

## **Life-Changing Life Journeys through Artistic and Educational Inclusive Contemporary Dance Contexts**

**Tone Pernille Østern, Elen Øyen & Philip Channells**

### **Abstract**

This chapter presents a case study of two of the authors—Elen, a dancer, and Philip, a choreographer-teacher. It focuses on their experiences of change through long-term engagement in inclusive contemporary dance contexts, and how this participation has contributed to their quality of life. In this study, “inclusive contemporary dance context” refers to a dance community where differently bodied dancers, with and without disabilities, and little or much previous experience of dance, participate in and contribute to artistic and educational dance processes, often culminating in performances on stage. Individual meanings and shared themes are identified through holistic life story analysis of the two artists’ written stories completed for the study. Participants’ experiences are interpreted with the help of theory about aesthetic transformation and learning within a wider framework of dance art, dance education and quality of life.

**Key words:** dance art, inclusive dance, transformative change, the lived experience of dance, narrative research, life story research

### **Introduction**

The three co-authors have been involved in inclusive contemporary dance contexts for several years in diverse roles of dance teacher, choreographer, and researcher (Tone), choreographer and dance teacher (Philip), and dancer (Elen). We perceive that this involvement has inspired significant life changes that have contributed to our quality of life. We come from and live in different parts of the globe (Finland, Australia and Norway) but

have worked together in different constellations over years and know one another well. Tone and Elen danced together as choreographer-teacher and dancer in a community dance company in Norway (2005-2012), and since 2012 have freelanced as teaching partners in various settings. Tone has worked with arts education in higher education since 2009. Philip works with inclusive dance in Australia and worldwide, and led a four-week project in Norway in 2012 where we all met. Philip and Tone have presented together at international conferences.

As researchers and authors we have studied various aspects of inclusive dance: meaning-making among differently bodied dancers in an improvisation-based project (Østern, 2009); difference as a creative and critical force in teacher education (Østern & Øyen, 2014a); embodied transformative learning in improvisation with differently bodied dancers (Østern & Øyen, 2015); inclusive dance as an educational experience of plurality (Østern, 2015); the choreographer's reflections on creative process in an inclusive dance project (Channells, 2015); and deep learning and teaching as affordances in inclusive dance and arts education (Østern & Channells, 2016). In this chapter, we seek to understand how Elen's and Philip's experiences in inclusive dance contexts have contributed to their quality of life.

In an encyclopedia article on dance and the quality of life, Bond (2014) writes that systematic inquiry on dance and the quality of life is a recent development and that dance remains underrepresented in the literature relative to other arts. She surveys a range of scholarship related to dance and the quality of life, highlighting numerous associations including emotional wellbeing and optimism, experience of freedom, improvement in self-esteem, stress relief, promotion of community and solidarity, the ability to express the ineffable in dance, and the experience of transformation and change in dance, among others.

She asks for more empirical research on the topic. In this chapter, we try to make a small, empirically-based contribution to the field through a case study approach.

### **Inclusive Contemporary Dance – A Brief Overview**

In short, inclusive dance within contemporary dance contexts highlights, values and draws on cultural pluralism and diversity to experience and create dance (Albright, 1997; Benjamin, 2002; Channells, 2015; Koppers, 2001, 2006, 2015; Østern, 2009, 2015; Østern & Øyen, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). In this chapter “inclusive contemporary dance context” refers to an artistic and/or educational dance community where differently bodied dancers, with and without disabilities, and with little or much previous experience of dance, participate in and contribute to creative dance processes, often ending up in performances on stage. The contexts we have been involved in are artistic and educational. Our work maintains a focus on dance as art and/or education and aims at examining what dance can mean in the meeting between different dancers where the intention is to meet, explore and create dance *as equals*. This supports a view that all participants, with their different abilities and disabilities, are active and creative contributors in dance.

### **Research Methodology**

Designing this study, we turned to life story research (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Pérez, 2006; Wigg, 2015) and narrative inquiry (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The experiences of change we illuminate happened slowly. Life story methodology seemed a plausible approach to address the question: *How can participation in inclusive dance contexts contribute to quality of life?* Wigg (2015) characterises life story research as belonging to a larger methodological tradition often referred to as biographical. This approach suits well when researchers are interested in people’s experiences in a longer-term perspective, as we are in this study. The aim with life story research is not to reveal what is

‘true’ about a person’s life, but how the participant constructs meaning of and coherence in their life through telling, or as in our case, writing.

In this study, self-reflexive texts written by Elen and Philip are the focus of analysis; in other words, their life experiences create the basis for this chapter. In line with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we do not believe that Elen’s and Philip’s experiences of meaning in dance are only *articulated* through their writings, but also *created* through the narrative work they perform as they write. Tone stays on the outside and does not provide life stories. Instead, in this chapter, she contributes a more analytic perspective, meaning that she reads the stories produced by Elen and Philip with a more external eye, looking for what seems central to their participation in inclusive dance and its contribution to their quality of life. Within this collaboration, we seek to create a mix of nearness and distance to our research material.

