

# TRINITY LABAN CONSERVATOIRE OF MUSIC & DANCE

## Research Online at Trinity Laban

### Unsettling Materials: Lively Tensions in Learning Through 'Set Materials' in the Dance Technique Class

Dryburgh, J.

Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices 10.1

## **Unsettling Materials: Lively Tensions in Learning Through ‘Set Materials’ in the Dance Technique Class.**

**Jamieson Dryburgh** Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

### **Abstract**

An explorative engagement with learning through set materials in the dance technique class enables embodied knowledge. This qualitative dance research, framed through practitioner-led inquiry, reflects upon the experience of a deliberately unsettled process of bodily learning in the studio. Set materials in contemporary dance technique classes are considered through two intertwined strands of learning; exploration and embodiment. A series of ‘lively tensions’ are articulated through the student participant data that reveal the multidimensionality of dance technique practice. The pedagogical considerations and theoretical framing of what it means for set materials to enable rather than restrict dance student agency are discussed. The teacher/researcher reflects on how unsettling the process of learning in the studio might encourage dance students to more thoroughly engage with bodily inquiry. The voices of students as research participants are quote in order that their words articulate the nuances of experience of learning in dance technique.

**Keywords:** Dance technique, exploration, embodiment, lively tensions, set material, pedagogy.

### **Introduction**

Dance technique practices that enable students to approach learning as a process of discovery are generative of embodied knowing (Spatz 2015). While the use of set materials within the dance technique class is commonplace the ways it enables inquiry-oriented learning needs further consideration. In the dance studio sequences of movement that have been formulated by the teacher are taught to students in order to facilitate the development of bodily skills and artistic expression. The objectives are determined by the stylistic concerns of the specific technique practices and the set materials are purposed as a means through which they might be realised. I am a 'release-based' technique teacher in a Conservatoire setting and I am committed to learning that develops bodily possibilities in ways that are expansive and generative of embodied knowing. This practice-based research investigates how such learning might be enabled by an explorative engagement with set materials in the dance technique class.

### **Somatics and release technique**

Somatic practices have become increasingly integrated alongside or within release-based technique classes in UK higher education contexts and their enabling impacts for learning have been widely discussed in dance research (see Brodie and Lobel 2004, Buck, Fortin and Long 2011, Enghauser 2007, Fortin and Sidentop 1995, Green 2001, Reed 2016, Weber 2009). Release-based techniques and somatic practices are both broad fields of body/dance work that are distinct and overlapping, sharing a holistic approach to movement. In my experience, somatic practices can support the dance student in encouraging a deepening awareness of sensation, connectivity and holistic bodily learning (Batson 2008, Bannon and Holt 2015).

Release technique is a post-modern dance approach that privileges efficient and effective body movement. It focuses on breath, body alignment and 'easy' joint articulation, weight play through use of gravity and momentum (Martin 1998, Olsen 2004). Of particular somatic importance in realising such ways of moving

is conceptualising the body as one fluidly-integrated organism where movement travels interconnectedly, sequentially and with freedom. To this end, a somatically informed pedagogical approach can facilitate the dance students' experiences of letting go of tension or unnecessary effort in the body, re-patterning habits of holding that are restrictive and developing authentic movement responses. In this, the aim is to not reproduce or imitate the teacher or some idealised form but rather to harness the stylistic principles towards an enhanced capacity to dance with particularity. The resultant agential engagement with dance technique realises more than an enhanced qualitative movement capacity, though. It radically (re)orientates ways of learning for the student as an individual 'through enhanced sensory awareness, care of oneself and of others' (Reed 2016, 179). As such dance technique practice that is somatically informed offers 'an ever-evolving means to educate and empower living embodiment' (Batson 2016, 72).

In my teaching of release-based technique in a UK Conservatoire, I employ somatic approaches in strategic ways to invite the students to pay attention to their body in motion by slowing down, focusing on sensation and noticing how change is occurring in body functioning. This tuning-in is encouraged through activities that purposefully reduce movements to simple forms, exploring them with an intention of ease and lightness of effort. I might invite the students to move freely for a while with one focus, for example sliding the shoulder blades over the rib cage or stirring the femur in the hip. Later on, in the session while the students are involved in more complex sequences of material, I would then ask them to return to these sensations allowing them to inform the dancing experience. In this way I attempt to bridge the bodily experiences noticed in moments of isolation and the articulation of complex movements and sequences. I utilise imagery, hands-on work and constructive rest in similar ways that encourage the students to notice bodily sensation while alone or with

others. Through these and other somatically-informed ways of working, I privilege the students' attention to movement possibilities as they are experiencing them. This deepens their understanding and appreciation of the intricacies of their dancing-selves.

