

Difference in dancing: Two dance educators reflect on difference in the dance studio

Introduction

This article offers an exploration of the notion of performing difference through dance. We specifically focus on the context of teaching young people in a diversity of social, cultural and educational settings. Alongside reflective narratives of practice, we lean on theories pertaining to difference, diversity, and identity. As a result, we investigate dance education as an embodied, performative practice that might support the development of diverse communities for youth. With this said, it can be emphasized that the notion of difference is central to our investigation. The broad overarching question motivating this investigation is: how could the notion of encouraging the performance of *difference* in the context of dance teaching lead towards further appreciation of difference within the communities we engage with?

Our desire to reflect on teaching practices that might include and celebrate difference within the dance learning encounter has been prompted by what we have observed in our communities and societies around the globe. We have noted that there appears to be an increasing polarization happening both between nations and between people within nations (Horton, 2000; MacDonald & Marsh, 1999). We have observed young people feeling disengaged and disconnected to the community and culture they are within (Eckersley, 1995). At the same time as teaching practitioners we have seen moments where experiential dance encounters have enabled young people to simultaneously explore and embrace diversity and belonging.

There is the potential that in the globalized world young people engage with, there are mounting tensions and challenges to navigate. Some of these issues could be due to the growing movement of people around the world, but might also be attributed to events such as the global economic crisis. Consequently, as diversity increases, the pressure, and as a result the anxiety, for sameness also appears to be growing. As educators, we see pressure in the dance learning environment of conformity, polarization of worldviews and ideologies, and binaries that divide rather than connect people. The issues of polarization and growing diversity has been discussed previously by several authors (see for example: Cooper 2004; Richardson 2005). With the rise of populist policies and rhetoric, the issue of how difference is negotiated, considered, accepted and celebrated seems to become more acute than ever (Mason, 2015; Rowe, Martin, Buck & Anttila, forthcoming). For young people, increasing pressure towards sameness is potentially detrimental, especially when taking into account the largely unknown effects on “performing” and constructing identities in and through social media and the virtual world. As dance educators, we are sensitive towards threats that contemporary lifestyles pose on our bodies and therefore, are driven by the need to understand “our interactions with digital media is embodied and they have bodily effect at the physical level” (Hayles, 2012, p.3).

In this article, we offer three reflective narratives of moments where we have observed, facilitated or questioned difference in the dance class. In presenting these narratives, that have emerged from our own practitioner experiences, we take a critical view on the notion of belonging based on similarities and exclusion based on that which is different. We seek to explore how challenges young people may face in finding a sense of place and belonging, may indeed be through the difference that is embraced within the dance class. We are both dance educators. Antonio is a community dance practitioner and performing artist from

Kampala, Uganda. Rose is a teacher and researcher within a Dance Studies programme in New Zealand. Both have experience of teaching dance to diverse groups of young people around the world and are curious about how their practice of teaching intersects with ideas of community, inclusion, and difference.

Methodologically, we chose to take a narrative approach to the reflections. The narratives constructed for this study have been purposefully developed to become central features within the research process. A narrative can be seen as an “oral, written, or filmed account of events told to others or oneself” (Smith, 2000, p.328), with the study of the narrative being viewed as an investigation of the multiple ways in which people experience the world (Barthes, 1966; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Richardson, 1990). The researcher’s role is to interpret the underlying themes and concepts of the interviewees’ stories (Reiley & Hawe, 2005), with these interpretations relating “to the purposes of the inquiry which, at the time of writing, may have evolved from the purposes originally conceived for the project and in terms of which much of the data was collected” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.11). With this in mind it can be noted that following on from the sharing of each narrative a critical unpacking of the issues within is offered, delving into how the encounter within the narrative stirs further discussion about the notion of difference in the dance studio teaching and learning context.

Encouraging freedom of expression by creating an atmosphere acknowledging individuality

Within the following narrative Antonio shares his reflections on the first class he taught within a particular course at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Following the narrative, a critical unpacking of key issues to emerge is offered.

During a six-month fellowship at the University of Auckland, I taught DANCE 200G, a course focused on themes of dance and culture and delivered within the Dance Studies programme. The course is a 'general education' option for those outside of a Dance Studies major. This therefore brings a mix of students to the dance studio – the students are from different years of study, from both the sciences and arts disciplines. All came from distinct backgrounds, with varying dance histories and experiences. The atmosphere was culturally rich, with individuals coming from different countries, such as Korea, the United States of America, China, Malaysia, Tonga, and New Zealand.

