

Undisciplined subjects, unregulated practices: dancing in the academy

Dr Elizabeth Dempster

Victoria University
Melbourne, Australia

This is a working paper in process. It is concerned with the changing status of disciplinary knowledges, in dance and performance, in Australian universities. Although I have been working as an academic within the fields of dance and performance studies for some twenty years, it is only relatively recently that I have begun to reflect critically upon the disciplinary identity of dance studies and dance research, and with some more concrete sense of how these endeavours might be engaged differently.

If I have been tardy in my attention to these matters, it may be in part because the institutional structures and contexts within which the disciplines of dance and performance are practiced have been in a process of more or less continuous change since the mid 1980s. However I must acknowledge that the title of this essay does betray a certain nostalgia for a pre-Dawkins era, when dance, if it was present at all in the academy enjoyed an outsider status. There was power and authority, however constrained and transient, in the positioning of dance and performance studies, as ‘other’ to the major disciplines in the arts and humanities.

The situation is more complex today. Dance is in the academy, but its presence in university programs is as much an effect of the pragmatism of university administrations, as it is a reflection of ethical concern for equity and diversity. Dance scholars and researchers in Australian universities know that the disciplinary difference of dance practice and research has not yet been fully embraced and recognised. And despite the recent expansion of practice-based / creative arts research

degree programs, we also know that the subjection of dance and performance to textual paradigms has not yet been overturned.

Part 1

Becoming (un)disciplined

I first began teaching in a university context in 1984. It was at Deakin University and I was employed as a movement/dance tutor in what was widely regarded as the most innovative performing arts program in the country at that time. The program was the brainchild of a classics scholar and theatre maker James McCaughey and a dancer/choreographer Nanette Hassall. The program, offered through the Humanities Faculty, revolved around dynamic, practice-based, heuristic learning. The students made a lot of art.

In this context, dance was not identified as a discrete discipline and it was not offered as a stand-alone subject. However it played an integral role in the multi-disciplinary performing arts major. The Cage/Cunningham aesthetic philosophy informed curriculum development and many of the compositional ideas and strategies explored in the course were borrowed from Cunningham and later post-modern dancers. In this way, avant-garde dance, a body of contemporary artistic research, was drawn into relationship with the academy. Practice based dance research provided an intellectually rigorous conceptual framework for a contemporary performing arts education, along with many innovative pedagogical activities and experiences.

I should remind the reader that this was back in the 1980s, before the implementation of John Dawkins' reform agenda. There was not much dancing going on in the universities of Australia at that time — *that* happened in Colleges of Advanced Education and Institutes of Technology, where course offerings in dance were expected to be more instrumental, technical and vocational in orientation. I had been working in the performing arts program for a couple of years when a lecturing position came up and I applied. I did not have a post-graduate qualification at that time and still very much thought of myself as an artist first, university teacher second. I met with the Dean to discuss my application and we talked about the qualification issue. He said, and I will paraphrase; "It is not so critical that you have a higher

degree. What is important is that you demonstrate an aptitude, that we see in you the makings of an academic; you need to be the right kind of person”.

In the Humanities faculty at Deakin in 1986 there still existed a residuum of old collegiate feeling and structure. The corporatisation of the university sector had certainly begun, but was not yet in full force. Something of the culture of the gentleman scholar was still alive. As it happens, I must have persuaded someone that I was, or could learn how to be, the right kind of person. I was offered the lectureship and took up my position as a gentleman scholar in training, albeit a rather oddly proportioned one.

I understood that my task was to develop as a researcher, master the relevant metalanguages and demonstrate competence in the reproduction of valued theoretical registers of writing and commentary. I recall a conversation with two colleagues, one a philosopher of science, the other an historian, who were anxious to establish some grounds for equivalence between our different areas of study and research. ‘What term defined academic and scholarly engagement in the practice of dance and choreography? Would choreo-*logy* serve as a disciplinary equivalent to musicology, sociology or anthropology?’ they asked. No, it would not serve.

Back in 1986 dance was not recognised as an academic discipline; it had no departmental home, unlike theatre, which was linked through the study of dramatic literature, with university English departments. In Australia, as in Britain during this period, dance research was pursued by a very small numbers of scholars ‘scattered across many more or less sympathetic university departments’ (Lansdale 2004). My academic mentors made various well meaning but not extremely appealing suggestions as to how I might become suitably disciplined — through sociology or history, for example, notwithstanding the fact that I had no background in these fields. They regarded dance as *techne*, not *phrenesis*, an object of study, but not a subject.

