

# **Starting from Here**

## **Dance in higher education from the inside out**

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In *Starting from here*, I begin a journey, which will revisit a collection of ideas that frame the 'disciplinary condition', paying attention to the ongoing fortunes of dance in higher education in the UK. There are two primary threads in the following discussion, the first dealing with the apparent contradictions of preserving a discipline, whilst promoting its future. The second considers how we continue to support the development of individuals within educational systems that serve many 'masters', whether they be political, social, sector wide or indeed discipline specific.

I recently completed a four-year period as the head of a department specialising in Arts and New Media. As I reflect upon the lessons learnt in this role it is the experience and time spent learning in and through dance that enabled me to embrace the multi-disciplinarity of the department as a place of innovation and learning. Taking on a new role as a senior lecturer in dance has provided the opportunity to revisit many of my ongoing questions about the arts as education; about what is taught, to what benefit, what is learned during the time spent and why the whole experience deserves to be valued.

This paper considers the provision of learning opportunities alongside expectations of teaching and learning, with a view to enhancing the integrity and wholeness for each individual. This trajectory has evolved from hearing my own replies to questions about the place of dance in education, where I speak of the sense of autonomy to think through experiences as interacting forces, to trace cause and effect, to consider subjective reality through objective reflection. Whilst *Starting from here*, is starting from the experience of learning framed by a discipline that bridges varied ways of thinking and responding, it also remains closely aligned with knowledge of 'ourselves' in the world. This may seem to be distant from the experience of dance for some but for me dance is a self actualising discipline, where individuals can become qualitatively transformed.

Entering the opening session of a module in choreography with a group of second year undergraduate students brought to mind comments by Dana Caspersen (2007) when speaking of her experience working with William

Forsythe. She talked of Forsythe working towards the exhibition of 'dance intelligence', something she understood as a curiosity, fearlessness and desire to continuously re-approach 'dancing' itself. As we spoke about the plans for the semester, I wondered if any of the people in class that afternoon were exploring their 'dance intelligence', or if the explorations we were about to embark upon would or could ignite a spark for those who had lost it or were yet to find it. How were we going to explore the relational chains through individual inventive curiosity and imagination that Caspersen spoken of in her own experience of what dance can be? How were we going to work and recognise what Susan Melrose (Flatt & Melrose, 2007; Melrose, 2003) refers to as the 'signature practices', by which we each can come to forge our singular response to the world through art. It was clear to me that although I had had a period of time outside of the studio the questions have not changed. I have asked them in one form or another for over twenty years. So, is there a significance to dance education? If there is, how do we know it and ensure it has relevance and legitimacy? What is the 'state' of the discipline and what are the signatures of the creative graduates that now emerge from our programs?

### **Interconnections**

Having completed my own undergraduate study in the early 1980s I am part of the generation who have observed and hopefully contributed to the making of a discipline in higher education (at least in the UK). This is a somewhat unexpected position to be in since, at the point of choosing to study dance at university, I had no reason to think that it was a young discipline in terms of the academy. Cultural and critical theory has perhaps had the strongest impact on developments in the study of dance over the past twenty-five years. This influence initiated a movement away from the earlier discipline identifiers, which tended to emphasise the historiographic, technical, and artistic.

Debates surrounding the embodied experience of 'identity', 'individuality' and 'community' are regular themes for a broad range of academic disciplines, each theme moving in and out of social consciousness, being discovered and discarded at regular intervals. For dance programs these themes remain constant features and have probably contributed, in some measure to the ongoing unease with which dance is viewed by senior managers in higher education.

In recent work by Franco and Nordera (2007, p. 1) they make reference to Foucault's statement that, 'disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules'. Evidently within given parameters there must be scope to formulate and reformulate ideas across an extensive range of identifying features in any discipline. The hope here is that disciplines can be free of the restrictions that could entrench a sense of boundary and thereby stifle innovation. However, this can be a point of contention if for example there are 'weighty' expectations of 'staying in the groove', a point admirably made by Dempster (2005) citing Whitehead (1925), when addressing the 2005 *Dance Rebooted* Conference for Ausdance.