I, the guest teacher, came from a background of community dance practice in Kampala, Uganda. I was there to deliver a module on Ugandan dance. Therefore, with such a range of students in the learning space I felt that it would be interesting to explore how my culture and community dance experiences might fit (or not) within an academic studio setting. It felt like an opportunity to explore how I and the students might embrace difference without promoting division. In other words, highlighting the ability to harmoniously co-exist with our differences and work together towards a common goal in the dance class.

At the beginning of the class, the students and I sat in a circle. I introduced myself, told them about my philosophy of teaching and how I planned to run the sessions. I articulated my desire for differences to be embraced, and how I sought to pay attention to freedom of expression. I told the group that the intention was not to look exactly like I the teacher, but rather I was most curious about how they might own the

movement and give their individual feeling to it. My plan was to teach them a traditional dance from Uganda, but first I said, “before I take you to the traditional, let's pretend to be in a club, and if you are not a club goer then find your zone that you are comfortable expressing in, maybe the shower or even church”. The group laughed, perhaps in part out of nerves, but also there was a sense that they liked the idea and I could see that their bodies relax.

We all stood up and after I put some music on we began to dance. As the group moved, I started to add in small details to create the feeling in the room of a Uganda traditional dance atmosphere. I included gestures like mouth alarms, unscripted chanting, and hand claps. The students picked up on this and began adding in their own contributions. It was beautiful to see how they freely dared and embracing aspects from another culture in such an academic setting after only meeting about twenty minutes earlier.

Once we had danced for a while I set about delivering a phrase of choreography to act as a starting point for their work. I set them into groups of five and asked them to play around with the choreography and later showcase to one another. At first, a few seemed nervous until I told them that I care less if someone gets lost with the choreography, but, my interest was more in how they handle the situation and blends back into the routine. I advised them to just keep the energy through chanting and cheering as they find their way back into the choreography. That created a magical atmosphere during the creative process and the groups supported one another. Taking this approach is in line with encouraging collaboration rather than competition, a key point in my teaching philosophy.

From the narrative above it can be seen that individuals tend to express themselves better in a space where they find a sense of comfort and safety (Edmondson, 2002; Raižienė & Garckija 2013; TSQDOE, 1994). By asking students to individually find movement within their imaginary comfort zones it could be said that this allowed them freedom. It can be acknowledged that individuals may feel comfortable in varying environments (Manzo, 2005). For some it could for example be, a religious setting, in nature, or with family. As educators, we cannot assume that all students relate the same to the dance space. By asking students to tap into places of comfort to find creativity and expression there is the possibility to foster a feeling of familiarity, in turn creating a better relationship with a particular dance environment. The examples of spaces I mentioned to the group, like a club, could have seemed odd to some, but that also implied how necessary it is to acknowledge differences that arise through varying cultural and religious beliefs, perspectives or realities. It has been articulated by Salazar (2013) that educators should attempt to understand students' experiences and acknowledge the challenges that arise through diverse cultural contexts. Simultaneously it could be said that equal attention could be placed on accepting differences, in the attempt to avoid polarisation, marginalisation, and extremism. Humans are connected by a field of energy (McCorkle, 1986), implying that there are similarities within different individuals. Regardless of the diverse background of individuals, Ideally, all students should feel a sense of belonging in the dance space.

Extending on the analysis of the narrative above, it could be argued that education should encourage collaboration over competition, and that such an approach will in turn allow students to learn about each other. Price and Osborne (2000) analyse this within the notion of humanizing pedagogy as “a pedagogy in which the whole person develops and they do so as

their relationships with others evolve and enlarge” (p. 29). By engaging the students into working as team players, there is the opportunity for them to understand each other’s differences while also realizing similarities. Collaboration enables students to identify each other’s strengths and weaknesses, therefore, working together could potentially make them all winners (TSQDOE, 1994), and to appreciate one another rather than working against each other (Glynn, 2006). Extreme Competition tends to create a “me against you” mentality, in such a case, creating the thought of one is better than the other. (Fraja & Landeras, 2006). Literature indicates that competition can lead students to feel extrinsically motivated, focusing on grades and achievement, rather than ensuring actual learning and an intrinsic learning motivation (Freire 1982: Salazar, 2013). Freire (1982) suggests that education should draw away from approaches that endorse learning in reductionist, highly scripted, skill-focused, and test centric terms. Such approaches could potentially silence the student’s inner voice, as the focus is placed on criteria, and how to fit into the available one single size for all paradigm.