Terry Threadgold has something to say about everyday life in the academy and what becoming recognised and accepted as the right kind of person, becoming academic, might entail (Threadgold 1996)

To be disciplined in any of the major disciplines in the sciences or the humanities/social sciences is to learn to embody, to perform and to enact on a daily basis, in the workplace, in everyday pedagogy, not only the academic genres that constitute the theories and practices of the discipline, but also the genres of social relations and embodied subjectivity that construct the discipline as a “body” of knowledge, and that determine its intersections and social relations with other disciplines and other institutions, other bodies of knowledge. To succeed in a discipline means to be able to perform its genres and to speak and write and embody its favourite discourses, myths and narratives (1996:281)

Now, as Amy Koritz observes in her essay “Re/Moving Boundaries: From Dance History to Cultural Studies”(Koritz 1996) being proficient in more than one disciplinary language has many benefits, both to the scholar and to their field. The dance scholar swims in a larger, more challenging intellectual pond; she invites greater connectivity. In Koritz’s view, interdisciplinary approaches to dance research “ have helped bring dance closer to the intellectual mainstream” and should be welcomed and encouraged (1996:89). But there are also risks and dangers in becoming inter- disciplined, insofar as that may entail learning to embody and enact a powerful discipline’s discourse and genres, be it sociology or anthropology or psychology or even cultural studies.

How are these bodies of knowledge to relate and on whose terms? The fact that a lectureship in a performance field was established at Deakin in 1986 might imply recognition of the difference of performance, but it was accompanied by an injunction — that both the lecturer and her field of practice become academically disciplined. For Threadgold, becoming disciplined presents particular dangers for the feminist subject:

When those (discourses) are patriarchal to the core, the female disciplined subject may be seduced into occupying the positions offered by the discourses and genres of various versions of the male

‘other’, or she may find her labours of rewriting, of not being seduced the subject of critique and appropriation (ibid).

I have already mentioned in passing the seduction of otherness, the (limited) pleasure accorded to the subject in taking up the small place offered on the university ticket as a counterpoint —the colour, light and movement — to the sobriety of ‘serious’ masculine identified disciplines. Additionally, and perhaps more positively, in certain styles of poststructuralist theorising within the academy during the 1980s, the idea of dancing acquired a kind of metaphorical force; dancing exemplified fluidity and dissolution. It ‘represented’ the unrepresentable. However I would suggest that neither of these forms of ‘othering’ has advanced an understanding of the disciplinary difference of dance and performance. And, as I have remarked elsewhere, the dance academic must also contend with an implicit ‘somatophobia’ which subtends many if not all of the major disciplines (Grosz 1994).

I am suggesting that there are two levels of difficulty consequent on being disciplined within the academy. The first involves a silencing of difference, not being heard. The second difficulty — being seduced and accepting (more or less) the place that is offered — is I think the more challenging of the two problems we are facing today. In this situation, when we take up the place the other reserves for us, there is a danger that key assumptions underpinning our discipline specific methods of practice and research, and the discourse that has evolved around them, may not be critically examined.

With the Dawkins’ reform agenda of the late 1980s the dance programs and degree courses offered in Colleges and Institutes of Technology were propelled into new university environments where the pressure was on to create a research culture, where perhaps none had existed before. What paradigms of research have been adopted? And what models of scholarly practice?

Susan Melrose has spoken cogently about the some of the issues that arise as creative arts and performance disciplines enter university research cultures. In her inaugural

professorial address at Middlesex University she posed the following questions to performance makers and researchers (Melrose 2002):

What does the disciplinary in performance-making — and in devised performance-making, in particular — “look like” and to what extent can it be identified by those who have not trained in these disciplines? How might we identify the expert knowledge-practices, their operations and boundary markers, within work which we also require to be challenging, innovative and offer new insights? And what might be its most productive relationship to writing? (2002:4)