Donaldson (1994, p. 97) at the *Dance and Child International Conference* in Sydney spoke succinctly of dance works as essentially '...dynamic reticulated complexes, in which all component elements and structures take on an interactive role'. The nature of this interrelatedness and co-dependence of features, in process and product, as performer, creator or viewer creates a dynamic and fluid art form. Each instance of a work is layered with cultural, historic, economic and political consideration, where the now well used notion proposed by Reid (1969) that works of art can be seen as 'meaningful', rather than 'meaning something' becomes most apparent.

The following quotations encapsulate a span of time in which the maturing fortunes of dance as a discipline in higher education have become apparent. First John Martin (1939) emphasises what he saw as a lack of theoretical development in dance, a situation he believed to have developed because of a reliance on borrowed theoretical constructs from other disciplines. His argument is that, 'we have become so busy learning other people's languages... that we have remained virtually illiterate in our own (Martin, 1939, p. 62).

In 1991 Alter restated the case when tracing the development of dance based dance theory, arguing that borrowed constructs had had a limiting effect on the development of the discipline of dance because, by their nature, they are bounded by the paradigms from which they emerge. The observations are worth noting if your aim is to call for the identification of dance as a discipline with a distinct and isolating identity. However, there is a relevant argument to be made that a distinctive strength of dance as a discipline lies in the very incorporation of a wealth of interdisciplinary features. Both Sanchez-Colberg (1992) and Dils (2001) present readings of dance in this multi-directional sense, although it is worth noting that they write fifty years after Martin, in a different world and with different discipline affordances. As Professor Susan Street suggested in her Dame Peggy Van Praagh Memorial address to the World Dance Alliance Global Summit (2008), there may be a sense of 'dance coming of age' and that the positive change in the environment will afford the place for dance to make a substantial contribution to culture and specifically the physical engagement with lived experience. Like Sanchez-Colberg we can argue for an appreciation of dance that is an, '...intricate network of cultural, political, social, psychological structures which are inextricably bound to the totality of the dance in as much as they help define its existence and specificity' (Sanchez-Colberg, 1992, p. 12).

In the work of Laban (1959) we can trace the promotion of a language of movement that displays a conscious awareness of the kinetic and rhythmical languages that are part of the intellectual activity of being human. This work like the work of other movement and theatre practitioners presented challenges to the reliance on the written or spoken word, exploring the realms of intuition and spontaneity in a clear attempt to associate intellectual activity with the felt experience of being alive. It is this long standing interconnection between our somatic identity and our social contextual identity that lies at the foundation of the disciplinary identity of dance. It is the potential breadth that this encompasses that marks dance as a distinctive discipline in the academy. It is this that we should promote more fully when asked what the study of dance entails.

Dance remains most often of the body, not only about the body, for as Dils (2001, p. 371) suggests, it is ‘...also about subjectivity – about how that body is positioned in the world as well as the ways in which that particular body responds to the world.’ It is these interrelationships between the individual and collective experience that sparks our need to consider how the discipline moves forward to be part of an articulation of new literacy in the twenty-first century.

Dance was not validated as a specialist BA (Hons) degree in the UK until 1975 when a course was established at the Laban Centre London (Brinson 1980). One of the major recommendations of research sponsored by the Gulbenkian Foundation (1981) into the nature of dance education and training in Britain saw the first Chair of Dance, at the University of Surrey established. This development came some fifty years after H’Doubler started work on the first American degree courses at the University of Wisconsin. The late development in the UK continues to be explained by political and cultural reluctance to accept the value, or even the existence, of knowledge embodied in dance experience. Haynes (1987, p. 141) refers to this as, ‘the principle of dissolution’, where one of the major difficulties for the establishment and inclusion of dance in the education environment, was the ephemeral nature of the medium itself. The ephemeral may well be its strength as Roger Copeland (1994) has argued but in institutional terms it has meant that Dance has remained vulnerable as an academic discipline. For Janet Adshead in 1994 questions of relevance, value and worth persisted, arising as she saw it from a cultural perception that, ‘...relegates it to the insignificant, as “entertainment”, and views it with incredulity in academia’ (Adshead, 1994, p. 22).