Elen and Philip spent three weeks writing self-reflexively about the following theme: *How participation in inclusive dance contexts contributed to my life – examples and reflections*. As we were discussing how to analyse the material we turned to what Wigg (2015) calls *holistic* and *thematic* approaches to life story research, combined with a narrative inquiry approach. According to Wigg, holistic form analysis looks at a life story as a whole and tries to create an emplotment, like a dramaturgy of the life story. The primary question in a holistic life story analysis is how the research participant understands their self and organises their life story to create meaning. In our case, this holistic life story analysis is conducted mainly by Elen and Philip themselves. As they spent three weeks writing based on the prompt we formulated—Elen in Norway and Philip in Australia, they independently wrote about their lives in a chronological way. They both started with childhood, which was not something we had talked about but an independent choice by each of them. In writing, they each chose to emphasise certain aspects while allowing others to fall more in the

background. They both sent their texts to the whole group and we all read and commented on them. From that reading and that discussion, Tone began to structure the chapter. As Tone read the texts, being more on the outside from the personal experiences Philip and Elen wrote about, and with an eye for the research question—*How can participation in inclusive dance contexts contribute to quality of life?* she suggested what narrative theorists Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) call *nodal points*. Nodal points are aspects that seem central or pivotal to the story; the nodal points Tone suggested were all discussed with Elen and Philip. Gradually, Tone also began to identify *central themes* in the stories. In this she aimed to condense the highlighted nodal points into individual themes that were then compared across Elen's and Philip's stories.

To sum up our collaborative work, Elen and Philip have been a driving force in writing their life journeys through inclusive dance contexts, whereas Tone has been a driving force in identifying nodal points, doing the thematic analysis, and structuring the chapter. Put simply, Elen and Philip contribute with nearness to their own lived experiences, whereas Tone contributes with a more analytical distance.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In this case study, we move very close to Elen's and Philip's lives as dancer and choreographer-dance teacher, respectively. They become vulnerable and exposed. Ethical considerations have therefore been important throughout. The project was approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Official for Research. Elen and Philip, as participants contributing their life stories, have had equal influence and authority for the analysis—what to say, what to expose, and what to remove. We have all three read, commented, corrected, discussed, and approved all parts of the analyses and its resulting chapter. We have discussed all material between us by email, we have Skyped, and Tone and Elen (living in Norway)

have met in person. In this way, we tried to implement a genuinely collaborative inquiry (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013), although we live on opposite sides of Earth.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Meetings in dance between differently bodied people with unique life experiences can set off a process of change among participants. Such meetings have the possibility to become a space for transformative learning and growth. We stress that deep learning and change are possibilities, not phenomena that occur in inclusive contemporary dance contexts automatically. As we have argued elsewhere (Østern & Channells, 2016) and in dialogue with Tochon (2010), the possibility for deep learning and change is present in inclusive contemporary dance contexts as these are places that reach to the whole person (participant-student and choreographer-teacher) and are characterised by difference and plurality.

Further, inquiry and creation in inclusive dance are fulfilled in action. The dance and the choreography incorporate participant experiences as material and the context is organised as a semi-structured physical and verbal dialogue around a theme being explored in dance (Anttila, 2013a, 2013b; Channells, 2015; Østern, 2015; Tochon, 2010). Improvisational and choreographic processes are relational and dialogic, with elements of risk-taking and challenge (Albright, 1997, 2003; Bozic & Olsson, 2013; Rustad, 2013). These characteristics of artistic and/or educational processes in inclusive contemporary dance contexts can serve as sparks for change.

Since we come from dance art and education, we interpret the experiences of change analysed in this chapter in terms of aesthetic transformation (Bond, 2008; Dewey, 1934/1980; Østern, AL, 2008), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), experience-based transformation of the body-subject in dance and the importance of dance as a bodily art form (Fraleigh, 1987; Parviainen, 1998), difference and plurality in dance (Benjamin, 2002; Bond, 2017; Bond & Etwaroo, 2005; Channells, 2015; Kupperts, 2001, 2006; Østern & Øyen,

2014a, 2014b, 2015), and the choreographer-teacher's role (Buber, 1995; Stavik-Karlsen, 2014). We interweave these theoretical perspectives in this chapter.

### **Elen's Life Journey**



**Figure 1. Elen dancing with Anne Marit Ligaard and Luis Della Mea, dancers in The Dance Laboratory**

**Photographer: Jøran Wærdahl / Klipp & Lim**

Elen is 36 years old as this chapter is written. She has spina bifida, a neural tube defect resulting in incomplete development of the spinal cord (Mayo Clinic, 2016). Elen uses a wheelchair. In Figure 1 she can be seen with fellow dancers Anne Marit and Luis in The Dance Laboratory, the community dance company she belongs to in Norway. As we analyse Elen's story as a meaning-making emplotment, or dramaturgy, we highlight nodal points with bold font to indicate their specific relevance to how inclusive dance contributes to her quality of life.

Elen's life journey story starts before inclusive dance enters her life. She describes a time of confusion and **crisis**:

2005 changed my life in so many ways. The year started with losing my best friend. Apart from that, I was also in the middle of a life crisis, experiencing a moderate depression, and having no self-esteem whatsoever.

Elen was in need of change. An inclusive dance project existed in her town (later developing into a community dance company), and a friend invited her to try it out. Elen was hesitant, but this changed when she went with her friend to **see a performance** of the group.

It really moved me, in a way I had never been moved by a dance performance. It was a kind of group and performance I had no idea existed. It was so full of quality and new ideas...a very contemporary expression. And it had differently bodied dancers. All kinds of people, with all kinds of bodies had access to that stage. Professionals, amateurs, people with disabilities, people without disabilities. That so many different people could create such a contemporary performance with such high quality really inspired me.

