Enhancing Learning in Dance Technique through On-Line-Mediated Reflective Practice

Evan Jones
Queensland University of Technology

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to argue the relevance and examine the effectiveness of an on-line-mediated reflective practice task designed to support student learning in practical studies of dance technique. To this end, it will seek to demonstrate the inherent applicability of reflective practice to studio practice and debate possible influences and effects of the on-line tasks on studio practice. More specifically, this paper will summarise the processes and outcomes of the six-year implementation of an on-line reflective practice component within the practical undergraduate unit, Dance Technique Studies, as taught in the Dance Department of Queensland University of Technology.

'Practice makes perfect' is a popular adage often used to encourage perseverance or to assuage the pain of perceived failure. There is here an implicit assumption that simply continuing to practise something will bring the accomplishment of that something closer to perfection. In this simplification lies the potential for an intuitively acceptable misconception, expressed in the thought 'If I keep practising it, I'll get better at it'. Albert Bandura (1997, p. 3), commenting on the nature of human agency, says, 'many actions are performed in the belief that they will bring about a desired outcome, but they actually produce outcomes that were neither intended nor wanted'. The 'if I keep practising it, I'll get better at it' approach to practice often delivers both disappointment and imperfection. I propose the reasons for this common failure are rooted in the following two axiomatic explanations. Firstly, unless the nature of the task being practised is comprehensively and accurately understood, the achievement of the task can only ever reflect the incomplete or even incorrect knowledge driving the practice, however diligent this practice might be.[1] Secondly, the nature of the practice itself must include dynamic

feed-back mechanisms which ensure that the practice maintains its efficacy and currency with respect to the evolving understanding, and degree of physical accomplishment of the task.[2] This paper will explore the specific application of one such dynamic feed-back mechanism, namely on-line-mediated reflective practice, and further show how the functional and aesthetic understanding of the task being practised can be progressively enhanced through this application. Only perfect practice makes perfect!

Context

Dance training traditionally takes place in the dance studio. A physical class session is typically one and a half hours and a dance student will take between one and four of these classes per day, four to six days per week. Time, money, ambition, course structures and physical endurance all contribute to defining the upper limit of the in-studio training frequency and intensity. More is not, *a priori*, better. Moshe Feldenkrais (1981, p. 135) writes, 'repetition is not a very efficient way of essential learning, but it is useful as a means of familiarising an already achieved learning'. The central proposition of this paper is that more *efficacious* practice of clearly *understood* tasks will enhance the dance training and help the dancer realise his or her potential along the continuum towards the ever-elusive and ultimately ephemeral state of perfection. Time outside the studio training hours is infrequently used to refine and develop the quality of the approaches to practice that are employed by the dancer during class. Thoughts and reflections of what happened in the class are most often dropped at the studio door or shed with the practice clothes in the dressing room. As part of the continuing process of improvement at our university, we were looking for ways to increase the effectiveness of our teaching delivery and the efficacy of the students' practice in the studio, including the reduction of injury related to dysfunctional practice. We sought to encourage students to till their thought-soil, to sow idea-seeds and nurture action research[3] plan-sprouts in the time between classes! 'Through their capacity to manipulate symbols and to engage in reflective thought, people can generate novel ideas and innovative actions that transcend their past experiences' (Bandura, 1989, p. 1182).

Accurate and constructive self-assessment, combined with a ready enthusiasm to explore processes that may lead to growth, development and the resolution of problematic issues, are essential tools with which professionals approach their work. Students can begin to learn the processes involved in this mature, self-driven reflexivity through introductory experiences based on reflective practice and action research. Because this practice of reflection is quintessentially personal, flexibility with respect to the time and place of the participation in this thought-tilling was recognised as important. An on-line format was thus devised which made use of the university Blackboard websites, accessible for enrolled students any time from any web-connected computer. This component of the practice-based unit (a discrete, defined, academic subject area of study), Dance Technique Studies, we called Performing Reflective Practice.

Process

The structure of this on-line component is based around four discussion fora, each addressing sequentially related topics. An issue on which to submit a response and make comment and discussion is set every three weeks. All discussion forum submissions and subsequent comments on submissions, with the students' real names attached, are uncensored and they appear without delay on the Blackboard[4] website for all students enrolled in the unit to read. The first topic asks students to define their goals for the semester's study in the unit. Some guide-lines[4] are given about effective goal setting, achievement recognition and progress measurement procedures. The second topic introduces the concept of, and a user's guide for, action research through brief quotations and descriptions.[5] The students are asked how they think an action research approach might be applied to Dance Technique Studies. Topic three asks students to design, implement and report on two successive cycles of action research involving a self-selected, personally relevant, problematic issue grounded in the practical components of the unit. The last topic asks students to reflect on their goals[6] as stated in the initial submission.