In 1981 Adshead suggested that dance education suffered from a restriction in scope, due mainly to the contemporary focus of many courses. The intervening years have seen changes in breadth and association with other disciplines, for example sociology, anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies, computer science, each providing avenues for the development of varied aspects of the discipline. The content and theoretical base may have expanded, helped largely by learning the lessons revealed in the changing fortunes of dance in American universities (Cashion, 1989), but there is room to explore whether this expansion has changed the perception of dance in the academy.

In recent work by Janet Adshead-Lansdale (2007, p. 238) she reflects upon the fortunes of dance as a discipline in a similar tone to Randy Martin (1998) suggesting that over this time it has become, ‘...a means to an end, annexed to other subjects, and through this process of appropriation it is denuded of any fleshy characteristics to become a series of metaphoric constructions.’ As such the discipline observed today exists in an extended array of complex disciplinary constructions. In the best of cases it retains a relatedness to the ‘synaptic’, a movement of energy that crosses and connects reflection and embodiment, a place of self knowledge, where learning and experimentation are prioritised, and this is where the distinctive character of the discipline could be said to lie.

The similarity in breadth and depth of the rationales that underpin undergraduate dance courses in the UK is considerable. The drive for a vocational impetus in higher education has no small part to play in the profile of many recent programs

even though, according to *Mapping Dance* (Burns, 2007), a report that aimed to trace the available experience of dance in higher education in the UK, the prospects of direct employment in the field itself remain relatively small. Only in the last two years have we seen the introduction of 'urban dance' as a degree program title. This is certainly an interesting departure in nomenclature although closer scrutiny of the program documentation belies the brave step into the popularist arena. The program actually prioritises site based performance work within a contemporary framework.

In the conservative and vulnerable market place that is higher education in the UK, individuality in program design can be hard to find and harder still to promote. The market for dance remains small in relative terms even at a time when the government is promoting 'compulsory cultural exposure' for all and 'Strictly Come Dancing' (British Broadcasting Corporation) at the time of writing fills the Saturday evening celebrity television slot with viewing figures over 10 million. However, this attention emphasises how dance as a discipline continues to present a selective history and self-image, which may well have resulted from the ongoing struggle to exist at all in the academy. For although most people move, dance education tends to reinforce a particular view of what moving is to be.

The ephemeral experience that is a feature of dance, underpins the characterisation of the discipline as an emergent field of knowledge. There remains a worthy and ongoing debate of the manner in which dance evades or resists linguistic representation, a debate which has had its costs as far as the position in the academy is concerned. The lasting impression that there is little of substance in dance largely remains the same, even where we are mindful of the interwoven multiple intelligences through which we experience the world, where the verbal and corporeal are inextricably linked in interpenetration (Williams, 2004 p. 175). It is certainly the case that research work like that undertaken by Rosemary Lee (2000-2006 PARIP, Uni of Bristol - ResCen, Middlesex University) in *The Suchness of Henie and Eddie* (Lee & Allegue, 2007), or Emilio Greco and Pieter Scholton (deLahunta, 2007), which engage directly with the revelation of processes in improvisation and performance begin to build integrated visual methods for documentation and the evaluation of dance theoretical practice from the inside out.