Even though seeing a performance motivated her to begin inclusive dance classes, Elen again experienced hesitation, which remained until the group started working on a new performance. Over time, the performance work and **performing itself** became a main motivation for her to go on with dance:

We started working on a new performance. I still thought the others were better than me, but I felt a motivation working towards something specific. It took blood, sweat, and oh so many tears. But I made it to the first show. I even opened the show. With talking in front of the audience! And eleven years and so many milestones and powerful moments later, here I am.

As the first performance took form, I truly felt I was a part of something important. It wasn't just about learning a few dance moves and showing it to a few people that I knew, just for fun. I had personally been a big part of the whole process towards the performance. I felt **ownership** for the choreography, because it was based on my improvisations. And **most importantly**: The performance was **high quality**. To show an audience true art of high quality did and still does do something for my self-confidence. It's really art!

And after the performances I get a lot of feedback from the audience. People say this is nothing like they have seen before. That so many different people can share the same stage, that everyone is equally important. The fact that my ideas and movements can be a part of such an innovative performance makes me proud...of myself and of the group. Art gives something both to me and an audience. To be a part of the whole process from creating dance to learning it and finally performing it, feels empowering. It's my dance that I created and learned. I **give my dance to other people**, who are touched by it.

In Elen's dance company, the dancers work a lot with improvisation but they also create choreography through creative processes. In other words, they work with dance as an art form, emphasising both the creative process and the product created collaboratively in the group. This working towards something specific through creative processes was the key to open the world of dance for Elen. Improvising, composing, creating choreography, creating something specific and then communicating that to an audience, in other words **opening up dance as a full art form**, has been important for Elen's engagement in dance and how dance contributes to her quality of life

In her writing Elen starts and ends with her mother. A life-thread of a strong mother and **the deep relation between mother and daughter** runs through her story. She

emphasises that **she has changed** through participation in inclusive dance, but has also **come to value the life she has always lived**. In the inclusive dance context, she finds similar values as those of her mother:

I have a mother who from the day I was born was set on giving me the same opportunities as everyone else...the tools to live an independent and complete life among “ordinary” people. Her idea of giving me quality of life was reminding me and everyone around me that despite my physical disability, there is a whole person inside of me with qualities like everyone else.

Throughout my life, I have experienced many attempts by society to put me in the “disability box.” People associating disability with something sad and assuming that I am this sad person who needs help with everything is the hardest part of having a disability. Not the disability in itself. My mother showed me from an early age that I am as ordinary and extraordinary as everyone else.

My point of all this is this: with the inclusive community dance company, I found a whole group with the same idea that my mother had during my childhood. A diagnosis doesn't define a person, it's just a small part of that person. Difference is not a bad thing. It is a huge resource. In this case, this resource is used in creating art. With The Dance Laboratory I have a whole group of people behind me supporting the idea that difference is a resource, not a disadvantage. I have a whole group with me showing that people are people. Not disabled people. Not black or white people. Not thick or thin people. Not tall or small people. But people.

In the inclusive dance context, Elen's belief (attributed to her mother) that **different people cannot and should not be put into separate boxes**, is strengthened. Her experience of differences among people being a value and resource to creating dance art is liberating. In inclusive contemporary dance art and/or education, difference among dancers is seen as

central and valuable, not additional (Bond, 2017; Bond & Etwaroo, 2005; Bond & Gerdes, 2012; Østern, 2009). Difference is not an ingredient that is being put on top of an already existing dance activity. Instead, inclusive dance starts from a genuine interest in difference and what that can give rise to in terms of aesthetic, artistic and pedagogical processes and products.

The meeting between diverse dancers is central for inclusive dance to become truly inclusive. Art educationalist A-L. Østern (2008) dialogues with John Dewey's (1934/1980) transformative aesthetic theory presented in *Art as Experience* as she writes about how transformation in art education or artistic experiences happens in the space between what I already know and the unknown. Such gaps become spaces for learning. Through aesthetic experiences in dance, dancers change both in bodily ways and in their "habits of mind" (Mezirow, 1991). In the words of dance phenomenologists Fraleigh (1987) and Parviainen (1998) an experience-based transformation of the body-subject takes place. In inclusive dance contexts, there is a strong aspect of the unknown, represented by the differences among dancers, bodies and experiences.

Another nodal point for how inclusive dance has contributed to quality of life in Elen's story is her experience of **being treated as anybody** in inclusive contemporary dance, in contrast with (as a wheelchair-user) often feeling underrated and treated like somebody in need of help in everyday situations. She writes, "Being told all the time that you are weaker than you are feels unfair, and so much of your day consists of telling people that you can do a lot more than people around you think." Elen describes how the experience of improvised duets with partners who have treated her as "anybody" has been ground breaking, giving her a **feeling of integrity**. Just the feeling of being treated like an ordinary adult, being trusted, being given body weight by a partner in dance, and not being treated carefully, has been liberating and strengthening (see also Østern & Øyen, 2015, p. 134).

One moment in the dance company stands out as unforgettable when it comes to improvisation. The whole group would improvise. Suddenly I found myself dancing in dialogue with a dance artist I didn't know personally at the time. This woman I was confident with at first touch. She had a clear body and clear movements. Although she did not know me, she was not afraid to try things out with me. She leaned on me, laid on me, used her weight on me. Dragged me in different directions. At one point I was almost on my way out of the chair. She trusted that I could take her strength. She was not being careful with me. I felt I was given a lot of trust. And because of that, I trusted her as well. She had confidence that I was going to endure what she did. To her I was a full-fledged dance partner, not a person she had to be more careful with because I was in a wheelchair.