Participation is mandatory, the Performing Reflective Practice component weighted at 20% of the unit's summative assessment. A performance standards schema and assessment criteria statements are provided at the beginning of the semester so that the students can know how their on-line submissions and comments will be graded. There is a 'due by' date for assessable submissions and comments on each topic, though the fora remain open and active throughout the semester to allow for on-going discussion and reflection.

Outcomes

Because the Performing Reflective Practice component contributed a significant weighting to the overall grade in the unit, there have been very few cases of complete avoidance of the Discussion Fora. As such, we can draw some tentative conclusions about the generalised impact of the on-line processes on the in-studio technique training as observed by the teachers, examiners and the students themselves.

The most significant impact teachers observed was an increased focus in class. Students were both more attentive and more inclined to stay on-task. The 'thinking dancer' is one of our aspirational catch phrases and the on-line component provides a framework and field for this thinking. Students are explicitly made aware that their learning is their responsibility[7] and the obligation to write about their learning in the on-line component encourages greater attention to what is going on in studio classes: what the teacher says and does; what their peers are doing; and most critically, what they are doing and how they are doing it.

External examiners (practicing dance professionals engaged by QUT for assessment purposes) noticed some significant changes in the students following the initial semester of Performing Reflective Practice

implementation. One said, 'Extraordinary improvement. Intelligent work in class. What have you been doing?' Another observed during the same examination period, 'The students look as though they really know what they are doing and how they are doing it. And they are doing it much better!' Although we must be careful not to interpret direct cause and effect here, there did appear to be some evidence that examiners saw a difference and this difference may certainly have been associated with the on-line component.

Most of the students express enthusiasm for the on-line discussion format and took advantage of it in an authentic way to improve their approaches to learning and practicing dance technique. An average of 25 students take this Reflective Practice component in their second semester, thus enabling them to apply these approaches further during the remaining two years of their undergraduate studies. The following student comments are a compilation from the 2005 – 2007 first year Dance degree cohorts.

'The discussion forum is a great learning device as it helps us as dancers to reflect and problems solve with our fellow peers and teachers.' Another student wrote: 'It helped me in technique classes to focus on particular goals that everyone else knew about! It also helps to share with classmates our feelings and advice on particular issues and the forum is something I would like to see occur again next year.'

Many students also used the potential and application of collaborative learning.

> I think we should all take note of each other's plans and goals and as peers volunteer heaps of support and advice to each other. Helping each other as a group with a common aim would be a positive way to reinforce and strengthen our respect for each other. We could also motivate each other to improve.

The distance which virtual space provides has promoted increased peer communication.

> I also think that having an active forum with class mates is a good way to talk about and share thoughts and opinions that may otherwise not be said. After reading others' forum responses there are many tips that I have picked up from other students.

Commitment to their practice has increased.

> I know I will be working on thinking about the things I need to fix before I do the exercise and I think it is a really good habit to get into.

Many students made similar comment to this one on goals.

> I think the practice of thinking of goals made the approach to practice completely different. It provided a clear path to work towards by giving

greater focus and attention to the details and working in an achievable framework.

Peer comments promote a greater sense of self-efficacy and provide peer recognition of achievement.

> To me, you were always a beautiful dancer but after watching you grow this year and with the help of action research, you have improved immensely, especially with your perfection of 'freedom of breath' in your movements.

Our observations of the students indicate that the enthusiasm is genuine as they recognise the authenticity and relevance of the on-line assessment tasks.

Discussion

The principal objective of the creation and implementation of the Performing Reflective Practice component have been realised: students are spending time *between* dance classes thinking about what they do *in* dance classes. We have no data directly relating injury prevention with the on-line component. However, given the students' enhanced focus, commitment, self-awareness and sense of responsibility, we can extrapolate that their safe dance practice has improved. They are also less likely to be mindlessly repeating unsafe pathways or inappropriate kinaesthetic patterns which lead to injury.

Time in the dance studio, where the act of dancing is practised, appears to be more effectively used as the students are better prepared mentally to truly engage in the physical training. They are more receptive to a teacher's corrections because they have a methodology with which they can apply these suggestions. Students also benefit more from peer-to-peer collaboration as they model face-to-face in class the on-line discussion forum processes of respectful critique, which are initiated in the less-threatening virtual environment.

In this on-line component, the students are involved in personally-relevant, authentic tasks. They are being required to construct meaning and method for themselves through their physical experiences, observations, reflections, writing and application of the teaching and their own discoveries. The class content and kinaesthetic understanding have become theirs, not because they can replicate steps but because they have constructed the understanding of the movement from within themselves. The on-line component helps create the mindset for the students to be engaged learners and reflective practitioners in the studio without using precious studio 'action' time to formulate the theoretical framework.