For my part, while being a professional dancer in London during the 1990's and 2000's I was heavily influenced by the increasing incorporation of somatic practices in the contemporary dance scene then (not having met them explicitly while a dance student). A personally important influence in my expanding understanding of how dance technique and somatic practices might be meaningfully integrated was through the inspirational teaching of Gill Clarke whose pedagogical approach is articulated well in *Minding Motion* (Clarke, Crammer and Muller 2011). Clarke's teaching modelled a way of moving attentively that I found very compelling as a young dancer and subsequently as a colleague. This encounter germinated an involvement with dance technique that allowed me to reconceptualise it as an ever-evolving process of being bodily. This is the process of embodied learning that I have been pursuing ever since and the expansive approach through which I hope to stimulate the students I teach.

### **Freedom and constraint**

In dance, ways of learning bodily might be experienced as 'a practice of freedom' through pedagogical approaches that enable the dance student to develop an active sense of themselves and their place in the world while expanding their movement capabilities (Freire 1993, hooks 1994, Anttila 2004, Batson 2009, Dryburgh and Jackson 2016). Learning through set materials in the dance technique class can appear to be coercive and contradictory to the ideals of liberatory pedagogy as 'a process that is often highly controlling' (Davidson 2004: 208). However, pedagogical approaches in dance that privilege the first-person perspective and 'a sense of inner authority' (Green

2001: 157, Enghauser 2007, Batson 2009) can foster ‘a process of kinaesthetic inquiry that leads to self-discovery of movement habit and potential, improved movement efficiency and overall well-being’ (Batson 2008: 146). Investigating ways of enabling student agency as learners is at the heart of this study; making choices about how to move and discovering increasingly sophisticated ways to dance that are particular and individual (Bannon 2010, Spatz 2015). In dance technique pedagogy, the dual modality of control and freedom inherent in learning through set materials can appear unresolved and conflicting (Stinson, Blumenfeld-Jones and Van Dyke 1990, Fortin and Siedentop 1995, Anttila 2004, Fortin, Vieira and Tremblay 2009). Clarke, Crammer and Muller describe this negotiation of conflict as a ‘lively tension’ (2011: 220). The experience of learning through set materials in dance technique discussed here concerns freedom, interpretation and response by the student as well as, rather than instead of, specificity, structure, and constraint. The term ‘lively tension’ will be used later in the discussion of the participant experiences as it vividly articulates the dynamism of the complexities at play while learning through set materials in the dance technique class.

According to Nettle-Fiol, it is important to allow for the freedom of movement in technique classes by countering the learner’s ‘urge to be right with a desire for discovery’ (2008: 117). Goldman, through her consideration of various kinds of constraint, termed ‘tight places’, troubles the conception of freedom in dance. She states that to consider freedom as something that is achievable encourages a ‘hardened stance to an inevitably changing world’ (2010: 3). Such a conception of freedom is to ‘ignore the constraints’ and ‘deny the real conditions’ dancers encounter and she endorses instead an approach of ‘flexibility and perpetual readiness’ as a powerful ‘full-bodied critical engagement with the world’ (2010: 5). The dance student in learning through set materials may be able to bring ‘a range of movement options within the dancer’s control’ (Nettle-Fiol 2008: 95)

and make choices in ways that are playfully open within the constraints of the specified framework (Foster 1995, Brodie and Lobel 2004, Clarke, Crammer and Muller 2011). However, dancing ‘without surrendering one’s agency’ (Goldman 2010: 142) is achieved by becoming ‘intimately acquainted with constraint, figuring out in the movement what is desirable and what is possible to change’ (145). In this sense, it is through the experience of boundaries and the requirements of certain specifications that a dance learner may expand the potential of their embodied understanding. Batson identifies embodied knowledge as knowledge that is gained *through* the body and movement exploration as ‘a primary source for embodied knowledge’ (2009: 179). However, what is understood as movement exploration, how it functions within a dance technique class, and in what ways it might lead to embodied knowledge needs greater understanding in dance research. As such, this study reflects upon a studio-based pedagogical experiment that considered the agential affordances of set materials in the dance technique class.

