

Developing a Mind-Body Connection in Teaching Dance History

Vera Bullen

Introduction

As a tertiary dance educator, I want to transmit dance knowledge to students in a manner in which they feel engaged and empowered. I want them to learn the material deeply and multi-dimensionally, combining theory and practice in teaching strategies and student learning activities in subjects that have traditionally been thought of as either wholly theoretical or practical in their teaching methods. The focus on theory and practice occurring concurrently within subjects has important pedagogical implications for both teaching strategies and student learning activities. I recognise that dance students want to learn from what they already know: moving and dancing. I want to tap into that desire within the rigorous tertiary academic environment. My expectation is that students engage with the material as dancers, choreographers, educators and researchers simultaneously. This encourages deep learning and provides them with the tools to engage with dance knowledge and skills for successful careers in the field of dance. This research project has grown out of two successive years teaching Dance 107: Dance History and Contexts to Year 1 students in the Dance Studies Program at the University of Auckland, (which covers 20th century American modern and European contemporary dance history). In refining and developing teaching strategies and student learning activities, two major pedagogical issues have arisen which are addressed in this paper. The first is dualist thought versus mind-body unity and the second is the introduction of a choreological approach in the teaching of dance history. These two issues are investigated through the Dance 107 subject within the Dance Studies Program at The University of Auckland, and the Master of Creative and Performing Arts research project, *Teaching Dance History Through a Choreological Approach*.

Cartesian dualist thought and mind-body unity

Dance education, like education in general, has historically suffered from 'perpetuating the mind body distinction embedded in Cartesian dualist

thought' (Thomas, 2003, p. 34). Our Western cultural heritage 'from biblical to early Greek times divides mind and body, the body supposedly undermining the integrity and purity of the mind' (Hanna, 1999, p. 10). Maletic (1987, p. 162) stated:

As a consequence to Descartes' main tenets in his *Meditations of First Philosophy*, movement is seen as a purely mechanical act, which belongs to the realm of bodies, completely separate from the world of intelligent minds. This body-mind dichotomy has enforced the mechanistic view of human movement ... The implications of these philosophical views are the separation of the living person from the world, from lived experience.

However, phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty 'undo centuries of traditional thinking and bring together the person and the world' (in Maletic, 1987, p. 162); Merleau-Ponty rejected 'Cartesian mind/body dualism and insisted that the body and the psyche are inextricably connected' (in Thomas, 2003, p. 29). He suggested that rather than 'knowledge of our body ... remain[ing] subordinate to our knowledge of it through the medium of ideas' (Merleau-Ponty, 1966, p. 199), meaningful, embodied and intelligent behaviour is simultaneously 'personal and impersonal, objective and subjective, social and natural' (in Thomas, 2003, p. 41). Increasingly, scholars, educators and practitioners take issue with dualist thought in dance and dance education. In *Dance-based Dance Theory*, Alter (1996, p. i) compares the writings of eighteen philosophers and aestheticians in order to 'provide a model for dance researchers, thereby enabling us to separate from philosophy and declare autonomy as a dance-based independent field.' Alter concludes that Rudolph Laban's work embodies the most comprehensive model for dance-based theory. 'Until the recent growing awareness of the value of Laban's ideas, the dance community has looked to aestheticians to provide the field of dance with theoretical constructs' (1996, p. 165). Because Laban's work is derived from 'in-depth dance experience' that bridges mind-body dualism, his theory is, according to Alter (1996, p. 7), valuable as dance-based dance theory.

In the 1970s, dance artists and educators began challenging the status quo. Emilyn Claid (2006, p. 5) 'gave attention to mind-body wholeness' in her works by challenging and manipulating hierarchical binary oppositions. This practice was in contrast to the conservatory's traditional educational paradigm in which dance education and training has been and to a large extent, continues to be, divided. There are those subjects that train the artist in practical technique and choreography taught separately from those that educate the artist in theoretical historical and contextual subjects. As dance has entered academia, this dualism has persisted. The trend towards modularisation of dance degree programs reinforces an atomisation of dance knowledge that perpetuates the education/training (mind/body and thinking/feeling) dualism. Understandably, an emphasis on theory has become important for dance to justify its academic place and value, and in some programs the focus on theory has overtaken the focus on practical classes. Claid (2006 p. 140) believes that 'dance has become a thoughtful subject of study – something to write about and analyse rather than rigorously practice' and that the modularisation of learning means that students learn 'a

little bit of ballet, a little bit of contemporary.' In America, the typical undergraduate dance program '...tends to emphasise technical skills and the compartmentalisation of subject matters' (Clemente, 1992, p. 8), essentially turning out graduates who have superficial understandings of dance knowledge. In order to counteract the mind-body dualism, dance curricula should be guided by key characteristics that include 'inquiry oriented towards discovery, a sense of interaction with the discipline, and an understanding of processes and transformation' (Gibbons, 1992, p. 17). Despite the persistence of compartmentalisation of knowledge, methods of bridging the mind/body, theory/practice, education/training divide are currently being researched and debated.

