Exploring the identity of dance teachers in Taiwan

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Abstract

Strong relationships exist between an individual's life experiences and their conceptualization of identity. This fact may shape the work of educators more than other professionals because how we teach is greatly shaped by how we were taught. "Exploring the Identity of Dance Teachers in Taiwan**"** engages qualitative and creative methodologies (Veale, 2005) to analyze a cohort of teachers' life experiences in learning, training, and educating. The purpose of this study was to explore the nexus of life experiences and the formation of identity and to examine how these factors shape the pedagogies of contemporary dance educators in Taiwan. Data demonstrated that the values and practices of the community in which they studied dance shaped the subsequent development of their identity as a dance educator. This paper examines differences in the journeys dance educators have taken in the development of their professional profiles and how concepts of self shape the paths dance educators take in developing identity.

Keywords: previous experience, identity, community, dance teacher, schoolteacher

Research Design

This paper presents research developed by the author in the doctoral program in education at the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. The design studied matters of identity among dance educators currently teaching in Taiwan. For the purposes of this research, the term *dance teacher* (in *italics*) refers to dance specialists who teach performing arts/dance in the Taiwanese curriculum. Performing arts/dance coursework is articulated in Taiwan's Ministry of Education (MOE, ND) document *Grades 1-9 Curriculum Guidelines*,

which was announced by the MOE in 1998, and presented to the nation in 2001. The *Guidelines* address seven learning areas. Dance (until the 1998 revision presented as a subject under health and physical education) is included as a subject area in the Arts and Humanities category, along with music, fine art, and drama. There were nine dance specialists who held a degree in dance and were employed as full-time *dance teachers*. Five of the nine were assigned 20-22 dance lessons per week, while the other four performed adjunct duties, such as serving as tutors for as few as five, or as many as 15, lessons per week.

Data Collection

There were three phases of data collection for this study: a first interview focused on each dance specialist's life history; self-interpretation/representation was engaged through creative modes; and a less informal closing interview sought to gather thoughts and perspectives on contemporary teaching practices. In the first data collection phase, two life history interviews were conducted to record each dance specialists' perception of significant events in their life experiences. The second phase involved using creative methods of having dance specialist's map their life experiences through drawing and embodying experience through dance improvisations. In support of their creative projects, dance specialists provided detailed narrative explanations regarding the connections they made between their drawings/improvisations and the events they cited as significant on their life journey. The third phase returned to a more structured interview process to collect perceptions and opinions about each dance specialists' current teaching experiences. The data collection design aimed to cross-examine narrative and embodied information from the nine dance specialists through a comparison of life phases, symbolic representations of significant events, and narratives on events/circumstances that led each to make important life-shaping decisions that led them to their current work as *dance teachers*. The three approaches to data collection illustrated similarities and differences among dance specialists regarding notions of self and

identity.

Related Literature

Wang (2013a) suggested that concepts of identity could be viewed from two perspectives: psychological and sociological. Referencing sociological perspectives, several educational theorists, including Goodson (1991), Knowles (1992), Connelly and Clandinin (1999), and Day, Elliot, and Kington (2005), stated that the conceptualization of self is strongly informed by life experiences and the people and events we encounter. Concerning the impact people have on the conceptualization of self, Wenger (1998) concluded that we develop our notions of self as a result of our interactions with those with whom we share time, place, and common experience: " … we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation [in community] as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves" (p. 149). Applying Wenger's theory to the dance specialists of this study suggested that before dance teachers began working in the schools, they had already developed a sense of self, of identity, through their interactions with family and prior learning communities.

Two considerations are important in analyzing how a teacher handles new interpretations of identity upon entering the school setting. The first consideration is how the teacher interprets her prior experiences in developing her sense of self in the new environment. When teachers share stories of their past and current experiences, they "engage in a period of theorizing" that influences how they "discover and shape their professional identity" (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 122). Beijaard (1995) and Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) found that significant connections exist between a teacher's self-image and their previous life experiences. When our understanding and affinity with a professional community is formed, we become group "insiders." Matters of identity are clarified as we share experiences with others in the group.