### **Research context and method**

In attempting to understand better the diverse and particular experiences of learning in dance technique classes it is important to gain insight into how meaning is constructed by the participant dance students (Stinson, Blumenfeld-Jones and Van Dyke 1990). The perspectives of the dance students have been privileged in this interpretive phenomenological study and ways of knowing have been recognised to be partial, ambiguous and lived (Moustakas 1994, leCompte and Schensul 1999, Bernard 2006, Creswell 2013). Claiming a postmodern feminist perspective, the moving body is privileged as source of knowing that is ‘experientially grounded’ (Barbour 2011: 69). From this perspective it is important that the ‘situated-ness’ of teacher/researcher is acknowledged and the partiality of his bias appreciated. The researcher

positions his 'inside-ness' as affording a felt sense of and connection to the students' experiences as his role as co-participant is permeated with intuitive and implicit ways of being both through the studio practice and data analysis. Reflexivity is therefore imperative through this study as a way of recognising the distorting and/or discriminating impact of researcher subjectivity (Barbour 2011, Clegg and Stevenson 2013, Kahn 2015). Of particular significance for this research are the enmeshed conceptions of embodied knowing and bodily learning through exploration (Sklar 2000, Dyer 2009, Spatz 2015).

'Empowerment', as an educational aim of critical pedagogy, is understood to be complex and a situated intention due to an unequal distribution of power (Weiler 1991, Freire 1993, hooks 1994, Burnidge 2012, Ahmed 2017). This was revealed most significantly in the diverse ways in which the experience of this studio-based experiment was responded to by the participant students.

As part of a broader PhD study exploring dance technique pedagogy with a specific focus on student agency this research was conducted through the process of teaching contemporary dance technique at Level 5 (2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduates) with contemporary dance students at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London. The group was comprised of twenty-four students in total (6 males and 18 females). The teaching component lasted 15 weeks of three 90-minute sessions and there was no assessment. Student data was gathered through one-hour participant interviews that were semi-structured and conducted in the learning context outside of scheduled classes. There were eighteen participants (4 males and 14 females) each of whom chose pseudonyms and their data has been anonymised. Ethical permissions were established and informed participant consent was given. Transcriptions were made of the videoed interviews and coding analyses was undertaken. Through the data the interwoven nature of exploration and embodiment appeared to be of particular significance in the ways that

experiences of learning were reflected upon. These two central themes, exploration and embodiment, were often referred to in ways that were connected, consequential and concomitant. As will be discussed, the inquiry-oriented nature of learning privileged throughout this study led to a multidimensional understanding of the development of embodied knowledge.

### **Set Materials**

For the purposes of this particular study I will be considering set materials as the dance phrase or sequence usually taught toward the end of the technique class. This is the ‘dancy’ bit that involves complex movement patterns often drawing upon movement concepts introduced in earlier parts of the class. Martin describes this as ‘both the telos of the class and it’s just reward for the dancers’ (1998: 164). In my teaching, individual interpretation of the set materials is an intended outcome of the dance session despite the framework of the movements being relatively tightly structured i.e. the movement patterns defined and counts given. The students are tasked with responding to rather than replicating my version of the set materials. This process of ‘making it their own’ involves resolving movement questions while moving and making choices about how they embody the movement. For example; diversifying the dynamic qualities, scale of actions, timing and rhythm, spatial travel/distance and flow. These features of how to dance through the set materials are fluid allowing the student to ‘play’ with the options available to them as they move. As such the set materials are intended to become a vibrant process of exploration that facilitate bodily awareness and decision making in the dancing moment. This pedagogical focus orientates the technique class toward an ongoing process of bodily attentive discovery and away from achieving fixed forms.

### **Settled**

Reflecting upon these pedagogical aims and as part of my research interests concerning student agency, I became curious about the ways in which set materials were experienced by the students I taught. I recognised that in my teaching the process of learning through set materials, while intended to enable discovery, was relatively formulaic, expected and somewhat ‘settled’. It seemed to me that this derived from an overfamiliarity, by the students and myself, with the structure of a technique class and how set materials are put to task. The disposability of the set materials in that they were used and then quickly discarded discouraged an active engagement with reflective learning.

