Shape shifting: Examining choreographic process in dance education

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Abstract

American arts educator Elliot Eisner suggests that: "We need a conception of multiple literacies to serve as a vision of what our schools need to achieve" (1998:12). This notion supports the outcome of dance literacies as one of the aims for dance in The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (2000). Put in a broader paradigm, dance education may be seen to communicate with and through multiple symbol systems.

Introduction

In July 2002 I ran three one-hour contemporary creative dance workshops for a group of teenage girls. The initial workshops were structured around a choreographic process which was more collaborative, heuristic and dialectic than the dancers were accustomed to. Even though the dancers had backgrounds in classical ballet, jazz dance and hip-hop, they viewed their role in dance as a passive receptor of set steps, timing and spacing. Their previous experience saw their teacher in the role of 'creator'. These workshops sought to give the dancers more input into the choreography and to allow space for them to reflect on their creative actions. The key question of this research is: Would their view of the dancer's role move from imitator to initiator through setting the physical process alongside that of reflection?

This process would see the dancer engage with and move between the roles of the:

- Choreographer: who generates ideas, (has inner drive to discover); identifies and solves problems; defines artistic process; requires knowledge of choreographic structures and devices.
- Dancer: who interprets the choreographer's images and ideas, is guided by choreographer in how best to find, remember and perform these expressively.

- Critic: who evaluates, re-evaluates and refines the aesthetic form and expressive
  impact.

This new role of choreographer differs from the more conventional frame of reference
that the dancers were used to. It can be described along the lines of Howard Gardner's
thesis of artistic process (1971) which suggests that when engaging in the act of creating,
the choreographer uses intrapersonal, kinaesthetic, musical, visual, verbal and
interpersonal intelligences. Arnheim (1983) identifies three key cognitive activities which
humans possess in some degree. They are the abilities to *think,* to *perceive* and to *form.*
As choreographer all three are of equal importance when composing dance. The creative
process of solving a qualitative physical puzzle relies on a choreographer:
• choosing images *(think).*
• drawing out appropriate movement to express the images (*perceive).*
• forming and structuring the dance *(form).*

The conventional process of choreography, and the one these dancers were accustomed
to, is perceived as dancers learning set movements, then through repetition they increase
accuracy and expression. In this role dancers are required to think and perceive through
imitation. In my proposed less conventional model the *dancer* is involved in all three
roles of choreographer, dancer and critic, extending the cognitive potential.

This area of research in dance education emphasises constructivist learning in an holistic
framework, and it is within this process that the potential shifts in action and perception
lie. This model has a traceable lineage to research undertaken by dance analyst, notator
and educationalist Rudolf Laban in the early part of the twentieth century. The dancer
becomes a co-creator in collaboration with others to solve a physical puzzle in
choreographing a dance. By engaging with kinaesthetic, visual and musical symbols,
among others, the whole being is active and interactive.

Schwartz (1993) and others (Maletic, 1989) have examined the parallels in the theories of
both Laban and Gardner. They propose that kinaesthetic intelligence underlies
development of all intelligences. Further, Schwartz claims that "Gardner and Laban from

different domains and with different languages address the idea of wholeness of being"
(1993: 11).

Through inner-directed improvisation dancers engage a range of intelligences, the most
pro-active being kinaesthetic (what I call the 'physical intellect'). The whole being is
actively involved in structuring movement metaphors, and metacognition - thinking and
evaluating one's own thoughts. This view has grounding in psychoanalytic theory such as
is found in the work of Heinz Kohut which claims that the transformation of 'self' during
interactions with daily life drives us and determines our success or failure in playing a
meaningful role in society. We must be clear that this is not the same as raw feeling or
sensation of 'free' expression. Self and feelings drive interpretation as part of an
intellectual process of forming movement metaphors. In turn these may be
intellectualised by viewers as the quintessence of images (in Press, 1990).

To layer this into the fabric of Laban and Gardner we sense that dancers may heighten
and deepen self-knowledge during the choreographic creative process. Immersing self in
the oscillations between kinaesthetic perception, self-awareness, interactions with others
and dance content (images, issues, concepts and ideas), they evaluate, re-evaluate,
confront and reconstruct self.

> As the student works to create or mold something that is his own, he must
> clarify his feelings and sort out and organize his ideas. Through this process
> he gains a new awareness of self and a feeling of integration (Hawkins, 1954:
> 92-93).

There is much to indicate that the professional world of dance has long used the method
of dancer as co-creator, but it has gone 'unseen'. One only has to look at the relationship
of classical ballet choreographer Sir Kenneth Macmillan with his leading ballerina of
choice Lynn Seymour to realise this. Seymour describes how they rehearsed together at
the start of a new ballet:

He will perhaps just say... 'I had this sort of idea', and he will show

something and say 'Like this'... And you try it... And the problem usually

becomes to translate this idea into rhythmic form that the music has, and

make it possible. This seems to be the thing that I have been best at and I do

it for MacMillan (Crisp & Clarke, 1974: 56-57).

More recently choreographers such as New Zealander Neil Ieremia[1] have described the

process of choreography as a blend of his ideas with those of the company dancers in

Black Grace. Ieremia also points out:

There are dancers who just want to be dancers and they do it really well. And

then there are people who dance, and who have the desire to make dance;

they make other people move (in Creative Explorer, Creative New Zealand,

1997: 29).

The project

Each workshop ran as follows:

- A 20-minute contemporary technique warm-up.