Dance history in dance education

June Layson (1994, p. 4), states that studying history links the present to the past, and 'through its study, the here and now can be informed', but historiography is '...based on sources, the residue or traces of the past, which more often than not are fragmentary and incomplete ... critically appraised, assembled into logical relationships and structures and then used as the basis for historical communication.' In relation to the paucity of resources for past dance histories, Thomas (2003, p. 4) states that: 'If we want to know what a particular dance looked like, dance scholars and interested parties generally have to resort to descriptions in history books, the odd still picture or comments from dance critics.' Siegel (1994, p. 29) believes that dance history remains stunted because it is, 'synonymous with the survey course, and endless recycling of a constructed lineage from the Greeks – or the Egyptians, or the cavemen – to ballet and modern dance.'

Adshead (1994, p. 219-220) wishes to challenge this stereotype of dance history teaching where 'dull, boring sessions in which so-called "facts" are recounted, in which indigestible quantities of information are gathered, culled from more or less respectable secondary sources but presented in a manner totally devoid of any involvement on the part of student or teacher'. She posits that one of the reasons history 'can be both unpopular and infrequently taught well in universities and colleges lies in the relationship between history and other aspects of the dance program' (ibid). In degree programs that separate theory and practice within and between subjects, few students make meaningful connections between theoretical subjects and their own dance practices.

New approaches to the study of dance history include Feminism, Deconstruction, and others (Desmond, 1997). Advocates of these approaches criticise 'many of the basic concepts of traditional history [and] attack the long-established methodologies by which the historian proceeds' (Layson, 1994, p. 13). Rather than employing procedures that involve the 'selection, re-arranging and re-ordering' of facts, 'new historians would claim that sources are representations or re-presentations, the latter carrying the force of a current and creative reading, or even construction, of an event' (1994, p. 14). One such approach, which is successfully applied to dance, is the Feminist perspective. Studying dance history from a feminist perspective can be a liberating experience for students who generally endure the historiography of

dead, white men and who do not relate the historical material to their own practices. Carol Brown (1994) states that, 'Feminism theorises culture from a woman's point of view, and it is women who constitute the majority of practitioners from within western theatre dance' (p. 198). Feminist scholarship challenges traditional methods of historiography, 'claiming that it stifles ... endeavours to articulate the dance knowledge of the women of the past for whom no literary or visual record remains be that as performers, producers or consumers of the dance' (pp. 202-203). It 'restores the role of the female artist by establishing her reputation within the established canon' (p. 212).

However, applying extrinsic theories and perspectives to dance that require considerable alteration is a concern for many dance scholars. 'While many dance scholars may be looking to analytical and interpretive models outside the field, others contend that dance must have its own methodology' (Morris, 1996, p. 3). Adshead (1999, p. xiv-xv; author's emphasis) states that 'an open-minded view of the potential relevance of theories from a number of different sources (including non-dance sources) has to be matched by a critical awareness of *their capacity to respond to dance, and to illuminate it.*' She also observes that while 'there is general acceptance of the strength of some anthropological methods of study *applied* to dance ... the development of a methodology that is *specifically* appropriate to dance is essential' (1999, p. 26; author's emphasis). One of the methodologies that is specific to dance is Choreology, which has matured out of the pioneering work of Rudolph Laban.

The choreological approach

Rudolph Laban was an influential individual in the field of dance in Europe and America in the 20th century. His original ideas in choreology, eukinetics (rhythm and dynamics), choreutics (space) and notation have been adopted and developed since his lifetime in a variety of diverse contexts. Laban thought of choreology as the science of dance: '...a kind of grammar and syntax of the language of movement ... it is based on the belief that motion and emotion, form and content, body and mind are inseparably united' (Laban, 1966, pp. vii-ix); in which concepts 'link between the physical and the mental aspects of movement' (Hodgson, 2001, p. 172).