It is apparent from the publicity materials for a host of undergraduate dance programs in the UK that the current priority to be a reflective, versatile and applied practitioner is of paramount importance. This is in marked contrast to the drive for 'innovative' and 'experimentation' prioritised in literature for contemporary theatre practice, drama or performance programs in similar institutions. There is of course evident need to consider the relationship between undergraduate programs and employment opportunity in what is a broadening professional field. Jeanette Siddall in *Mapping Dance* (in Burns, 2007) talks in what she calls her 'dream mode' envisioning opportunities where there is a confidence in the individual 'USP' (unique selling point) of dance. She takes the opportunity to promote interest in a curricula that is less focused on conceptual dances and more focused on making transferable skills explicit, with increased opportunity for students to gain practical work-based experience. The main drive

of her comments can be read as a call to 'relevance', which may be fair but there are concerns to address in the message. Wareham (2008, p. 3) in a report that considers what constitutes a creative graduate, suggests that the 'notion of the university being a place where enquiry, research and learning are at the core is in danger of being lost.'

To further explore this position it is worth noting projects in educational enterprise and artistic research that have taken place in the Netherlands over the past five years (Hoogenboom, 2007). One purpose of these projects was to stem the flow of what was seen as an occupational reinterpretation of higher education. Hoogenboom (2007, p. 80), recounts how changes in a range of arts school curricula meant that they increasingly defined themselves according to current labour markets, in as much as they allowed it to dictate their 'application-oriented teaching to job-training.' For the Ministry of Education and Science this led to an increasing fracture within academic discourse when what was more desirable was a blended mix of applied and innovative research and education. Back in 'dream mode' we might envision a community of practice where continued exploration through research impacts on learning and the application of practice. Together these experiences can mobilise ideas and innovation.

What is considered valuable in a graduate is that they are people who will contribute to society in a range of positive ways. What Wareham (2008) emphasises is that it is not just about preparing young practitioners to enter creative and cultural industries but enabling them to act as catalysts who will ultimately move these industries forward. To do this there has to be more evident challenge in learning processes than the delivery and reception of information that is known and already evident in current practice. This is where the development of conceptual abilities is of vital importance in the experience of dance as higher education.

Hanstein's (1990, p. 57) discussion of her vision of dance education as one with openness and discovery at its centre, may sit at odds with the traditions of objective curriculum development, but it provides a window onto what dance could be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her argument has three main characteristics.

1. Working in open as opposed to closed systems, to promote a sense of discovery and responsiveness to change. The likely impact on dance teaching could be immense when you consider that the general view of dance as a discipline has been replication and reiteration.
2. Becoming involved in the complex nature of the discipline, promoting a sense of inquiry where both imagination and critical thinking are valued. She argues, that the 'meaningful' engagement with dance requires '...a willingness to explore new territory, a tolerance of ambiguity, and a commitment to an active rather than passive encounter.'
3. The potential for transformation within the discipline, when seen as part of a complex interconnecting web of education.

The main contention here is that dance education is potentially as intellectually demanding as it is physical, even though culturally the expectation of the discipline arguably remains very different.

Significantly, experience in dance education can benefit from moving across disciplinary boundaries, providing access to knowledge that is transformative, an area I hope to address in future research projects. Moving these ideas forward could provide the opportunity to evolve a dance education that avoids the segregation of knowledge that compartmentalises the discipline and instead provide bridges and gateways to positive innovation. The priority is to emphasise inquiry through connectivity, supporting the development of informed and reflective individuals. Some of this is certainly evident in program publicity, and studies that have attempted to trace the impact of the updated curriculum. What I hope to do in future research work is trace distinctive and developmental changes occurring in the groove of the discipline now.

### **Emergent research in learning**

When Siegesmund (2004, p. 80) argues that ‘...the arts are not simply about the mastery of technical skills, but that technical skills are merely a gateway into non-linguistic thinking’, he reflects on the earlier work of Eisner. The basic tenet of his position is that at the centre of any enduring case for the arts in education is development of a facility which engages qualitative reasoning to produce somatic knowledge, which is part of ‘learning to create ourselves’ (Eisner, 2002, p. 3).