Structurally, learning through the set materials in my teaching had a relatively formulaic pattern in terms of when and for how long they were used in class, how often they were repeated, the size of the groups in which they were danced, and for how many sessions they were revisited. It seemed to me that my teaching had followed a normative approach to the way in which set materials function in the technique class. These ‘settled’ expectations were not contributing to the vitality of learning and the full potential for embodied understanding. This study is formed from the investigation I undertook in response to unsettle the process of learning through set materials in my teaching.

### **Unsettling**

In the dance studio I repositioned set materials by unsettling the approach to learning through them. This was initiated through ascribing greater prominence in the learning process to the possibilities for embodied knowledge through the set materials. I taught the set materials more gradually and over longer periods of time developing accumulatively longer sequences. This steadiness enhanced learner confidence about the *what* of the set materials as well as enabling the layering of information regarding the *how* to explore them. Dialogue and reflection were deliberately employed to develop shared understanding and a

curious approach to what might be possible to learn together. When these expanded set materials were well known by the students, an entire session would be dedicated to ‘just’ dancing them. During these sessions the students danced the set materials alone or with a partner while being observed by their peers from the front. This was a relatively unusual experience for the students who described it as being similar to rehearsal for performance. Throughout these experiences the students were afforded extended opportunities to embody the inherent movement concepts by re-doing the set materials with varied foci and to develop their particularity of dancing them. They were encouraged to take risks by pushing at the boundaries of what was within their comfort zone.

The students were encouraged to identify personal goals with which they intended to explore the material. This objective setting was often facilitated through dialogical peer feedback (Author 2016). Extended periods of time in the studio were given over to reflective activities following dancing the set materials. During one particular session the students were each tasked with making a written response to every student’s dancing of the set materials. On this occasion large pieces of flipchart paper filled with multiple comments were laid out through the studio and the students spent time reading and reflecting on the diverse and reinforcing peer comments. Throughout this unsettling process it was intended that feedback, dialogue and reflection would connect with bodily doing in immediate ways in the studio. This allowed, in some ways, for that which had been understood through the body to remain present, be shared and initiate further inquiry. In essence the learning afforded by the set materials became the focus of the technique sessions rather than just one more thing that we did at the end. It was, to cite Goldman (2010), a process of recognising the affordances off becoming intimately acquainted with the constraints of the set materials.

## **Lively Tension**

In turning now to discuss the experience of the participant students I will weave together their voices and offer an interpretation of the varied and diverse ways in which they reflected on this unsettling process. Inherent in the data were the two intertwined themes of exploration and embodiment. These themes frame the language that was used to describe what we had been involved in together. Exploration and embodiment were interconnected concepts of the learning process, they were meaningful for individual participants in particular ways. It is this nuance of experience that will be drawn out here. The data results will be presented as a series of five ‘lively tensions’ building on Clarke, Crammer and Muller (2011)’s terminology, discussed earlier. These ‘lively tensions’ establish a multidimensional understanding of bodily learning through set materials in dance technique practice. The multiplicity of factors that the participant students were involved in negotiating, resolving and responding to will be discussed as:

- Opening and Honing
- Ambiguity and Intention
- Seeking and Revealing
- Inward-ing and Outward-ing
- Usefulness and Sensation

These lively tensions describe seemingly opposing features of dancing held together in the lived moment of the technique class. In expressing the experiences of the students in this way I have reflexively interpreted their comments and reflections. Participant student quotes have been included to enrich the descriptions and draw out some of their particular meanings.

### **Opening and Honing**

This lively tension describes the experience of how learning is conceived through set materials in the dance technique class. Exploration of movement can be conceived of as an opening of bodily possibilities that is an unending journey of discovery (Anttila 2004, Crow and Sager 2006, Nettle-Fiol 2008, Bannon 2010, Stanton 2011, Spatz 2015). In lively tension with this opening is the conception of technique learning being about the honing of particular skills. As such the movement details that are to be found, not fixed, are specified and the student is encouraged to refine them towards ‘a deeper perception and more detailed articulation’ (Clarke, Crammer and Muller 2011: 223). Opening and honing appear to be conflicting in terms of how learning is conceived, while opening widens up honing narrows down. However, they define the dancers experience of there always being more to find and define through an evolving process of movement exploration.