In the duet with this non-disabled woman, for the first time in many years I had a feeling of being taken seriously by someone my age. She didn't look down on me like I expected she would, she treated me like an adult dancer like her. She treated me like an equal. Being a dancer in an inclusive dance group just wipes away the artificial line between "us and them."

Along with experiences of being treated as "anybody," Elen **builds integrity**. When she teaches student teachers about inclusive pedagogy alongside Tone, she often talks a lot about how participation in inclusive dance contexts has given her a feeling of integrity. With integrity she means the feeling of being whole, of being respected and valued as she is, of having the feeling that her ideas and movements are welcome and important in the group, of being treated like an adult (which people using a wheelchair do not always experience, but rather may experience being underrated, treated like a child or helped "too much"):

Although I have no education in dance, I am considered just as valuable a dancer as the trained dancers in the group. What I do is as important and good as what they do.

For the first time in my life, I feel like I have integrity, and that is truly an amazing feeling.

Fraleigh (1987), Parviainen (1998), and Østern & Øyen (2015) write about how dance contributes to experience-based change of the body-subject precisely because of the movement experiences that dance offers. In the above-described duet, qualities of Elen and her partner's relationship developed through sharing full weight, a clear touch, and being stretched in different directions. Sensing and relating through weight sharing gave Elen a feeling of confidence, physical integrity as she was treated like “*anybody*” and not like a fragile body, and social power. Elen is moving through change. As she is going through bodily, experience-based change, she finds herself creating a new space where she can take up more physical and psychological room, speak her mind, and set boundaries, becoming more open and integrated at the same time. Scholars have emphasized how improvisation has an important function in opening the individual to transformative learning and change, and that what happens in the dance studio influences life outside and vice versa (Albright & Gere, 2003; Benjamin, 2002).

Another important nodal point we locate in Elen's life story is the lived experience of dance. The kinds of **body contact and communication** she has found in inclusive dance contexts have made a huge impact on her. The meetings—the exchange of information and knowledge in dance, are primarily experienced through movement (Albright, 1997; Albright & Gere, 2003; Sheets-Johnstone, 2009). Bodily communication in dance improvisation often includes the exchange of touch. Touch engaged in dance improvisation is not *any* kind of touch, but a *specific* kind. Touch is engaged to allow the dancers to communicate through different body surfaces: through the skin, through the contours of the body, through taking and giving weight. Through touch, dancers may give and take information as they

acknowledge each other, experience each other's bodies and construct each other. This skin-to-skin communication is very direct. Elen writes:

I have gotten used to being in contact with many different bodies with different stories. We are very focused on contact improvisation in the dance company. In every dance class I learn something new about my own body. My boundaries. My strengths. My weaknesses. I learn to listen to my body. And also, to listen to other people's bodies, signals, boundaries. I feel enormously grateful for having learned that lesson.

In ending her story, Elen points to how her developed skills in and understanding of bodily communication brings quality to the relationship with her mother, who is now, eleven years later, seriously ill:

My mother is seriously ill with Alzheimer's. She has almost no spoken language left. Every time I see her I feel so grateful that through inclusive dance I have learned to pick up bodily signals. And I am not afraid to touch her. I am not afraid to see her weak. Though it hurts to see my strong, secure mother disappear into the disease, I feel secure enough in my own body to take it. To be there for her. Even though it has become hard to have a conversation with her, I can still hold her hand. Mirror her when she smiles. Stroke her hand when she cries. Have a calm body language, a steady body no matter what. Seeing the value in music and movement when I'm with her. To have the ability to not get scared and run away from my mother's disease is something I have learned from dancing with so many different people. No body or situation is too scary to handle.

Through this holistic life story analysis we have tried to follow Elen on her life journey through inclusive dance contexts, lifting forwards so called nodal points that have had special value for the phenomenon of inquiry on Elen's journey. We looked at her life journey as a whole and then condensed the identified nodal points into central themes. Table

1 presents both the nodal points (in order of their appearance in Elen's text) and the themes that best appear to answer the question, *How has participation in inclusive dance contexts contributed to Elen's quality of life?*

Nodal Points	Themes
<p><b>Crisis</b></p> <p><b>Seeing a performance</b></p> <p><b>Performing itself</b></p> <p><b>Giving my dance to other people</b></p> <p><b>Ownership of the dance created</b></p> <p><b>Experiencing our dance as a full art form of high quality</b></p> <p><b>The deep relation between mother and daughter</b></p> <p><b>Moving through change</b></p> <p><b>Coming to value the life she has always lived</b></p> <p><b>Different people cannot and should not be put into separate boxes.</b></p> <p><b>Being treated as <i>any</i> body</b></p> <p><b>Feeling of integrity</b></p> <p><b>Building integrity</b></p> <p><b>Body contact and communication</b></p>	<p><b>Embodied relations</b></p> <p><b>Body contact and communication</b></p> <p><b>Dance as improvisation, choreography, performance and communication</b></p> <p><b>A valuing of difference among people</b></p> <p><b>Building integrity—being treated as <i>any</i> body</b></p> <p><b>Becoming herself</b></p> <p><b>Transformative change</b></p>

**Table 1. How Elen's participation in inclusive dance contexts have contributed to her quality of life**

We now turn to Philip's life-journey through inclusive dance contexts, and will return to themes identified in Elen's story in later discussion.