This relates well to the idea of ‘thinking in terms of relations of qualities’ (Dewey, 1934, p. 52) or the relational chains referred to in the opening sections of the paper. For it is having the ability to organise and arrange disparate qualities through identifying and providing an internal integration that sustained qualitative learning in dance comes into existence. The important thing is to devise and implement learning outcomes in such ways that they encourage the learner to take greater responsibility for setting their own goals, making informed choices about how they achieve them and recognising the processes through which they travel — a position endorsed by John Cowan, Emeritus Professor of Learning Development at the Open University, who cautions that,

It serves no purpose to lower our educational aspirations because we cannot yet measure what we think is important to teach. Quite the contrary, measurement and assessment will have to rise to the challenge of our educational aspirations.  
(Cowan, 2006, p. 27)

Working with learners in contexts where creativity and conceptual development are intended outcomes means finding ways to encourage and evaluate activities that involve unpredictability, intuition, indeterminacy, serendipity and surprise, in tandem with those where the learning outcomes can be predetermined.

Arguments for the re-evaluation of educational aims and teaching practices in dance, have been presented in the work of many dance educators including Stinson (1984, 1993), Hanstein (1990), Marques (1995) and Shapiro (1998). In trying to evolve a vision of a coherent dance education, the contention by Schutz (1967) that we should aim to develop a state of ‘wide awakeness’, where a level

of consciousness, originality, leadership and reflectiveness is forged, becomes an aim for what may be realised. Studying dance can incorporate, evaluating the social interaction of persons as groups and individuals, the manipulation of ideas in art making and of mobilisation as a cultural phenomena, as well as consideration of structural form influenced by concerns that may be spatial, dynamic, temporal or technological. By integrating and continually transforming these features, opportunities to evolve critical, imaginative and perceptive abilities can be made available.

The potential integration of physical/intellectual/emotional selves that can occur through experience in dance is advocated by many theorists as essential to understanding the holistic benefits of dance. Dance educators seem often to talk about the integrated nature of learning in dance education but give little, if any detail, as to how we might approach teaching and learning in ways different from the expectations of education in any other discipline. The ability to accept and work in ambiguity may ultimately mean more to the development of dance scholarship than notions of 'certainty', which the discipline may have sought in order to establish an 'acceptable' level of credibility in academia. If we in any way subscribe to the belief that valuable learning happens where an individual is conscious of the change they are making and the process they are going through, then these questions of approach to teaching and learning are well worth consideration. In this we are supported by the inspirations of Merleau-Ponty (1964) who spoke of the idea of wonder, and of a desire to question the world and ourselves as part of it, to be more conscious of our lives.

### **Creative graduate**

The argument for *Starting from here*, is that dance offers a complex range of opportunities through experiences that are sensory, imaginative, critical and social. The 'constellation competencies' referred to by Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles (2000, p. 229) encapsulate these experiences as an approach to higher education, alongside creative thinking and originality. These they say, group to form constellations in pedagogical contexts, requiring individuals to take '...multiple perspectives, layer relationships, and construct and express meaning in unified forms of representation.' These higher order competencies are accompanied by other dispositions such as: risk taking, task persistence, ownership of learning, and perceptions of accomplishment' (Burton et al, 2000, p. 252). Their argument, that teaching that doesn't engage with this constellation offers only a '...superficial menu of learning' (2000, p. 254) outweighs what employers in the creative industries are reported to consider as characteristics to be of prime importance in the portfolio of a graduate (Wareham, 2008), such as working with others, communication, IT and self development. Prawat (1989) refers to such knowledge as 'conceptual knowledge', a knowledge rich in relationships where I call into question the contention that undergraduate students should spend less time on conceptual dances as suggested by Siddall (in Burns, 2006). For it is here that meaningful learning takes place, where enhanced transferable skills can be honed and where development and change in the discipline will be sourced.

The culmination of dance education is a broadening of knowledge through engaged inquiry that *starts from where you are*, in reference to your individual



experience of the world. A state of 'wide awakeness' (Schutz, 1967) where a level of consciousness, originality, leadership and reflection are forged, becomes a vision of what could be considered to be higher education in dance. For the educated dancer as an individual, is '...not only conceptually equipped and experientially sensitive but is one who thinks about what she [he] does and why she [he] does it' (Arnold, 2000, p. 91).

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