Preston-Dunlop (1989) defined choreology as a structuralist method developed out of research and practice at the Laban Centre. More recently, Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez-Colberg (2002, p. 3) include embodiment and corporeality, a triadic perspective of creating performing and appreciating. They posit that these three constituents of a work – idea, medium and treatment – and process and product are the core concepts of a choreological perspective. They assert, therefore, that choreological methods aim to 'promote and enable practical research by articulating and debating what is peculiar to dance: its making, its performing, its spectating, its medium, its choreographic treatment, its documenting methods' (ibid) Eisner (2002, p. 214) believes that the 'shift from the supremacy of the theoretical to a growing appreciation of the practical is a fundamental one because it also suggests that practical knowledge cannot be subsumed by the theoretic; some things can only be known through the process of action.' Choreologists 'are practical

scholars in the sense of being practitioners in one or more of the interlocking domains of dance' as 'choreographers, teachers, notators, reconstructors, performers, historians; that is, in professions where corporeal and verbal knowledge is integrated' (Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez-Colberg, 2002, p. 3). 'What a choreological perspective argues is that the assumed dichotomy between theory and practice is unhelpful since practice embodies its own theoretical base' (2002, p. 114). Foster (2005) suggests the term 'praxis', or theoretically informed practice, as a way forward.

A choreological perspective can be applied to many areas within dance education and indeed Rudolph Laban advocated linking dance history with choreology (in Maletic, 1987, p. 183). Preston-Dunlop (2002, p. 130) advocates utilizing a choreological perspective in history subjects so that 'historiography expands from having primarily a verbal and film method to one that is workshop based.' Her workshop-based historiography allows the students to access 'current choreological workshop methods: experiencing, experimenting, documenting and analysing.' Introducing choreological methods into tertiary dance education and research contexts is seen as timely, given the emergence of Dance Studies degree programs. The application of choreological approaches is also timely in fostering connections within and between subjects in undergraduate and postgraduate academic degree programs where curricula require a synthesis of theory and practice.

The Dance Studies Program at the University of Auckland

The National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries (NICAI), at The University of Auckland, includes the schools of Architecture and Urban Planning, Fine Arts, Music and the Dance Studies Program. The Dance Studies Philosophy Statement (Undergraduate Prospectus, 2009, p. 13) asserts that:

The Program celebrates and acknowledges the discipline of Dance in its diversity by learning in, through and about dance.

- Learning in dance occurs as you use dance itself as the medium for exploring and thinking, creating, communicating and interpreting ideas, designs and research questions.
- Learning through dance recognises that studying dance develops your lifelong learning skills such as problem solving, communication, presentation, self-confidence, teamwork, leadership and research.
- Learning about dance fosters your investigation of dance forms, functions and innovation from the past and present, both in New Zealand and internationally.

Learning in, through and about dance recognises and respects that education is a holistic process and experience, integrating mind, body and spirit in dynamic and diverse contexts.

In an environment that values education as a holistic process and experience, teaching staff have the freedom to develop curricula that foster mind-body connections in teaching strategies and student learning activities. These values are reflected in the teaching strategies and student learning activities undertaken in Dance 107.

Dance 107: dance history and context subject

Dance 107 is a Year 1 core course required for all Bachelor of Performing Arts dance major and minor students, covering American modern and European contemporary dance history, and is also open to all Bachelor of Arts students. As a result, a diverse range of students take Dance 107, some of whom are new to dance, and others whose education and/or training includes dance in school, community, cultural or studio-based settings. The course has been designed to give the students an opportunity to study through experiencing, exploring, analysing and documenting historical material from the perspectives of dancer, choreographer, teacher and researcher. Both the teaching strategies and student learning activities in Dance 107 aim to build mind-body connections and foster a multi-dimensional experience for the students, encouraging active engagement with the material that is relevant to a student's own practices including their technical development, choreographic practices and analytical/research skills within the academic context. Dance 107 meets for two hours twice per week, and utilises the following outline daily:

- an introduction to the choreographer, artistic or cultural context;
- discussion of assigned readings;
- an introduction to the choreological concept;
- practical movement explorations: improvisation or pre-set exploratory study;
- observation of practical movement explorations;
- observing dance works seen on video/DVD;
- analysis and discussion of all of the above.

The course texts for the 2008 academic year included Cohen's (1992) *Dance as a Theater Art* and Bullen's (unpublished) *Choreological Praxis: Practical Scholarship in Dance*. By the end of the 12-week term, students are expected to articulate an understanding of artistic and cultural contexts; discuss relationships between different events; understand how the past affects the student's current practice; articulate philosophical approaches; apply choreological methods in research; and, critically examine contemporary dance (Dance 107: Dance History and Context Course outline, 2008). Formal course assessments consisted of:

- A 1-minute solo in the style of an American modern dance choreographer with a 500-word support document.
 - A 1,200-word (min) structural analysis essay comparing and contrasting two contemporary dance works by different choreographers.
 - A 1,500-word (min) research essay on a contemporary dance choreographer.
- (Dance 107: Dance History and Context Course Outline, 2008)

Within each assessment, the students were expected to combine the choreological with the contextual, and articulate an understanding of both practical and theoretical concepts. The goal is to bridge the gap between history and the student's own practice and foster deep learning through a mind-body connection.