### Philip's Life Journey



**Figure 2. Philip choreographing at MultiPlié Dance Festival in Trondheim, Norway (2012). Photo: Arne Hauge**

At this writing, Philip is 46 years old. He presents himself as a dance artist with a disability, but his disability is invisible and he is not met with the same societal prejudices as Elen, who uses a wheelchair. Philip's story starts from a point where dance was not part of his life.

Who would've thought I'd become a dancer working in disability-inclusive dance? Certainly not me. I grew up in a working class family who, like many white, privileged Australian families with a big back yard, were more interested in playing sports than in the performing arts and culture. In fact, dare I out myself on this detail

about my childhood and youth, but apart from going to the movies and watching TV,

I wasn't introduced to dance as an art form until I was in my late 20s.

Leaving his family and home as he became an adult, travelling around the world, and then returning to Australia at the age of 26, Philip writes about how he was introduced to a dance class and discovered that he loved it. He prepared rapidly to audition to study dance in higher education, but ten days before his audition sustained a severe car accident, throwing him into a **life crisis**. A long period of recovery lay ahead, giving Philip time to think.

I needed direction in my life, I needed purpose and a reason for living, which I hadn't discovered in my four years travelling abroad. Some say they go travelling to find themselves...I didn't. I guess I was not really looking for that. But I think I finally woke up and realized that I needed to dance.

After months of recovery, Philip finally reached a point where he could skip and then run along the beach again. During that time, he also came to the realisation that he needed dance to be part of his life. A men's dance group was about to start up in a nearby town, and Philip found himself dancing in a non-judgmental environment where he could feel safe to be expressive in the way he wanted. This was also the environment where he **found, or allowed, his own sexuality**—a turning point in his life. **Dance served as a catalyst for change** (Albright & Gere, 2003; Benjamin, 2002; Bond & Etwaroo, 2005; Fraleigh, 1987; Parviainen, 1998; Østern, 2009).

I recall dancing with a guy and for the first time I felt the warmth of touch of another man. It was gentle and caring, strong and sensitive. This surprised me, I guess because I had not wished to acknowledge my tendencies to be attracted to men. I had probably spent a great proportion of my teen and adult life running from the possibility that I could love another man intimately. This dance made me realize it's absolutely possible, and it felt so right for me. I felt like I could be myself whilst at

the same time it scared me—it was such a new experience. But none-the-less, it is another period of my life where dance was a catalyst to change.

In this dance context, Philip had the feeling of **being able to be himself** (albeit a scary feeling).

Philip moved to a city and started his professional training as a dance artist. This is also the point where he first attended a dance class for people with and without disabilities. He describes this as an overwhelming experience of having “**found myself**” even though it took him two weeks to pick up the courage to try again.

I realized dance was the unifying language and that no matter what our background, we all had something to say, something to offer, something to express, openly and without judgment. I remember finishing the class and running and skipping down the street so elated that I had “found myself”—found something that was meaningful in a place where I could just be me. It was dance that was neither wrong nor right. It was a place where everyone was valued, and I felt empowered by this. Without being able to put my finger on what it was exactly about the people I danced with that night that made me feel so alive, I can recall thinking, “this is it!” This is what life’s all about.

Starting from discovering a fascination for **unique individual movements by uniquely bodied dancers** (Albright, 1997; Benjamin, 2002; Bond, 1994, 2008; Channells, 2015; Koppers, 2006), Philip grew more and more into becoming a professional dance artist, also beginning his **choreographic journey** in the inclusive contemporary dance landscape, and with inspiration from inclusive dance artists like Adam Benjamin, Sally Chance, Ingrid Voorendt, and Kat Worth. A nodal point in his meaning-making life journey was when he started paying attention to **culture and politics** of disability on one hand and contemporary dance choreography on the other. Working in inclusive dance contexts often includes being

politically engaged (Albright & Brandstetter, 2015; Albright & Gere, 2003; Benjamin, 2002; Koppers, 2001, 2006, 2015; Østern, 2009).

The culture and politics of disability and the culture and politics of contemporary dance were equally complex and yet I felt there was potential for them to collide in a way that was positive and nurturing. I saw scope to provide other people an opportunity to challenge their own perceptions of difference and equality as I had done very early on in my career.

As an artistic space characterised by plurality, inclusive contemporary dance can open up a political space in a clear and loud way. Differently bodied dancers bring their unique life experiences right into the dance studio. The (im)possibilities that different dancers have had in life and dance, the expectations of viewers towards different people's body capacities (Bresnahan & Deckard, this volume; Whatley, 2007), and the tacitly different ways of relating to different people turn up and offer possibilities to change, expect and act differently. However, opening up a political space and acting differently is a possibility, not something that happens in inclusive dance automatically.