*There is always something you haven't realised yet about the movement and your way of doing something. (Ino)*

*I think with the long material, when you know the steps or the form, it's just keep discovering. You never stop... I discovered that there's always more to go through. (Gio)*

*Every next repetition I feel more secure about the movement or my questions become clearer...the more we do it the clearer it becomes for me what I still need to know. (Katherina)*

*Trying to hone in on details is a combination of what I've heard you say about the sequence but haven't had the chance or haven't had the brain space to put it in my body yet, or that I've forgotten about. (Lauren)*

*It's like a journey with no end. There's places we've been to but there is no actual final destination. (Gabriel)*

These comments reflect that there is potentially always more to be discovered in the process of learning through set materials. Clarke, Crammer and Muller emphasise the importance in somatically informed release-based technique practice of ‘tuning-in, immersion, layering of information in the body and embodiment’ (2011: 202). Embodied learning is articulated here through the students’ words as ‘a journey with no end’, ‘trying to hone in on details’ and ‘questions becoming clearer’. While seemingly paradoxical set materials that are encountered in explorative ways were experienced by the students as open-ended. This involves generating a ‘multidirectional availability in each student by sharpening their curiosity, igniting their imagination, and engaging them in the immediacy and challenge of continually examining movement and compositional choices’ (Karczag 2014: 149).

### **Ambiguity and Intention**

This lively tension describes the experience of how learning is pursued through set materials in the dance technique class. The ambiguity of bodily exploration requires dealing with not-yet-knowing where the learner is involved in a process that, while structurally framed, is concerned with the ‘indeterminacy’ of embodied understanding (Csordas 1994: 5). Conversely, set materials are often taught with an intention to achieve specific movement objectives that involve a deliberate focus on aspects of particular interest and import. This ‘lively tension’ of how learning is pursued was discussed by the participant as equivocal, expectant and intended toward something distinct.

*It’s like some days I can get it. Some days if I’m like really tuning in... and in the moment be in it, and remember the sequence, then it can happen. (Syafiqah)*

*I do not know what I’m actually looking for. I’m just trying to find something I don’t know I’m looking for? (Gabriel)*

*There's not always a perfect set way that you have to do it... I just kind of go into the movement more. (Rose)*

*In my mind, it feels somewhere in the middle where it's not completely fixed but at the same time it's not just interpretational. So maybe it's just confusion about where it lies. It's just a bit cloudy in my mind. (William)*

*But then there's actually opportunity to find something that's interesting for you. (Christopher)*

Embodied learning in dance often requires dealing deliberately with the ambiguity of bodily exploration (Barbour, 2011, Stanton 2011). In dance technique, such ambiguity can be experienced as being 'a bit cloudy' and this may not appear to align with the intentionality of objectives to be encountered through the set materials. The ways in which bodily learning is pursued in somatically informed dance techniques are concerned with the inherent ambiguity of a process that encourages a personal and autonomous learning approach. According to Weber 'the focus in somatics on valuing subjective experience re-positions authority on individual dancers' by relying 'on more autonomy in movement response' (2009: 239).

### **Seeking and Revealing**

This lively tension describes the experience of how learning is acquired through set materials in the dance technique class. Learning effectively through dance technique practice requires seeking as an ongoing attending to movement.

Vibrant repetition or re-doing is a way of questioning oneself about how movement is being experienced with a constancy of noticing. This perpetual state of seeking is in lively tension with the somewhat revelatory and incidental ways in which bodily learning can become explicitly understood (Allen 2009).

Moments of realisation at points along the learning journey, while not

necessarily always on a big scale, can be significantly relevant for the individual student. At times things just seem to fall into place but these moments can not necessarily be anticipated or willed into happening.