We re-conceptualize the notion of self as we negotiate experience. Our understanding of self is modified with the integration of our own experiences through which a sense of our self "as a certain kind of person … in a given context" is developed (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 108). In the processes of re-conceptualizing notions of self, we negotiate between the various dimensions of personality, accessing a nexus of identities that "we define by the way we reconcile our various forms of membership into one identity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 145).

Wenger's (1998) research and inquiry on patterns of identity integration inform the design of this research. Here, he explained boundary encounters between individuals representing different communities, citing three types of encounters: "one to one, immersion, and delegation" (pp. 112-113). While Wenger's framework is used to illustrate encounters between individuals from different communities, I suggest that the framework (one to one, immersion, and delegation) may also be used to represent three different patterns of encounter that individuals experience when communities of practice interact. For example, it could be used to illustrate matters of identity for *dance teachers* when they enter the academic environment of the school. (See Figure 1, below).

Figure 1: Types of self-encountering a boundary between communities

A) Moving from one to another between   B) Crossing over community   C) Shifting
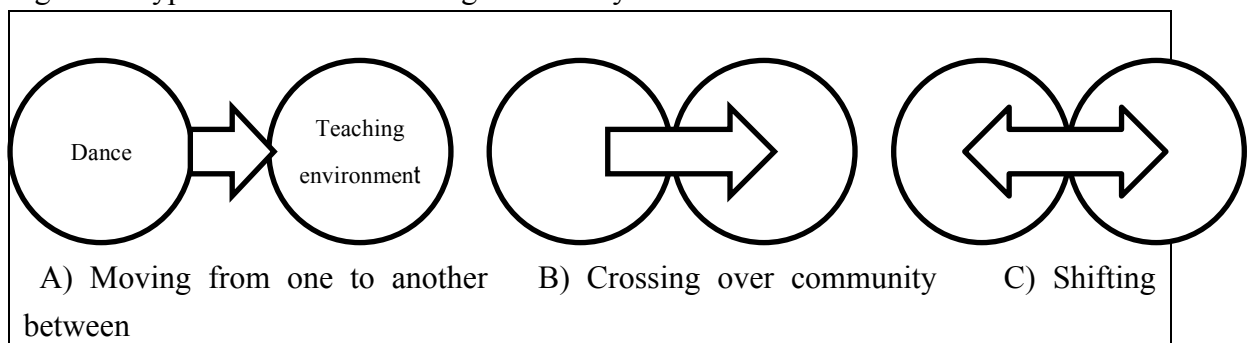
(Quote from Wang, 2013b)

In Figure 1, above, A) represents moving from one community to another, based on Wenger's example of "one to one," where membership in a primary community is maintained;

B) illustrates crossing over communities, one to another, similar to Wenger's "immersion," where the characteristics or experiences of the home community remain dominate during the encounter with another community; and C) shifting between communities represents Wenger's "delegation," where a fluid transference of experiences and values between communities is possible.

Every time we interact with a new environment or new human contacts, some transaction occurs. From the microscopic transference of dust particles to an active exchange of goods and services, transactions shape and reshape our experiences and sense of self. In, *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*, author George H. Mead (1934) discussed the transactions individuals experience when encountering new environments. The passage of time allows the understanding of self that one has upon first encounter to transform as a result of ongoing experiences and the exchanges one has with other new "selves." Transactions are important factors in developing the sensibilities that inform communities of practice. Identity is not a simple construct of how we interact with others, just as it is not simply a matter of how we perceive self in social contexts. Identity is informed by how we make sense of social phenomena and experience. Tensions exist between agency (the individual's capacity to influence an event) and the event or social experience itself (Beijaard et al, 2004). Singer (2004) stated that we regard ourselves both as individuals and participants within the professional communities we associate with. For the dance specialists of this study, prior experience, the work environment, and the people they interacted with were important factors in the conceptualization of identity in practice.