While political awareness can be manifested and investigated in the very choreographic work on the movement level (Albright, 1997, 2003; Albright & Brandstetter, 2015), democratic ways of acting need to have influence right into the choreographic process. During Philip's artistic journey, he continuously studied how creative processes could be developed in dialogue and through an investigating approach to movement together with different and unique dancers, resulting in performative "magic." He tells about his meeting with a choreographer in an inclusive dance context:

I was impressed with her ability to harness the individual strengths and creative nuances of performers she had only just met. In a short period of time, she created what I thought was a masterpiece with a cast of adults with a wide range of skills and

abilities, some who had never performed before. She performed magic. It was jaw dropping. I wanted that, **I wanted to learn** how to do that, how to be that patient, **how to look for that unique something about someone** and turn it into a performative gesture or phrase that gave meaning to dance. It wasn't the dance steps that were important, it was the connections the performers made to each other, to the music and to the audience that I found astonishing. I continue to **search for a process that gives meaning to the work from which a performer "owns" their creativity.**

The final nodal point we lift forward in Philip's story is how he, now as an experienced choreographer and dance teacher, discovered his own **compassion, vulnerability and intuition** as important in the creative processes of choreographing.

I realized compassion and consideration is an important aspect of how I work and unless I am also willing to be honest enough to express my own vulnerability in the creative process, I am hardly qualified to expect this from the performers. More importantly, what I have learnt is that my intuition is finely tuned and this I know creates a deeper learning experience.

Educational philosopher Stavik-Karlsen (2014) describes a "pedagogy of vulnerability," building on his reading of philosopher Martin Buber. A meeting, Stavik-Karlsen argues, can only be a real meeting if it is open and not rigorously planned in advanced; in this lies the paradox of vulnerability (p. 166). The strength of a trustworthy choreographer/teacher resides in finding the courage needed to be vulnerable in meeting the dancer/pupil. The teacher needs to have courage to be open to investigating creative learning processes, and to partake in those him/herself, even if it means being personal and vulnerable.

Again, in Table 2, we condense the nodal points that we have lifted forward through holistic life story analysis of Philip's life journey through inclusive dance contexts into

themes that best appear to answer the research question, *How has participation in inclusive dance contexts contributed to Philip's quality of life?*

Nodal Points	Themes
<p><b>Life crisis</b></p> <p><b>Finding, or allowing, his sexual identity</b></p> <p><b>Dance was as a catalyst for change</b></p> <p><b>Being able to be himself</b></p> <p><b>Finding himself</b></p> <p><b>Unique individual movements by uniquely bodied dancers</b></p> <p><b>Choreographic journey</b></p> <p><b>Culture and politics of disability and dance</b></p> <p><b>Choreographic work on the movement level</b></p> <p><b>Searching for a choreographic process that gives meaning to the work from which a performer "owns" their creativity.</b></p> <p><b>Compassion, vulnerability, and intuition</b></p>	<p><b>Becoming himself</b></p> <p><b>A valuing of difference among people</b></p> <p><b>Dance as improvisation, choreography and communication</b></p> <p><b>Political engagement in society and in movement</b></p> <p><b>A journey towards collaborative choreographic processes</b></p> <p><b>Development of compassion, vulnerability and intuition as choreographer/teacher</b></p> <p><b>Transformative change</b></p>

**Table 2. How Philip's participation in inclusive dance contexts has contributed to his quality of life**

Elen and Philip make meaning through the stories they tell, and through life story analysis it is possible to see the importance of inclusive dance in their lives. Both stories show that inclusive contemporary dance contexts are pivotal spaces where quality of life has been nurtured. Elen's and Philip's journeys through inclusive dance are different and similar.

In the next and final section of the chapter, we return to the individual themes identified through the analyses and discuss them across two life journeys.

### Discussion and Conclusion

*How can participation in inclusive dance contexts contribute to the quality of life?*

Elen	Elen and Philip	Philip
Integrity – being whole and treated as any body	Becoming oneself	Journey towards collaborative choreographic process
A new way of taking up personal and social space	Valuing of difference	Political engagement through movement
Body contact and communication	The embodied experience of dance	Development of compassion, vulnerability and intuition as a choreographer-teacher
	Dance as improvisation, choreography, and communication	
	Transformative change	

**Table 3. Themes describing how participation in inclusive dance contexts has contributed to Elen’s and Philip’s quality of life**

As we zoom in to focus on the core of how participation in inclusive contemporary dance contexts can contribute to quality of life (diagramed in Table 3), we conclude that for Elen and Philip inclusive contemporary dance has inspired transformative change. Also from dance artistic (Albright, 1997, 2003; Benjamin, 2002; Kupperts, 2006, 2013; Østern, 2009) and dance phenomenological (Bond, 2017, forthcoming; Bond & Stinson, 2000/2001, 2007/2015; Fraleigh, 1987; Parviainen, 1998) perspectives, the experience-based transformation of body-subject in relational, artistic processes can contribute to quality of life. As Elen wrote, “I am becoming more of myself, or more the person I want to be.”

Life story analysis suggested that three characteristics of context were perceived as important and salient to experienced quality of life by both Elen and Philip: contexts that 1) value difference, 2) offer the embodied, creative experiences that contemporary dance as an

art form can offer; and 3) work toward choreography, performance and communication through improvisational processes. In dance contexts where bodily difference is valued and not excluded on the basis of ableist stereotypes, the dance process is often pushed towards improvisational, open-ended working methods. Improvisation allows space for the untried, in and between different bodies (Albright, 1997, 2003; Benjamin, 2002; Bond, 2008). In dance improvisation, this experimenting with what is unseen and unknown in advance involves a kind of thinking in movement that is “motional through and through, at once spatial, temporal, dynamic” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p.30 ). The felt-sense of body is heightened through movement. This is what dance as an art form specifically can give: a heightened, felt sense of self relating to others through movement. This dance can be energizing—bodily, relationally and politically, both in collaborative choreographic processes and in culminating performances on stage. Deeply felt, relational moving experiences crystalize, as both Elen and Philip described in their self-reflexive texts.