Research questions

To test these theories a Master of Creative and Performing Arts research study seemed a good place to start. The two questions that this research project aimed to answer were:

- How can one apply a choreological approach in the teaching of a tertiary dance history subject?
- How does a choreological approach contribute to student learning through its blend of theory and practice within a traditionally theory-based subject?

Research methods

Fraleigh & Hanstein (1999, p. 17) state that 'qualitative values are intrinsic to dance' and Eisner (1991, pp. 5-6) states that 'the arts are paradigm cases of qualitative intelligence in action.' I chose a constructivist paradigm that embraces socially constructed multiple realities uncovered by naturalistic, interpretive methods, where researchers and participants co-construct understandings (Hatch, 2002, p. 13). 'We are always in a constructive position. We make our experience, not simply have it' (Eisner, 1991, p. 60). This research project focused on an educational criticism (Eisner, 1991) case study, which shares many features with the anthropologically-derived ethnographic case study. Instead of utilising ethnography in educational research, Eisner (1991, p. 63) advocates a method of inquiry that incorporates educational connoisseurship with educational criticism. Connoisseurship is 'the ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities' which depends on 'the ability to see, not merely to look' (1991, p. 6). On its own, educational connoisseurship is 'essentially a private act', therefore, 'we must turn to criticism, for criticism provides connoisseurship with a public face' (1991, p. 85). Criticism is 'the process of enabling others to see the qualities that a work of art possesses' (1991, p. 6). In this research study, the tutor/researcher was both connoisseur and critic.

The task of the critic is ... to transform the qualities of a painting, play, novel, poem, classroom or school, or act of teaching and learning into a public forum that illuminates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experienced.

(Eisner, 1991, p. 86)

Data collection

Interviewing is common in research (Eisner, 1991; Green & Stinson, 1999; Hatch, 2002) and is used 'to uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organise their experiences and make sense of their worlds', and 'offer tools for bringing these meanings to the surface' (Hatch, 2002, p. 91). This research project utilised a formal, semi structured interview format with prepared guiding questions, but remained 'open to following the leads of informants and probing into areas that arise during interview interactions' (2002, p. 94). Two individual interviews with each of the four participants were conducted: after completion of Assessment 1 and after Assessments 2 and 3.

The case report drew substantially on the stories that emerged from this interview data.

Reflective journal writing was also employed as 'a record of the affective experience of doing a study' where 'researchers can openly reflect on what is happening during the research experience' (Hatch, 2002, p. 87-88). This method of data collection allowed the researcher-tutor's voice to be heard alongside the voices of the student participants.

The final method of data collection in this research project involved document collection. Hatch (2002, p. 117) refers to document collection as unobtrusive data that include artifacts and records. Unobtrusive data can 'tell their own story independent of the interpretations of the participants, and they can be gathered without disturbing the natural flow of the human activity.' They are useful 'when comparing them to data from other sources such as observation and interviewing' (2002, p. 119). Documents and artifacts 'often reveal what people will not and cannot say' (Eisner, 1991, p. 184). Because of the researcher-tutor nexus inherent in this research project, where formal course assessments are graded by the researcher-tutor and the course outline is written by the researcher-tutor, the 'non-reactive' (Hatch, 2002, p. 119) nature of this data is called into question. But, 'triangulating unobtrusive data with data from other sources is one way to improve confidence in reported findings based on such information' (Hatch, 2002, p. 121) and so document collection was seen as an important data collection tool.

Data analysis

The interpretive analysis model was utilised in this research project as a way to transform data that emphasises interpretation. It situated the researcher as an active player in the research process and recognised that 'interpretations are constructed by researchers' (Hatch, 2002, p. 180). After transcription and coding of the collected data, analysis was carried out. The interpretive analysis model, in which inductive analysis is embedded, 'provides a process for constructing meaning from data that goes beyond the analytic' (p. 180). Because Hatch's interpretive analysis model did not detail the procedure needed to carry out the inductive analysis, the constant comparative method procedure (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) was utilised in the coding, sorting and finding meaning(s) embedded in the data.