At Victoria University, where I have been working since 1991, we use the phrase *thinking through performance* to characterise our approach to the study of and research in performance. The phrase implies a careful, thoughtful approach to performing arts scholarship and research inquiry. It also places performance and artistic processes in the foreground as distinctive and (perhaps) irreducible modes of thinking. In a polemical essay entitled “Dancing the Bridge: Performance /Research”, my colleague Mark Minchinton outlines a rationale for the recognition of artistic practice as research within the university context. His argument draws out both the pragmatic and ethical dimensions of the relatively recent expansion of practice-based higher degree places in Australian universities. He argues that the universities should not only be sites of commentary upon difference, but they also should be active in their *production* of difference. (Minchinton 1997)

It is time, I believe for dance scholars and researchers, especially those of us committed to the pursuit of practice-based research, to work towards a much more precise and nuanced articulation of the production of our difference. If we are no longer willing to occupy the place of the other we need (and I borrow Melrose’s words again) ‘to make a much better fist of accounting ... for the operations of disciplinary difference within the generally defined arts and humanities’ (2002: 4).

Part 2

Unregulated, unprofessional practice

I have been interested for many years in the approach to postural reintegration developed by Mabel Todd, now widely known as ideokinesis. Ideokinesis is an empirical, in-body research, whose vitality is contingent upon its ongoing resistance to professionalisation and regulation. The influence of ideokinetic method upon post modern dance has been noted by many commentators, most recently by Steve Paxton (Paxton 2002).

In her preface to *The Thinking Body*, Mabel Todd notes how she delayed setting down the details of her method for some thirty years, not only so that she could be confident that her ideas had been validated, but so as to prevent ‘the premature appearance of a “school” or “system”, which so often spells the end of a creative process.’ (Todd 1937/1972)

Todd was resistant to any codification of her discoveries and although the principles and technique elaborated by her now enjoy quite widespread institutional recognition, ideokinesis continues as a relatively unregulated practice. There is no system of certification, no centralised process of accreditation and there is no academy or school of ideokinesis or Todd alignment. Todd taught in the physical Education Department of Columbia University between 1928 and 1931 and it seems that she was concerned in that period to establish some degree of academic credibility for the work. However, notwithstanding her achievements during her tenure at Columbia, she did not find the university environment conducive to her ongoing research and what she regarded as fundamentally a creative investigation.

According to Pam Matt, “Todd was bored with the usual academic preoccupation with matters of methodology and was unable to think in terms of limiting, segmenting, defining and manipulating her approach according to experimental models ‘(1973:10). Needless to say, Todd did not pursue an academic career. She did not become a professional teacher or researcher in a university context. And the unregulated, non-professional status of ideokinesis today is I think consistent with the principles of creative inquiry first outlined by Todd.

I am following Todd and beginning to suggest that professionalisation may be an impediment to creative thinking. It may also be an impediment to new forms of creative research. Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has this to say about the problem of professionalisation (Whitehead 1925):

Another great fact confronting the modern world is the discovery of the method of training professionals, who specialise in particular regions of thought and thereby progressively add to the sum of knowledge within their respective limitations of subject The situation has its danger. It produces minds in a groove. Each profession makes progress, but it is progress in its own groove. Now to be mentally in a groove is to live in contemplating a given set of abstractions. The groove prevents straying across country, and the abstraction abstracts from something to which no further attention is paid ... Of course, no one is merely a mathematician, or merely a lawyer. People have lives outside their professions or their businesses. But the point is the restraint of serious thought within a groove (1925: 196)

Whitehead characterises professionalism as the mental groove, which defines a specific field, with its specific ways to understand and analyse, its specific values and aesthetic judgments. Discipline specific embodied habitus also plays a significant part in the constitution of a profession. What are the implications of Whitehead's critique for dance professional practice and practice-based dance research in the professionalised university milieu?