As illustrated in Table 3, Elen and Philip have discrete themes reflecting where they come from and where they see themselves heading. Their stories also reveal some shared themes connecting with participation and quality of life. Elen, using a wheelchair, comes from a place where her personal space has been limited by the prejudice she bumps into in everyday life (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005). For her, the “integrity” she has built in inclusive dance contexts has been agentic and life-changing. For Philip, his singular themes reflect that he has been working towards becoming a choreographer-teacher and experienced personal vulnerability in this process (see Stavik-Karlsen, 2014). As a leader of inclusive contemporary dance contexts, he seeks to be able, artistically in movement and politically in society, to open the inclusive space for dance that Elen as a dancer experiences as so refreshing.

Summing up, in different and similar ways, Elen's and Philip's life journeys through inclusive contemporary artistic and educational dance contexts have been transformative, contributing to their quality of life. In this chapter, we have tried to illuminate and communicate how.

### **Critical perspectives**

Reflecting on study design and analysis, one critique might be that the guiding question and therefore the findings are biased towards the positive, that is, lacking in criticality. Indeed, life story analyses illuminate Elen's and Philip's journeys through inclusive contemporary dance contexts specifically in regard to *enhanced* quality of life. In this particular study, the positively biased starting point was deliberate, allowing us to examine their perceptions of *how* enhancement happened, not *if* it happened. This is not to say that their life-journeys have been easy. Quite the contrary: they have been challenging with, as Elen put it, "blood, sweat, and oh so many tears." As numerous dancers have reported, challenge can be demanding and rewarding at the same time (Bond & Stinson, 2007/2015).

Further, from a scientific perspective, the study is not generalizable to a population. The case study of Elen and Philip does not prove that participation in inclusive contemporary dance contexts leads to increased quality of life. We have all three, during our time in the inclusive dance landscape, experienced artists who did not like what we were offering and dancers who stopped coming to class. Those who do not experience enhanced quality of life in inclusive dance contexts have not been our focus here, but hopefully will be another time, as there is much to learn from negative cases. For this study, we began with the personal experiential understanding that inclusive contemporary dance contributes to our own wellbeing, employing life history writing by two of us to document the lived experience of

inclusive dance contexts. We hope this study will be valuable and interesting for others interested in questions of dance and the quality of life.

### References

- Albright, A. C. (1997). *Choreographing difference. The body and identity in contemporary dance*. Hanover: Wesleyan University.
- Albright, A. C. (2003). Dwelling in possibility. In A. C. Albright & D. Gere (Eds.), *Taken by surprise. A dance improvisation reader*. Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press.
- Albright, A. C., & Brandstetter, G. (2015). The politics of a prefix. *Choreographic Practices*, 6(1), 3-7.
- Albright, A. C., & Gere, D. (Eds.) (2003). *Taken by surprise. A dance improvisation reader*. Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press.
- Anttila, E. (2013a). Dance pedagogy in the contemporary world. In A. K. Stähle (Ed.), *Close encounters - contemporary dance didactics: Exploration in theory and practice* (pp. 13–30). Stockholm: Dans- och cirkushögskolan.
- Anttila, E. (2013b). *Koko koulu tanssii! Kehollisen oppimisen mahdollisuuksia koulu yhteisössä* [The whole school dances! The possibilities with embodied learning in school.]. *Acta Scenica 37*. Helsinki: Teatterikorkeakoulu.
- Benjamin, A. (2002). *Making an entrance. Theory and practice for disabled and non-disabled dancers*. London: Routledge.
- Bond, K. E. (1994). Personal style as a mediator of engagement in dance: Watching Terpsichore rise. *Dance Research Journal*, 26/1, 15-26.
- Bond, K. (2008). The human nature of dance: Towards a theory of aesthetic community. In S. Malloch and C. Trevarthen (Eds.), *Communicative musicality: Exploring the basis of human companionship* (pp. 401-422). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Bond, K. E. (2014). Dance and quality of life. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 1419-1424). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Bond, K. E. (2017). "Boys are morons"... "Girls are gross"... Let's dance! In W. Oliver & D. Risner (Eds.), *Dance and gender: An evidence based approach* (pp. 37-57). Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Bond, K., & Etwaroo, I. (2005). "If I really see you ...:" Experiences of identity and difference in a higher-education setting. In M. C. Powell & V. Marcow-Speiser (Eds.), *The arts, education, and social change: Little signs of hope* (pp. 87-99). New York: Peter Lang.
- Bond, K. E., & Stinson, S. W. (2001). "I feel like I'm going to take off!" Young people's experiences of the superordinary in dance. *Dance Research Journal* 32(2), 52-87.
- Bond, K. E., & Stinson, S. W. (2016). "It's work, work, work, work:" Young people's experiences of effort and engagement in dance. In S. W. Stinson, *Embodied curriculum theory and research in arts education: A dance scholar's search for meaning* (pp. 269-295). Dordrecht: Springer. (Original work published 2007).
- Bozic, N., & Olsson, B.K. (2013). Culture for radical innovation: What can business learn from creative processes of contemporary dancers? *Organizational Aesthetics*, vol. 2 (1), 59-83.
- Buber, M. (1995). *Det mellanmännskliga [The interhuman]*. Ludvika: Dualis.
- Bullough, R. V. Jr., & Pinnegar, S. (2001). Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 13-21.
- Channells, P. (2015). Perfect (im)perfections: The choreographer's reflections on the creative process. *Nordic Journal of Dance*, 6(1), 48-53.
- Dewey, J. (1980). *Art as experience*. New York: Perigee Books. (Original work published 1934)