With collaboration, there is also the chance for learners to learn social life skills, through interaction with one another. Through collaborative dance encounters students can possibly understand more of each other’s different cultures and perspectives, which is necessary for life beyond the dance studio space that embraces difference within the world. Price and Osborne (2000) describe a humanizing pedagogy as one that promotes the over-all wellbeing of students beside acquiring academic knowledge. As educators, we hold the assumption that individuals may understand themselves better by relating with others, as in one way to know who you are is by knowing who you are not.

Mentioning to the students that there is not a ‘one right way’, and that there is no problem if “one gets lost”, could be seen as a way to offer courage to take risks and explore more with the choreography. This also allowed them more creative freedom. Cammarota and Romero (2006) suggest that teachers should express verbally and non-verbally their faith in the students’ intellectual capacities, allowing students to reveal individual perspectives without fear of negative judgement. A mistake is not necessary a failure, could rather be trigger to deriving and figuring other ways besides what might be considered as the norm or regular pathway (Risner, 2009). What we teach in classrooms should translate into the lives of the students outside of the class room (Eisner, 1994; Freire, 1982; Salazar, 2013; Shapiro, 2008) Therefore, tolerating mistakes is a communication to that falling in life is inevitable, but what matters most is how the failure is perceived and managed (Eisner, 1994). We live in an imperfect world, giving less room for risk taking and zero tolerance for mistakes is living in denial of the realities we face as humans.

An embodied statement

The next narrative recounts a teaching experience Rose had in Amman, Jordan. The narrative is followed by an unravelling of the experience and how the teaching and learning encounters intersect and challenge the notion of difference in and through dance.

Over the weeks of December 2014, I taught a series of community dance workshops for teenage girls in Amman, Jordan. The group of 12 were from various socio-economic backgrounds, all had different dance learning experiences. Some were from Jordan, others were from Syria, and two were from the Occupied West Bank of Palestine, traveling through checkpoints and border crossings to get to and from the classes that were held in Al-Balad Theatre, Downtown Amman.

Simply turning up to a dance workshop in a cultural context that could be considered somewhat suspicious of dance could be viewed as making an embodied statement. The moving, visible, dancing body, exploring and interrogating movement could be seen to have impact, in an Austinian sense, on both the cohort of 12 dancers, and also potentially on wider social and community stereotypes and binaries. Within the workshops there were encounters of breaking away from cultural stereotypes. At the most basic level, this was through young women dancing publically with the purpose of creativity, physical expression, and innovation of movement and ideas. This shifts away from the stereotype of an invisible, vulnerable, veiled, silenced, and non-embodied woman in the Arab world.

Then there were specific instances where this 'breaking away' was illustrated. In partnering work all participants took on roles of the 'lifter' and 'liftee', steering away from gender based roles that can exist in dance partnering. Within this partnering work the notion of touch also emerged as a way the group demonstrated an embodied statement, comfortable connecting limbs, holding torsos, connecting hands in a way that rubs up against a cultural fabric that does not always encourage touch within a public forum. In generating choreographic tasks and stimulation themes the group sought to explore often sat outside what might be considered 'culturally' acceptable for public discussion – investigating and questioning themes of sexual identity, abuse; religion; and gender identities through their dance making. Such explorations revealed a desire to encounter fluidity in identity, and openness to disrupt and critique dominant images, stereotypes, and ideals.

From unpacking the narrative above, it could be said that dance education practices that are situated within safe and inclusive spaces, may also allow for gender stereotypes and differences, grounded within very specific cultural, social or religious contexts, to be transcended (see: Martin 2013) and difference to emerge. In the dance workshop the group of young women were encouraged and supported to dance publically with the purpose of creativity, physical expression, and innovation of movement and ideas. This support came through facilitators working closely over extended periods of time with the young women and their families, and including wider community stakeholders (such as local educators and arts organizations) in dialogue about the dancing. This active inclusion of others within the dance education encounter potentially created greater understanding of the motivation and activities within the dancing, allowing the voices of diverse parties to be heard, and in turn creating greater acceptance of the notion of difference.