Paths Teachers Take in Developing Concepts of Self

Analysis of data indicated that the *dance teacher's* movement between communities mirrored the processes of one to one, immersion, and delegation cited by Wenger (1998, p. 113). Dance specialists moved from exclusive engagement with one community to

experiencing exposure to another, crossed over from the base community to the new group, and shifted back and forth between communities of practice. The effects of one to one experience in community were evidenced during the initial period of teacher training. In this situation, dance specialists observed and responded to differences between communities: the professional community of dance arts training (their home community) and the academic community of the school (the teaching community). The experiences involved in crossing over communities and shifting communities brought up issues and questions including: what values are transferable between populations? How may I incorporate the practices of developing body skills experienced in the professional world with the expectations of what students need to learn and be able to do as a result of their exposure to dance in the school curriculum? What was of importance to *dance educator* were the varying degrees to which they believed prior experiences shaped and constructively informed a secure sense of identity in the new environment.

Data collected for this study demonstrated that in their initial encounters with a new community, dance specialists adhered to the values and practices of their "home" community. New teachers brought the attitudes of the professional dance community into the school. After a period of adjustment, dance specialists began to merge their experiences in their home community with what they were experiencing in the new community, yet allegiance to the values and ethics of the home community continued to shape their daily experiences in the educational setting. Data analysis suggests that while professional identity is shaped and defined by both the familiar and the unfamiliar (Wenger, 1998), significant challenges to one's sense of self-definition emerge out of exposure to new environments and our interactions with others. Our interactions influence our concepts of understanding the self (Côté & Levine, 2002).

Several dance specialists in this study experienced phenomena associated with crossing over into new communities, including feelings of disappointment with the structure

of instruction in the school environment (schedules, time for individual classes), and differences in values of practice that students exhibited in the studio. These findings parallel observations by Chang (2008) that dance training in Taiwan may not adequately prepare *dance teachers*, exposing them to structures of instruction in public education, the hierarchies of privilege that exist among teachers representing different disciplines, or the procedures and rules one must follow in evaluation and instruction. *Dance teachers* who chose not to continue participating in dance in the schools felt that their desire to remain within the professional dance community was largely due to their satisfaction with the "dancer" identity they had nurtured and developed in the professional world of practice and performance. The dance specialists in this study, following traditions for dance arts training in Taiwan, were prepared in the world of the dance professional. Their identity as a dancer found its first and strongest manifestation within the professional dance community. Giving up their experiences in the professional studio, their studies in the complexities of dance technique, and roles in choreographic works meant losing membership in the artistic community and with that loss, their link with identity in the professional world.

Not all dance specialists associated identity as a dance artist within the professional dance community with success and familiarity. Some dance specialists, such as Molly, Lilly, and Iris, demonstrated capacities for accepting and working with dualities in identity. These dance specialists found shifting between communities manageable and fulfilling. They were able to move between the professional and educational settings and work effectively in each. According to Anderson (1981, p. 45), dual practices for arts educators involve both arts making and teaching (*see also*: Day, 1986). However, in this study, most dance specialists stopped participating in professional dance activities soon after starting their work in the schools. Xenia considered teaching at the schools to be a positive experience when compared with her experiences in professional realms of practice. For Sue, there was a feeling of having had "enough" of participating in the professional world of dance arts.

With these findings in mind, a central challenge for professionally trained dance educators who wished to retain a comfortable identity in both professional and educational worlds was to find ways to nurture and solidify their identity as a *dancer teacher*. In this study, only Molly and Lilly demonstrated a strong capacity for doing this. It appears that Molly and Lilly's life experiences had not only shaped who they were/are (as with other teachers in this study), but also enhanced their connections with both dance communities. For dance specialists capable of shifting between communities, a dual professional identity was possible. Participating in two realms of practice may be referred to as a double-profession, as Lowe (1958) termed it, even though their roles and responsibilities are different in each, as suggested by Smith (1980, p. 10, cited in Day, 1986, p. 39).

Hatfield, Montana, and Deffenbaugh (2006) studied professionals capable of shifting between work and practice communities. Lilly (mentioned above) may be regarded as a good example of such a professional. Initially, Lilly experienced difficulties in melding her work and practice activities: school teaching and dance performing. She managed to find a balance between both and enjoyed the challenges and rewards of doing so. However, Lilly's experience may be best viewed as more the exception than it was the rule. During most of the study, dance specialists experienced difficulty in merging professional and educational dance worlds.