*It's just a case of going over and over the material and finding new ways to go through it. (Lauren)*

*You may find more and more things the more you go through it... It allows for the brain and body to come together and to find what is the most comfortable and fluid way of doing that phrase. (Christopher)*

*Finding a freshness so not getting bogged down in the 'oh doing this one again' or this is the way I dance this phrase. (William)*

*So, it sort of becomes second nature, but then also, for me, I think I come to the point where I keep getting the same things wrong. (Jenny)*

*Sometimes you feel like you are doing the best you can do but actually there's more you could be doing or something different you could be doing that can make it look completely different by just changing a simple thing. (William)*

*So, this is how this works! (Ino)*

The realisation of the affordances of deliberate and determined seeking in dance technique cannot be forced. This can be disquieting to students who are eager to make as much progress as possible in the shortest time (Nettl-Fiol 2008, Allen 2009). The acquisition of bodily learning is not always experienced as immediately consequential of seeking movement understanding, however, it is often predicated upon it. 'Finding more ways', 'finding more things', 'finding a freshness', these metaphors describe the evolving ways in which learning was experienced by the students through set materials in the dance technique class. This was enabled, in part, through an attentiveness that transcended

considerations of being right or wrong. From an expanding awareness of each potent moment learning occurred as a form of bodily ‘getting it’.

### **Inward-ing and Outward-ing**

This lively tension describes the experience of how learning is orientated through set materials in the dance technique class. The influence of somatic practices within dance technique draws particular emphasis to the ways in which connections are made through the body both internally and externally (Brodie and Lobel 2004, Crow and Sager 2006, Batson 2008, Dyer 2009). Enghauser advocates ‘an ecosomatic approach to training the dancing body’ that perceives ‘relationships, contexts and interfaces’ through ‘sensing from the inside out’ (2007: 89). A dancer’s kinaesthetic mode of attention is ‘a directing of intentionality toward one’s own bodily sensations, and perceptions and maintaining a particular awareness of the ways the body moves and responds to movement’ (Ehrenberg 2015: 46). Sklar described this sense of inward-ing as ‘dropping down into the body’ (2000: 72). While Csordas defines the outward-ing of embodiment as a ‘perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world’ (1994: 12) The participant students described their developing understanding of connectivity as having direction both inward (noticing bodily sensations) and outward (extending to others and environment).

*It’s allowed me to open myself up, be more aware of my surroundings...*

*It’s allowed for a sort of room in what I’m doing... You find room in it to breathe, to look, to notice things and to play with it a bit more.*

*(Christopher)*

*For me it means I guess being able to have the material almost become part of me. (Amy)*

*The next layer... how you are presenting the work not just doing it. What way, personally you would do it. (Jenny)*

*So, for me, the more I work on the material, the more it comes from the in to the out; from inside to outside. (Gio)*

Exploration through set materials in the dance technique class affords an appreciation of the various ways in which a dancer might simultaneously connect with their inner-moving-selves and the context within which they are moving. This lively tension relates to how the dancer orientates their attention variously. The experience of bodily knowing that allows for ‘a sort of room’ in it enables a greater perception of felt sensation and contextual presence. The double direction of dance connectivity through set materials involves more than solely performance (out) or self-absorption (in) by ‘expanding the network of consciousness’ (Allen 2009: 221). The students’ experiences of set materials almost becoming ‘part of me’ while also ‘presenting the work’ is consistent with somatic practices that offer a means ‘to hone an embodied relationship with the environment through a doubling of attention to inner and outer sensory awareness’ (Garrett Brown 2011: 68).

### **Usefulness and Sensation**

This lively tension describes the experience of how learning is ascribed purpose through set materials in the dance technique class. Some of the students discussed technique practice as being useful in developing a set of skills or tools to be used elsewhere i.e. choreography or repertory. In this familiar positioning of technique as fundamental in facilitating other, seemingly more important, areas of dance study, learning is a preparation of bodily capabilities. Whereas, other students emphasised their appreciation of technique practice as valuable for its own sake as it allows them to be engaged in an experience of body

sensations. Dance technique, ascribed purpose in this way, is about and for the purpose of embodying and this can derive emotionally felt aspects of learning such as pleasure and satisfaction (Martin 1998, Nettle-Fiol 2008).