This act of dancing within a supportive environment shifted the young women away solely adhering to the gender stereotypes that permeate women and dance in a certain cultural context, rather it allowed difference to emerge. Similar encounters have been noted by Lebanese dance scholar Krystel Khoury (2014), who explains that dance practices within the cultural context of the Arab world can reveal “new perceptions of the body’s potential and awakening a strong feeling of empowerment” (p.97) within wider socio-cultural norms. The discussion of disrupting gender assumptions and expectations within the dance class connects with literature most notably from scholars such as Susan Stinson (1998, 2005) and Sherry Shapiro (1998). In generating choreographic tasks and stimulation within an environment where the young women felt a sense of safety, themes explored often sat outside what might be considered ‘culturally’ acceptable for public discussion. For example, investigating and questioning themes of sexual identity; abuse; religion; and gender identities through their

dance making. Such explorations revealed a desire to encounter fluidity in identity, and openness to disrupt and critique dominant images, stereotypes, and ideals.

It could be said that dance education practices, that are sensitive to the intercultural dimension that exists when people from different cultures are together in classes, can put an emphasis on practicing to 'see' with the whole body, that is seeing others through trying their ways of moving and thus experiencing what it is like to move and be like them (van Manen 2004). Such practice makes young people more aware of both the differences in their groups, but also, they can become more aware of who they are themselves. Presumptions about others and how they are can be questioned and discussed through such practice and might therefore help fostering acceptance of diverse ways of being in a group.

Closed off the mirrors

This third, and final narrative within the article, is from Antonio's reflections when teaching a studio class at the University of Auckland. Like previous narratives, this will be shared and then considered.

As a community based dance practitioner without any prior dance institutional experience, the opportunity of teaching in an academic setting at the University of Auckland, gave me a reflective moment about my teaching philosophy and pedagogical approach. The assumption is that, usually one teaches according to how they learnt (how they were taught). In my community dance experience, the philosophy was that everyone is a student and everyone is a teacher, based on peer skill-sharing without hierarchy's. During my fellowship with the University, I taught an urban dance choreography to students in the dance studio. In this context, urban

dance being a fusion of hip-hop with an influence of movements from Uganda (Africa). I opened the session with a vigorous warmup, including playful and funny movements.

I chose to set the choreography to a West-African afro-pop song. I felt that it might initiate a certain level of energy into the choreography and allow a wide range of expressions to emerge. It was a relatively 'happy' song that allowed fun and play into the learning activity.

In between the set choreography I intentionally put some freestyle counts so that each individual has a chance to freely move their own way and hopefully bring out their inner feelings towards the song. The group seemed to embrace the idea and gave substantial physical input, which was evident by how much they were sweating and breathing heavily when the music stopped. After having a short break, I mentioned to the group that we need to memorize the choreography and movements with our bodies, not only our minds. Then I tried a few exercises. First, I closed the curtains over the studio mirrors, and we did the choreography while often switching lines, having a new group in front. Secondly, I split the group in to two, and they danced one after the other while facing each other. Keeping the same directions, the two groups did the dance at the same time while facing each other, with the aim to share and boost each other's energy. It was a good experiment to trust oneself so as not to be destructed by the opposite movement direction of the other group. By looking at how they seemed to enjoy the activity, we tried doing the choreography while each person was facing in whatever direction of their choice.

The approach in the experience above was to try to turn the dance classroom into the type of community Antonio learnt through, a community setting, one that was more relaxed and informal than what might usually occur within a dance studio. Such an approach required some breaking of 'rules' and hierarchies of the teacher student relationship in order to create a tension free atmosphere. Such an approach connects with Eisner's (1994) statement that "to bring about significant change in schools requires, among other things, changing the images that teachers hold at work" (p.6). With this in mind, it could be said that such an approach may allow the view that each person is an individual, while also noticing the commonalities that unify a community (Freire, 1982). Antonio's intention was to view the learning process as a knowledge-sharing space, to hopefully create a trustworthy relationship with the students, and amongst themselves.

It could be seen that the aspect of fun and play was a way to bridge the gaps between the differences (Stinson, 1997). Regardless of the diverse backgrounds in the dance studio, highlighting such commonalities was equally essential. Through the element of fun and play, there is the possibility for hierarchy to be shifted and even dismantled in some way (Eisner, 1994; Stinson, 1997), therefore allowing the students to comfortably share their individual feelings in the atmosphere.