In describing their work and practice experiences, all nine dance specialists labeled themselves "school teachers" instead of the more generic "teachers." Their specificity is in accordance with Day (1986), who suggested that the concept of *school* teachers would be prioritized among identities to avoid identity conflict (*see also*: Adams, 2007). Although Bernard (2004, p. 282) suggested that there was no need for teachers of the arts to choose between the roles of work, it was natural that teachers would seek to prioritize their sense of community membership. These findings did not support Hatfield et al.'s (2006, p. 47) claims that the stresses of working in dual communities would extend the duration of identity

conflict. Dance specialists in this study aligned their professional identity with that of the professional community (Coldron & Smith, 1999) or that of the school (Beijaard et al., 2004).

Study findings also resonated with Sachs (2001), who found that professional identity could be used "to differentiate one group from another" (p. 153). Teachers in this study used the terms *school teacher* (educational) and *dance teacher* (professional) to differentiate identities for those who teach in the schools and those who teach in the professional world. Dance specialists also distinguished between their occupational roles (*school teacher/dance teacher*), even though in the professional world, teaching roles (teachers of beginners or advanced students, or teachers of choreography) are not similarly differentiated (Hatfield et al., 2006, p. 43).

Additionally, dance specialists mentioned that they accessed their artistic identity in the school studio by incorporating professional levels of technique or in the classroom by expounding on the dance content in the performing arts textbook based on their professional knowledge of the dance specialist. These findings clearly resonate with Hatfield et al. (2006, p. 44), who found that school teachers would tap their artist identity, or "artist-self" (Szekely, 1978, p. 17), in classrooms. Nine dance specialists in this study augmented educational benchmarks by introducing additional artistic activities and information into the curriculum design. Such practices not only moved beyond the role and responsibilities assigned the *dance teacher*, but they also clearly illustrated the esteem school-based *dance teachers* had for the professional dance community. The *dance teacher's* notion of their roles and responsibilities as arts educators were expanded by their prior professional experiences. This finding supports Adams (2007), who contested that school teachers would value and seek to transmit their former roles as dance artists to their more recent roles as schoolteachers. It provides a different perspective for examining the values and practices of teachers in the arts who are already artists, a set of considerations that was brought up in Jeffery (2005), but a set that Jeffery largely left unaddressed.

There are practical reasons for engaging the content of previous learning experiences in crafting the structure and content of an upcoming work or practice assignment. The practice supports the notion that while crossing the communities, experience with more than one prior community may be carried forward. Crossing over into new community parallels Clandinin's and Connelly's (2000) analysis of workers who described looking backward in their lives and work to substantiate their current sense of identity. In telling their life stories, all nine teachers were involved in ongoing processes of re-conceptualizing their notions of self, confirming the contention made by Beijaard et al. (2004) that the contemporary notion of self is a result of interpreting and re-interpreting past and current life experiences.

Conclusion

The nine dance specialists in this study reacted to the school-based community of work and practice through the lens of their prior experiences in the professional dance community. Yet each interpreted "prior experience" in very individual ways. In line with results from similar research designs, the dance specialists in this study demonstrated that their identity as a *dance teacher* was first shaped by their foundational experiences in the world of professional dance. Here, their technical studies and performance experiences validated their self-image as a "dancer." Their transition to effective *dance teacher* in the schools was largely contingent on the values they learned from their experiences as students themselves, in the studios where they received instruction in the practice of dance. A few dance specialists acquired capabilities in shifting between communities, where the *dance teacher* is comfortable in both academic and professional communities and moves between them with confidence. Most dance specialists however, struggled with issues of identity in the academic environment and gravitated back toward the professional world.

The complexities of having a dual professional identity, from both practical and conceptual perspectives, can be understood from these teachers' narratives. Dance specialists

struggled to move beyond notions of their identity as professionally trained teachers in Taiwan, based on their understanding of the operations and traditions of the professional dance community. In relating their school-teaching experiences, there was evidence of a clear change in personal notions of the professional-self, and this was in accordance with their practical experiences in the schools. Evolution of their pedagogic identity supports the view that professional identity is informed and shaped by personal and professional experiences (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

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