Overview of findings

On the micro-structural level in the classroom, several themes emerged that supported the teaching of dance history through a choreological approach. First, the modifications that were made to the course over three years, allowed me to refine the connections between the historical and choreological material. Second, by rejecting the education/training divide, the Dance 107 content could be made directly relevant to the students' own dance practices, which necessitated an approach that actively fostered a mind-body connection in the teaching strategies and student learning activities. Engaging the students actively through experiencing, exploring and analysing historical material through a choreological approach helped them form meaningful

connections with their own practices through a deep learning environment. This phenomenological approach provided Laban's 'link between the physical and the mental aspects of movement' (Maletic, 1987, p. 172). Therefore, this approach to teaching and learning dance history unites theory and practice, mind and body, and thinking and doing. The students enjoyed this approach because it emphasised the practical, analytical and the structural, simultaneously and concurrently, as the dance history course went from being historiography-based to workshop-based. In this way, students were frequently engaging their bodies and minds in the classroom setting. By allowing the students to experience the structures of the dance works intrinsically, they were offered 'a deeper engagement with the work and with the artists involved' (Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez-Colberg, 2002, p. 130).

The students demonstrated that they were able to unite historical and choreological concepts effectively in a relatively short amount of time, and successfully integrate and apply those concepts into their formal course assessments. The teaching strategies and student learning activities, which emphasised Stenhouse's (1987) induction educational process, combined with the spiral curriculum model (Cave, 1971) features of integration, reiteration and sequence. Two clear examples of this were seen when students 1) tended to recycle previous research for new assessments within the history subject area, and 2) when they reiterated previous knowledge to a greater depth with each successive assessment. There were also some indications that students were utilising dance knowledge across subject areas, specifically for assessments in the Dance 120: Ballet subject.

Taking a wider view of the implications of curriculum design, the issue of applying a choreological approach to other areas within a given curriculum emerged from the data. It was shown that historical and choreological concepts can be applied in diverse contexts. The students' responses indicated that they either currently, or will in the future, utilise the historical and choreological knowledge in other settings within and outside the Dance Studies degree.

Leslie stated: 'These would be good skills for choreography. There are so many things to do if you get stuck; you can try this or that. I think it would be quite helpful' (Interview 1). Andrew stated: 'With the things we've been doing with the hip hop crew, things like music visualisation that we studied with Ruth St. Denis, I can actually draw parallels with things that we do and things that she's done' (Interview 1).

They also indicated that some choreological material was covered in the previous term's choreography but to a lesser extent than in Dance 107. If Laban's original concepts or subsequently developed choreological elements are taught either implicitly or explicitly in other courses within the undergraduate degree program, then the rationale for a choreological approach underpinning a portion of the entire curriculum can be made. Given that the philosophy of the Dance Studies Program at The University of Auckland promotes a 'holistic approach balancing practical and theoretical elements' (Undergraduate Prospectus, 2009, p. 13) across all subject areas, a

choreological approach underpinning significant portions of this particular curriculum could be a viable philosophical choice.

Conclusion

The adoption of a choreological approach as a foundation for an entire undergraduate degree program raises wider educational issues. At this time, there are no dance degree programs that underpin their entire curricula through a choreological approach. The Laban Centre's Choreological Studies curriculum is its own three-year strand in the BA (Hons) Dance Theatre degree program. The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts also offers courses in Choreological Studies at undergraduate level, while many American universities offer students 1-term courses in Laban Movement Analysis: an American adaptation of Laban and Bartenieff's work. Since choreology is effectively still in its infancy as a dance-based dance theory, it comes as no surprise that it is solidifying as a subject area, rather than as a philosophical underpinning. But the potential exists for it to develop in this direction. Several things will have to occur for this to happen. First, many more scholars and practitioners will have to become fluent in choreological approaches. Second, teachers and researchers will have to develop choreological approaches in their areas of expertise in order to build a knowledge base from which to work. Third, this information will need to be presented at conferences and symposia, for debate and dissemination of this unique knowledge base. Fourth, research studies into the viability of such an endeavour should be undertaken. Finally, a tertiary dance degree program will need to take the plunge and give it a try. In conclusion, in terms of wider implications for dance studies curricula, choreological methods can contribute to areas beyond the historical. I believe that, due to its multi-modal nature, that choreological methods can underpin many dance studies subject areas including technique, choreography, contextual areas and research topics both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. By virtue of its location within dance practice, and by intelligently and organically utilising adjunct theories, choreological methods are in an excellent position to underpin dance curricula in general and dance studies curricula in particular.

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Biographical statement

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