Lev Vygotsky (in Newman & Holzman, 1993, p. 60) writes, 'Instruction is useful when it moves ahead of development. When it does, it impels or wakens a whole series of functions that are in a stage of maturation lying in the zone of proximal development'. This aspect of Vygotsky's work provides a literature-based idea about mechanisms by which reflective practice and

action research could enhance dance technique. The student focuses awareness on her/his present state of development and takes on the role of being her/his own instructor, making plans (i.e. giving self-instruction) through action research applications, which are ahead of further development.[8] Thus, the student will be working towards greater achievement (inspired and informed by the desire to achieve goals and self-fulfillment[9], by the teacher and by other external environmental factors) from an ever-changing base of her/his own known zone of proximal development.

Bandura's social cognitive theory[10] (1986) also provides a solid theoretical basis for the claimed constructive relationships between reflective practice/action research and improving dance technique. Some of the underlying observations or assumptions upon which Bandura's social cognitive theory is based include the powerful symbolising capabilities humans have which allow for the creation of internal models of experience and the testing of these models; and that they are also self-reflective and engage in metacognitive activities, which enable self-control and self-regulation of thought and behaviour. Furthermore, physiological and experiential forces, including observation of others, interact to determine behaviour, and changes in behaviour, providing a plethora of possible permutations (James Maddux, 1995, pp. 4-5). The parallels and close similarities between Bandura's set of assumptions and the ideas, proposals and relationships put forward in this essay, confer credibility to the central theme that dance technique can be enhanced through reflective practice.

Conclusion

It should not be assumed that all of this happens without any staff input! However, organising the Discussion Fora and setting the topics are easy and take little time, once devised. The discussions are intended to be student-driven, but we have found that monitoring and strategically timed comments from staff help the flow and the direction of the virtual conversations. Censorship has never been necessary. The students have always shown respect and there have been no instances of abuse, even though the discussions are at times passionate!

Assessment of the Performing Reflective Practice component is not too onerous as it can be done on-line at three-weekly intervals during semester. The discussion forum submissions have a by-product in that they give teachers valuable insights into issues, which are pertinent and topical to each student. Taking advantage of this by-product, we can better tailor our advice and corrections given in studio classes to the students' current concerns and what they are presently investigating. We, as teachers, are in a more informed position to recognise those aspects of dance technique for which the student is ripe and ready for development and change. Teaching and learning thus become better aligned through these insights provided on the discussion fora. This improved alignment in the teaching/learning nexus is a companion thrust to the enhancement of dance technique through on-line-mediated reflective practice.

We also implement a Teaching Reflective Practice component, pitched primarily at the dance education students, in a subsequent unit of the Dance Technique Studies suite. This component transfers the vantage point of applying reflective practice from that of the performer to that of the teacher. We use a similar structure to that described for Performing Reflective Practice but set different topics and add on-line support material such as book chapters and journal articles. This second on-line component is very successful in terms of student engagement as it provides valuable scaffolding for the students to begin, or continue, to make the curve towards the other role in the student/teacher relationship.

Implementation of on-line-mediated reflective practice tasks in other institutions and contexts involving dance, along with the reporting on such experiences, will help strengthen the community of dance educators and enrich the education of dance students. As the published literature on this subject grows, so, too, will the depth and breadth of applications of reflective practice and the use of flexible delivery in dance technique training.

Notes

[1] For example, if a student does not kinaesthetically understand the function and operation of neutral pelvis in a *plié*, no amount of practice will perfect the *plié* and continued dysfunctional practice may lead to injury. Similarly, if the correct placing of the arm in *à la seconde* is either not known by the student or not accurately described or demonstrated and explained by the teacher, correct *à la seconde* arms will not be achieved and an imperfect physical patterning will be established and perpetuated by the student. This will not be improved simply by repetitive practice.

[2] Continuing on from the examples above, as the student develops a self-relevant understanding and application of the function and operation of neutral pelvis in a *plié*, s/he will need to observe, accommodate and integrate ensuing static and kinetic changes in the rest of the body. This requires crucial feedback information from both the teacher and, even more importantly, the student him/herself. Similarly, a developing understanding of correct *à la seconde* arms requires on-going feedback (principally through self-awareness and self-observation) to accommodate and integrate the ensuing changes and to provide further body knowledge information about how to progress from this particular transitional stage towards more perfect (!) *à la seconde* arms achievement.

[3] 'Though the process of action research is inadequately described in terms of a mechanical sequence of steps, it is generally thought to involve a spiral of self-reflective cycles of:
- Planning a change
- Acting and observing the process and consequences of the change
- Reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then
- Re-planning, and so forth' (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998, p. 21)

[4] Blackboard is a web-based system QUT uses to support student learning and the dissemination of subject (or unit as we term it here at QUT) specific information. It has a wide variety of functions which have the potential for further adaptations and development of the current approach.

