context of the classroom and tailored to meet the needs of individual teachers and their students (Buck, 2003; Hill, Hawke & Taylor, 2002; Melchior, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2003; Showers & Joyce, 1996, 1997). To be sustainable it needs to take place over time.

> If teachers are to be able to improve practice they need to be able to take risks, make mistakes, and engage in honest self-reflection. This requires a culture where relationships bind them together in a supportive, enquiring community.
> (Fullan & Hargreaves, cited in Hill, Hawke & Taylor, 2002, p. 2)

My drama colleague and I supported the teachers over a period of two years (2006-2007), visiting them at regular intervals. We spent time in the classroom observing the teachers and their students, modelling teaching strategies and engaging in professional conversations with the teachers. To build a reciprocal relationship of collegiality and trust we also met outside the classroom, often in a local café. For the first year we decided to work collaboratively on building learning relationships. In the second year we worked individually in our specialist area. I worked with the dance teacher to design the learning program in dance. By developing a deeper understanding of how the teachers related to their students and the teaching strategies they used, we were able to support them more effectively.

Methodology
We decided on an action research approach, so that specific issues and problems of practice could be identified and explained by involving the teachers in the process through an action/reflection cycle (Merriam, 1998). Semi-structured interviews, videoing and journaling were used as data gathering tools. Baseline data emerged from initial interviews with the teachers and from classroom observations. Filmed evidence was used to reflect on student participation and engagement. An interview with the dance

teacher towards the end of the process was recorded on digital audio to evaluate the process in relation to her identified goals.

Our initial observations of the teachers and their students revealed the need for a clear lesson structure, meaningful contexts for learning and higher teacher expectations for student achievement. Students arrived late for class and were not ready to learn. After a short warm-up (where students appeared to 'go through the motions' in a half-hearted fashion) the lesson was divided equally between dance and drama, with students mostly working in small groups on specified tasks in preparation for assessment. Most students appeared to follow the teachers' instructions in a passive way, displaying little energy or enthusiasm. Some didn't participate at all. They sat apart from their group chatting to each other. At the end of the lesson when students were asked to share work in progress with the rest of the class, only three of the six groups had anything they were willing to show. The teachers reminded the students of the brief, told them what they needed to work on, and dismissed the class.

Reflecting on the lesson from the perspectives of both teacher and student resulted in an action plan for professional development. We discussed how we could acknowledge and value Māori culture to make learning more meaningful for Māori students and decided to use a ritual of *karakia* (Māori prayer) as a way of beginning the lesson. By starting with song and movement in a circle, we wanted to enhance students' readiness and willingness to learn. My colleague and I agreed to model co-teaching a dance and drama lesson on our next visit.

The teachers found it valuable to observe their class being taught by someone else who could model what they were trying to achieve. They commented on clarity of instructions using discipline-specific terminology (dance and drama), sharing learning intentions and success criteria with the students and having high expectations for student achievement. They acknowledged the positive impact of questioning strategies and timely specific feedback. Time was allocated in class for students to reflect on their learning in their journals. Ending the class using a reflective circle allowed students to verbalise responses to their learning. One teacher commented:

> Seeing you model how to create the kind of learning environment that is good for our students through *karakia*, questioning, waiting, being really clear about what we are learning, you showed us what we really need to get into our teaching.

The teachers challenged themselves to stay positive, focus on what the students were doing well and scaffold learning by making connections to what the students already knew. Raised expectations for student achievement resulted in greater teacher satisfaction and enjoyment and more imaginative and improved quality of student work. The dance teacher explained:

> I definitely feel that I am communicating more clearly with the students. I am asking better questions in a clearer way, I am giving more important feedback: more effective, and explicit.

I visited the dance teacher at regular intervals throughout the two years, continuing the action/reflection process, and gradually shifting the professional development focus from *building learning relationships* to *designing the learning*. My role was to give her encouragement and support to plan and teach dance within culturally responsive contexts while clearly focussing on raising student achievement. We went through the dance NCEA achievement standards and planned units of work within contexts that were meaningful to the students, adapting assessment tasks accordingly.

## Factors for successful culturally responsive teaching

In the light of our original goal – to improve student participation and engagement in learning by creating a culturally responsive classroom – I was drawn to Dr Angus Macfarlane's (2004) *Educultural Wheel* as a way of reflecting on what was happening in the dance class on my final visit.

*Whanaungatanga* was evident through the teacher knowing the students' background, recognising their prior knowledge, and giving Māori students opportunities to teach their peers and to learn co-operatively. I observed a Māori student teaching a dance sequence to the rest of the class using his adaptations of traditional Māori movements. The other students were totally focussed and committed to reaching the high standard of performance that he demanded. *Rangatiriatanga* was evident in the teacher's positive leadership, warmth and understanding. She had clear expectations, knowing what was to be taught and how to teach it, and awareness that good teaching is culturally inclusive. She asked open questions that encouraged the students to reflect on the quality of their performance. *Manaakitanga* is the foundation for successful and reciprocal teaching and learning experiences. The teacher provided a comfortable learning environment where cultural connectedness was established and reciprocal learning was taking place. Respect, kindness and trustworthiness between teacher and student were apparent in the way the student taking the teaching role, fellow students, and the teacher asked questions and offered suggestions. The students were actively engaged in their learning. *Kotahitanga* was evident in the teacher's inclusive approach, through setting and maintaining agreed-to boundaries and rewards. In the dance class there was a sense of group sharing – a blending of the distinction between teacher and learner / learner and teacher – and a feeling that everyone wanted to be there. Reflecting on the learning outcomes the teacher observed:

> Today I saw potential merits and potential excellences. They have been taught well. They just needed to make it mean something, feel something.

The central concept, *Pumanauratanga*, extends outwards to the four interconnected concepts in the wheel – *whanaungatanga, rangatiratanga*, and *manaakitanga, kotahitanga* – representing cultural connectedness. By making the classroom a culturally positive place for Māori students all students benefited, with increased 'connectedness' between the teacher and the students, the students and each other, and the students and dance. I suggest this is a powerful model for teaching and learning dance.

*Tena te ngaru whati*
*Tena te ngaru puku.*

*There is a wave that breaks,*
*There is a wave that swells.*

(Ministry of Education, 2000)

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**Biographical statement**

**Elizabeth Melchior** MEd is a Lecturer in Dance in primary and secondary teacher education in the School of Educational Psychology and Pedagogy at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She also works as a dance facilitator providing professional development and support to teachers implementing the dance curriculum in primary and secondary schools, and she co-ordinates WE'LL Dance (Wellington Dance in Education Network). She is a member of the Educational Advisory Board for DANZ and Footnote Dance Company.