I will approach this question via Sally Gardner's discussion of the professionalisation of dance in her paper *Gendering Discourses in Modern Dance Research* (2005). I was especially struck by Gardner's identification of the non-professional status of the early modern dancer as a pre-condition of her innovation. Gardner's paper suggests, rather forcefully to me, that we need to be circumspect, even cautious, about the kinds of claims we might want to make for the creative research capacity of our discipline. In a similar vein Steve Paxton, in a recent essay on Trisha Brown, comments upon the

locus of research in early post modern dance. He corrects a common misconception concerning the radicalism of the Judson dancers when he writes:

It might be assumed that because dance is a medium employing the human body, foregrounding the body would be essential and inevitable, but in reviews of Judson Dance Theater it has been seen that the bodies and movements of the non-dancers (who were actually painters, composers and musicians) are mentioned more than those of the dancers. It is as though the term dancer suggested a generic body type, already known all too well. A dancer's job was to dance in work by a choreographer. What was seen was not their body, but the movements their body made, their technique, perhaps their interpretation. (2002: 56)

The intensive, in-body research of Trisha Brown, which has been claimed for 'dance', here arises from a critique of dance and as a critical response to dance's professionalisation. Paxton discerns in Brown's work a capacity for sustained critical inquiry, but clearly not all performance practice is research. Dancers and choreographers are not necessarily researchers and their hard-earned professional skill and expertise may impede certain kinds of open-ended creative and critical inquiry.

I am suggesting that it may be time to examine our assumptions about the nature and value of the embodied knowledges, the capacities and sensibilities that dancers, choreographers and performers bring to the academy. Now that practice-based dance research is gaining wider acceptance within the academy we need to revisit the question of the relationship between dance professional and research practice. Does dance professional training and experience provide the most relevant and productive models and methods for research inquiry? Does such training strengthen and facilitate the kind of critical thinking one might need to think through performance?

It is not my intention to re-enact the theory-practice divide, nor to subject dance anew to 'the tyranny of certain conventional registers of higher degree writing' (Melrose 2002:2). But I am suggesting that if we are claiming to produce difference, we need 'to make a better fist of accounting for that difference'. The challenge of articulating

what counts as foundational knowledge in our (various) disciplines, has not yet been met, except in the most general of terms. The second challenge, consequent upon the first, is to ask how might such knowledge be produced differently. If professionalisation produces expert minds and expert bodies ‘within a groove’, perhaps we should not be afraid of behaving unprofessionally, or being judged as such, so that we might regain the freedom to stray across country.

I will conclude with a brief return to Susan Melrose. In a passage outlining her interest in performance that ‘challenges symbolic structures’. Melrose coins a useful term, which has applicability for dancing both within and without the academy. She identifies challenging performance work under the heading of *critical meta-practice*, by which she means,

a disciplinary practice or practices which both maintain conventions specific to the discipline (and the judgements it entails) while challenging and/or interrogating certain of its practices (2002: 1)

In elaborating this notion of critical meta-practice Melrose cites examples of professional devised performance such as Tadeusz Kantor’s *Wielopole, Wielopole*, but it is clear that her analysis could equally be brought to bear on instances of creative arts practice pursued as research, within a university context.

My hope is that we too might begin to identify with more confidence, and celebrate with greater élan, critical meta-practice in dance, that is, dance practice and performance work that performs its critique of its own disciplinary conventions, whether that be without or within the academy.

References:

- Gardner, S. (2005). Gendering discourses in modern dance research, Dance Rebooted: Re-Initializing the Grid, Deakin University, Melbourne.
- Grosz, E. (1994). Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism. Sydney, Allen & Unwin.

- Koritz, A. (1996). *Re/Moving Boundaries: From Dance History to Cultural Studies. Moving Words: Re-writing Dance*. G. Morris. London and New York, Routledge: 88 - 103.
- Lansdale, J. A. (2004). "The Role of Doctoral Research in Cultural Change". *CORD. Dance, Identity and Integration*, Taipei National University of the Arts, CORD.
- Melrose, S. (2002). "Entertaining Other Options: Restaging 'theory' in the age of practice as research." **2004**(11/11/2004).
- Minchinton, M. (1997). "Dancing the Bridge: Performance/Research: A Polemic." *Writings on Dance*(16): 58 -63.
- Paxton, S. (2002). *Brown in the New Body. Trisha Brown: dance and art in dialogue, 1961-2001*. H. Teicher. Andover, Mass.: Cambridge, Mass, Addison Gallery of American Art: 56-61.
- Threadgold, T. (1996). *Everyday Life in the Academy: postmodernist feminisms, generic seductions, rewriting and being heard. Feminisms and Pedagogies of Everyday Life*. C. Luke. Albany, State University of New York Press.
- Todd, M. E. (1937/1972). *The Thinking Body*. New York, Dance Horizons.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1925). *Science and the Modern World*. New York, Free Press.