(from the Blackboard Discussion Forum website page – text this author)
Choose something specific about your studies in this unit and write a goal associated with this specific aspect of your Technique Studies. Include in your submission how you will go about achieving this goal and how you will measure its achievement.
Make your goal(s) SMART -
Goal-setting is optimised when five conditions are applied collectively:
- You are SPECIFIC and detailed about what you want to achieve
- You devise a MEASURE that allows you to track your progress towards your goal and the degree to which your goal is achieved

Dance Dialogues: Conversations across cultures, artforms and practices

- You choose a goal that is going to be a challenge to you yet ACHIEVABLE
- Your goal is RELEVANT and important to you at this time in this context
- You specify a TIME frame and schedule by which your goal will be achieved.

[5] (from the Blackboard website – text this author) There are four basic stages in the iterative or recursive cycles (spirals) of action research:

Plan: Decide on a particular course of action (include as much detail about just what you will do, how you will do it, when you will do it etc) to find a resolution to a specific question or issue or problematic area or to find more clarity about some murkiness. Make sure that this plan is clear, important and meaningful to you.

Implementation: Do it. Put it into practice. Do this as accurately as you can, with all the conviction and integrity you can muster.

Observation, Critical Analysis and Reflection: (This is the stage of the Reflective Practitioner.) What was the outcome? What happened? Why did it happen that way? Was your observation reliable? Was there a change, an improvement? Did your plan work? To what extent? How might you improve the outcome? What did you learn from the experiment? What sources can you consult to get further knowledge about resolving the question/issue/problem/murkiness? What might you do differently *next* time, in your next action research spiral cycle investigating that specific question/issue/problem/murkiness?

Re-plan: Use your reflections and further information to make a revised plan of action to address the issue as you now understand it. Include detail as in your first plan.

Implementation (2): etc etc etc and so it goes spiralling and iterating onwards….

[6] (From the Blackboard website – text this author) To what extent have you achieved your goal(s)? Has working towards this achievement opened up other hither-to unexplored avenues of potential development? Did you experience a deviation with your goal achievement implementation? Was this a desirable outcome? How did you approach achieving the goal? In retrospect, was this much different in practice as you worked towards doing it than 'in theory' when you were thinking about it and posting it at the beginning of this semester? Have you consciously (or unconsciously!) used action research in working towards achieving your goal?

[7] (from the Dance Technique Studies unit outline - text this author) Deep learning processes are promoted through the lecturer's emphasis on the critical requirement for you to transform all given corrections, advice, imagery and artistic and physical challenges into your personal, individuated and self-relevant property. You are explicitly given the control and responsibility for your own learning and development.

[8] This development, or outcome of the implemented self-instruction ('plan'), may not always be a step forward per se along the continuum towards perfection but it is all the same development in that the student has developed an expanded understanding and awareness of her/himself within that function undergoing scrutiny through action research in that context at that time. Feldenkrais (1981, p.94) advises, 'do not avoid errors, but rather use them as alternatives for what you feel is right and their roles may soon be interchanged'.

[9] 'Hours of repetitive practice is hard work; hours of practicing awareness in movement or action remain the most absorbing and interesting time in our lives. The feeling of being alive relates to the awareness of growing to be oneself' (Feldenkrais, 1981, p. 96).

[10] 'The social cognitive approach posits a system of triadic reciprocal causation in which (a) action, (b) inner personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events, and (c) environmental influences all operate as interacting determinants' (Bandura, 1990, p.101).

References

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: a social cognitive theory.* NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American Psychologist*, *44*(9), 1182.

Bandura, A. (1990). Some reflections on reflections. *Psychological* Inquiry, *1*(1), 101.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy – the exercise of control.* New York: W.H. Freeman & Company.

Feldenkrais, M. (1981). *The elusive obvious.* Cupertino, California: Meta Publications.

Kemmis, S., & Wilkinson, M. (1998). Participatory action research and the study of Practice. In B. Atweh, S. Kemmis, & P. Weeks (Eds.), *Action research in practice* (pp. 21-36). London: Routledge.

Maddux, J. (1995). Self-efficacy theory: an introduction. In J. Maddux (Ed.), *Self-efficacy, adaptation and adjustment; theory, research and application* (pp. 4-5). New York: Plenum Press.

Newman, F., & Holzman, L. (1993). *Lev Vygotsky: revolutionary scientist.* London: Routledge.

Biographical statement

Evan Jones was born in Brisbane, began dance training at age six leading to twenty-six years of professional dancer engagements with Ballets de Marseille, Staatstheater Darmstadt, Vancouver Opera and Frankfurt Ballet. His academic career began at QUT in 1997 as Lecturer in Ballet. Research interests include reflexive praxis and intrinsic motivation.