By including freestyle counts into the choreography, it provided a way of offering students some control and ownership over their feelings and emotions in the movement presented in the studio, in turn also determining how knowledge is passed on with the process. Such an approach is in line with Freire's (1982) notion that humans are motivated by a need to reason and engage in the process of becoming. Ideally this engagement and reasoning might trigger a certain level of individual inspiration and motivation to engage fully in learning process. As

Salazar (2013) claims, humans are motivated by their cognitive capacity to shape their experiences and achieve personal and collective self-actualisation. During the freestyling moment, some students were more daring than others, some took risks and others remained more within their comfort zone. As educators, it could be said that there is a need within the learning space to giving opportunities to listen, observe, identify and acknowledge difference within the personalities of the people. Such an idea resonates with Freire's (1982) notion of encourages teachers to listen to the learners and build on their experiences so as advance the learning process by individualizing education.

Though the nature of the choreography required high physical energy, the feeling of them having sense of ownership in the process, kept the group energized throughout the session. Potentially through the students' participation in the 'how' of the learning process they can develop a learning disposition that is self-motivated (Freire 1982: Salazar 2013). Rather than the tasks becoming a burden within the learning context, they become enjoyable and fun, allowing the students to develop an appreciation for the activity and the learning process, rather than viewing it as an obligation.

Within the narrative there is also a sense of spontaneity. Spontaneousness by teachers can allow customization of the learning process to a particular class since each one can be unique. Eisner (1994) noted that teachers tend to treat all students alike with respect to rule enforcement, which submerges student's individuality. Therefore, there in a need for structure in teaching but one that is flexible. As the students faced different directions while doing same choreography, it was interesting to identify both difference and unison with the dance studio. In the same way, it could be viewed that it is possible to have structures in education that accommodate both the differences and commonalities of the learners. The one

size fit all paradigm cannot account for the diversity of humanity. This could be likened to the simple notion of having a belt with one hole meant to fit several people, yet if the same belt had multiple holes, then it is adjustable and fitting to different bodies.

Conclusion

The average number of years spent at schooling in Uganda and New Zealand are about 15 years: seven years of primary school, four years of ordinary secondary level, two years of advanced secondary level, and three years of a Bachelor's degree. Several people have extra years counting early years of nursery and further years of post-graduate studies. We personally did not enjoy school for the most part, and such feelings may resonate with others' experiences. To some level of surprise, when we embarked on study within a postgraduate university setting we enjoyed learning, perhaps because we found that what and how we were learning had relevance to the lives we were living. Returning to study, after experiencing years of practice in communities gave us something to reflecting on. Through such reflections there was the opportunity to better understand ourselves and our practice.

This got us believing that education would serve an even better purpose if it is entirely linked to people's current lives and societies they live in. Society constantly evolves but for some reason classrooms and schools have remained in the same setting for years. The quick advancing world of technology has taught us how to individually customise devices, if compared to the education settings, it seems like there is less evolution in education.

Academia needs disruption and interruptions to enable humans to better their individual capacities. We find it as a shame to see dance performances choreographed by individual students from a particular class but, most of what one sees in their bodies on stage is their

teacher. We believe dance should be one of greatest art of expression that should draw us away from becoming Robots or puppets. Creating duplicates of the teacher in the students is to blocks personal voices and narrowing creativity, and to a broader sense limiting the development of one's full humanity. The teaching approaches should allow students to be the best that they can be rather than leading them into becoming like an extension of teacher.

Perhaps educations should intend to look inwards into humanity and try raise questions of "who am I?", why am I here...? Dance should build people's relationships with their bodies and create safe spaces for understanding one another, to view life as episodes to experience rather than entirely chasing towards a not clear distinct happy ending. We find that, the popular education system teaches more about the world we live in and less of us who live in the world. In our opinion, critically looking at community behaviours and cultural patterns, and find means to incorporate such characteristic into learning and teaching methods, would make an advancement to education. (McCarthy-Brown, 2009)

In many cases students go from bachelors to masters, we would assume the best way to master anything is living it. We believe some sectors require someone to live it before you can master it in addition to research and study. Thereby, not only relying on other's references but equally looking at one's personal experience and feeling.

Education could serve a better purpose if we could derive ways to encourage students to want to attend school. Making it a fun enjoyable activity could help towards that cause; looking into how that joy could be shared within the peers, while putting a focus on embracing difference in the process as mutual relationships emerge. Perhaps It could be enjoyable if it directly translates into one's life outside of classroom, that is, customised towards the

development of one's full humanity. Further education practice and research should look more into exploring the primary essence to life; looking at the co-existence of individuals' differences and commonalities as human, with intentions to hopefully bring about unification of the race as we understand and celebrate one another, assuming that would help in making the world a much safer place for all.

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