- Some structured exploration and improvisation based on the theme of the piece.

- Development of the improvisations to set them into kinaesthetic memory as a group

  dance.

- Group discussion and reflection on the session.

The technical warm-up is important for dancers who are accustomed to behaviourist

learning in dance. It orientates them and allows them to feel that the physical

environment is one which they can relate to safely. Perhaps worthy of consideration here

is that, with dancers who may be unfamiliar with conventional codified technique

training, this type of warm-up is not always necessary, or even desirable.

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[1] During conversation between the author and Neil Ieremia and company during a dance workshop,
September 11, 2002.

The improvisations were on the themes of ideas which were very personal to them; their own names and star signs, favourite colours and animals. There was nothing new here, dance educators have been using similar ideas for years, and it is interesting to see that relatively recently the professional dance world has adopted these approaches more overtly. A suitable example is *Signatures* (2000), choreographed by Siobhan Davies for her company, and based around the dancers' own names, using a process not dissimilar to the one at issue here.

The young dancers would work individually to create phrases. With choreographer's support, they select and reject, gradually refining and improving until movements are committed to memory. Often this would involve performing for each other and this would always meet with their reciprocal approval and appreciation, in what grew into relatively sophisticated critiques.

The creative process was resonant with *thinking, perceiving and forming* as interactive activities in a spiralling matrix of thought and action. So, for example, on this project I asked the dancers to choose (*think*) their favourite colour and 'dance' it, but to achieve this further clues and images were necessary. Dancers were then asked to describe the colour with three adjectives (*perceive*), for example, green, fresh, lively, spiky. This combination of thinking and perceiving then allowed the dancers to *form* appropriate kinaesthetic responses. These complex verbal, visual, emotional, kinaesthetic interchanges are essential to allow dancers access to choreographer's territory. Thus internal dialogue is generated.

Gradually the dance was pieced together by the outside eye of the facilitating choreographer in consultation with the dancer/choreographers. Their ideas (as with mine) would not always be adopted. The participants came to understand why some things are effective while others need to be discarded as part of the heuristic process.

This is not training in a specific genre, and neither does it necessarily involve performance. It is creative exploration, the end point of which is to manipulate movement

in order to express images and self. The benefits to the dancers go beyond the physical and we may speculate lead to greater self-awareness. Facilitating these young dancers so that they felt secure and able to participate in these ways was the issue. They may have turned around to me to say *'This isn't dance'* and from their experience maybe it wasn't. It was the balance and combination of dialogue and kinaesthetic structures which empowered them to take more responsibility.

The initial sessions saw the dance only partially completed and other commitments meant a delay of three months at which point a further four one and a half hour sessions were required. For those who may not be familiar with dance choreographic process it is important to note here that the total working time of nine hours is a fairly minimal time span in which to create a four minute piece ready for performance. It is therefore revealing that this creative process can work at speed. The dancers commit the movements to their motor memory much faster, and one may claim with more expressivity, when they 'own' them, that is, they have created the movement themselves. Also it is important to realise that the choreographer/director/teacher acts as editor, engaging dancers in a continual dialogue of reflection, evaluation and refinement during the creative process.

The following diagrams display a selection of the dancers' comments, tracing how the dance entitled *"The names we're given are the colours in our stars, And the creatures we see are the lights in our eyes"* came to be and how, if at all, the dancers' perceptions of themselves as creators or recipients shifted from *"I'm not very creative"* (Dancer A) and, *"How can **I** do that? How can you dance a colour?"* (Dancer C).

Conclusion

Prior to the project the dancers took the role of passive learners. After the project they were able to participate as active learners, as well as understand, if not totally identify with, the artistic and intellectual responsibilities and challenges of the choreographic process.

Prior to the project they saw the teacher/choreographer as an authority figure from whom they took directions. After the project, although their identity was not significantly shifted (it was a very short project), there was certainly *some* shift. Two of the four dancers could see themselves as choreographer within limitations. They had choreographed their own short solos but had not assimilated the bigger picture of being an 'outside eye', even though they had engaged with that role occasionally.

In the first two sessions some of the dancers hardly spoke to me at all but as the project progressed they gradually opened up and become curious and chatty. Talking can be very important in the early stages of choreography. These choreographer/dancer/critics became more able to discuss problems and to pinpoint solutions to questions which developed within the sessions.

An outcome of this research which might resonate into the classroom gives clues about how generalist teachers may be empowered to cope with teaching the new dance curriculum. Having learned the verbal language of the dance elements, and equipped with some basic choreographic skills, they can collaborate with the children to create dances. This strategy moves away from 'teacher as model'- 'student as imitator', in the rush to teach dance 'as we know it', this is often overlooked. When the thought of making up a whole 'routine' is all too much, many schools hire a professional to teach a specific genre such as Jazz or Salsa. Another challenge to the generalist teacher might be students who are well trained in the codified techniques of ballet, jazz or hip-hop, but if teachers can see dance as springing from pedestrian movement rather than from preordained steps, then including dance education in their classroom will be more achievable.

Positioning dance beyond the performance enterprise makes possible an excursion into the totality of human expression, the logical and the intuitive (LaPointe-Crump, 1990: 52). Moreover, it should be considered that teaching which is driven by the creative process in dance produces a more inclusive and holistic learning environment, one which involves alternative symbols of meaning as teachers and students move towards increasing dance literacy.

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