- Fraleigh, S. H. (1987). *Dance and the lived body. A descriptive aesthetics*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Goodson, I. F., & Sikes, P. J. (2001). *Life history research in educational settings: Learning from lives*. Buckingham, UK: Open University.
- Kuppers, P. (2001). Deconstructing images: Performing disability. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 11, 3-4.
- Kuppers, P. (2006). Vibrant agencies: Dance, disability embodiment and phenomenology. *Discourses in Dance*, 3(2), 21-31.
- Kuppers, P. (2015). Waltzing disability culture: Moving history with Raimund Hoghe. *Choreographic Practices*, 6(1), 41-57.
- Mayo Clinic (2016). Diseases and conditions: Spina bifida. Retrieved from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/spina-bifida/basics/definition/con-20035356>
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rustad, H. (2013). *Dans etter egen pipe; En analyse av danseimprovisasjon og kontaktimprovisasjon – aom tradisjon, fortolkning og levd erfaring [Dance as you wish: An analysis of dance improvisation and contact improvisation – as tradition, interpretation and lived experience]*. (Doctoral dissertation). Oslo: Norwegian School of Sports Sciences.
- Østern, A-L. (2008). Pedagogisk teori for estetiske fag – om kunstneriske læringsprosesser og om å undervise på estetisk nivå [Pedagogical theory for art subjects – Artistic learning processes and teaching on an aesthetic level]. In T. Ørbæk Svee (Ed.), *Dans og didaktikk [Dance teaching and learning]* (pp. 19-37). Trondheim, NOR: Tapir akademisk forlag.

- Østern, T. P. (2009). *Meaning-making in the dance laboratory. Exploring dance improvisation with differently bodied dancers*. (Doctoral dissertation). Theatre Academy, Helsinki, FIN.
- Østern, T. P. (2015). The dance project Perfect (im)perfections as a deep educational experience of plurality. *Nordic Journal of Dance* 6(1), 36-47.
- Østern, T. P., & Channells, P. (2016). Deep learning and teaching as affordances of inclusive dance and arts education. In A. B. Sæbø (Ed.), *International yearbook for research in arts education* (pp. 123-31). Münstner: Waxmann.
- Østern, T. P., & Øyen, E. (2014a). Difference as a creative and critical force in teacher education: Reflective partners teaching in and out of the wheelchair. *Journal of Dance Education*, 14(3), 101-108.
- Østern, T. P., & Øyen, E. (2014b). Ulikhet som impuls til nye oppdagelser i dans: Å tøye både muskler og meninger gjennom mangfold i Danselaboratoriet [Difference as an impulse to new discoveries in dance: To stretch muscles and minds through diversity in the dance laboratory]. *InFormation (Nordic Journal of Art and Research)*, 3(2), 94-109.
- Østern, T. P., & Øyen, E. (2015). Moving through change. *Choreographic Practices*, 6(1), 125-144.
- Parviainen, J. (1998). *Bodies moving and moved: A phenomenological analysis of the dance subject and the cognitive and ethical values of dance art*. (Doctoral dissertation). Tampere University, Tampere, FIN.
- Pérez, P. (Ed.) (2006). *Erfarenhet, berättelse och identitet [Experience, narration and identity]*. Karlstad: Karlstad University Press.
- Pesonen, K. (2004). Inspiraatiossa joutuu laittamaan itsensä alltiiksi. *Pohjalainen*, 12 January.

- Sandahl, C., & Auslander, P. (Eds.) (2005). *Bodies in commotion. Disability and performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Savin-Baden, M., & Howell Major, C. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Sheets-Johnstone, M. (2009). *The corporeal turn. An interdisciplinary reader*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Stavik-Karlsen, G. (2014). Konturer av sårbarhetens pedagogikk [Contours of a pedagogy of vulnerability]. In A-L. Østern (Ed.), *Dramaturgi i didaktisk kontekst [Dramaturgy in educational contexts]* (pp. 149-168). Trondheim: Fagbokforlaget.
- Whatley, S. (2007). Dance and disability: The dancer, the viewer and the presumption of difference. *Research in Dance Education*, 8(1), 5-25.
- Wigg, U. J. (2015). Att analysera livsberättelser [To analyse life stories]. In A. Fejes & R. Thornberg (Eds.), *Handbok i kvalitativ analys [Handbook of qualitative analysis]* (pp. 238-255). Stockholm: Liber.

Tone Pernille Østern

Department for Teacher Education, NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology

[tone.pernille.ostern@ntnu.no](mailto:tone.pernille.ostern@ntnu.no)

Elen Øyen

The Dance Laboratory, the Municipality of Trondheim, Norway

[elen.oyen@icloud.com](mailto:elen.oyen@icloud.com)

Philip Channells

Dance Integrated Australia

[philipchannells@gmail.com](mailto:philipchannells@gmail.com)