*I find the mechanism in the sequence and then I put it through my body and I know how to use it in something else. But if I go through the sequence without finding anything I think it's useless for me. (Ino)*

*Just to have more skills to adapt to different situations... when you are creating something. You have more possibilities in your body. (Davina)*

*Your body doesn't need necessarily to think about what the material is. You are experiencing what you are in the performance... But it's what I'm feeling through what I'm doing. (Lauren)*

*You're not thinking of the steps you can actually feel how you feel. (Gio)*

*I was enjoying it more. I was living in the moment. Which made me think; Ok now that I know it, enjoying it, maybe I work on pushing myself a little bit more. (Richard)*

Learning through set materials affords opportunities for embodiment that serve purposes of usefulness and sensation that sustains the enjoyment of dancing while simultaneously developing bodily-know-how. While the development of adaptable body skills can enable the individual dancer to have increasing bodily possibilities with which to resource their dancing-selves the importance of feelings in the pedagogical act should not be underestimated (Woods 1996). The experiences of being able to 'feel how you feel', 'living in the moment' and 'feeling through what I'm doing' as described by the participant students are, I would propose, valuable for their own sake. The term usefulness suggests an instrumentalist approach to the body and the dance technique class as the place where useful skills are acquired so that dance student develops their value for the market place. Megan Quinlan argues that techniques that 'encourage

dancers to develop their own toolbox of skills for movement creation' does not strip them of all agency but that it is limited by a 'formulaic approach to training the body to react and embody sensation' (2017: 38). She endorses that questions about the kinds of freedom being encouraged in dance training should be constantly asked. It seems to me that the dance technique class is an ideal space to raise these questions. Embodied knowing, as it has been described in this paper, positions the dance technique class within the broader social values of critical feminist pedagogy as the pursuit of self-knowledge and social agency (Anttila 2004, Barbour, 2011, hooks 1994, Stinson, Blumenfeld-Jones and Van Dyke 1990).

### **Concluding thoughts**

Unsettling ways of learning through set material, as discussed in this study, impacted distinctively the experiences of exploration and embodiment in the dance technique class for the participant students as well as for myself as teacher. It has been highlighted through the 'lively tensions' drawn from the participant data, that such learning is complex and multidimensional. Of pedagogical concern in this research, however, was that the unsettled nature of the learning experience was invariably disruptive. While this process did eventually lead to greater learner confidence it was important to appreciate learner vulnerability. An appropriately supportive environment was essential for enabling this engagement with risk (Dryburgh in press). This disruption generated important reflections by the students about what they tended to rely on while in the technique class i.e. being part of a group. The students were encouraged to continue to take risks and to keep trying out new things while attending to embodied learning. Witnessing each other pursuing this, enabled further acts of unsettling the materials by revealing the diverse ways in which they were engaged in 'finding'. The layers of inquiry and decision making were

rendered more visible in the studio and this became a further generative source of learner curiosity.

By becoming intimately acquainted with the various constraints and affordances of set materials the dance students were able to deepen their understanding of learning in technique class. The enlivening impact of the resultant tensions have been shown to stimulate a dynamic interplay of possibilities that encourage agency while immersed in a process of bodily discovering. Approached in this way set materials in dance technique classes can offer meaningful experiences of inquiry-oriented learning through which students can make sense of their embodied selves, take ownership of movement propositions and actively contribute to the learning process. Through the approach to pedagogy outlined here, I am concerned to reinforce the understanding that, irrespective of stylistic privileging, set materials need not coerce or limit bodily possibilities. The intention to enable experiences through which students can approach learning as an inquiry-oriented process of discovery is generative of embodied knowing. By engaging in a somatically informed learning process through set materials, dance technique may be most fully experienced as enlivening, enriching and empowering.

*You come to the point where you can actually dance (the set materials).  
And that's a really, really nice feeling because if you just do technique  
class you never really dance. (Ana)*

## **References**

Allen, J. (2009), 'Written in the Body: Reflections on Encounters with Somatic Practices in Postgraduate Dance Training', *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, 1: 2, pp. 215–224.

Ahmed, S. (2017), *Living a Feminist Life*, Croydon: Duke University Press.

Anttila, E. (2004), 'Dance learning as practice of freedom', in L. Rouhiainen, E. Anttila, S. Hamalainen, and T. Loytonen (eds), *The same difference: Ethical and political perspectives on dance*. Finland: Theatre Academy, pp. 19-62.

Bannon, F. (2010), 'Dance: The Possibilities of a Discipline', *Research in Dance Education*, 11: 1, pp. 49–59.

Bannon, F. and Holt, D. (2015), 'Attending to Ethics and Aesthetics in Dance', in S. Whatley, N. Garrett Brown and K. Alexander (eds), *Attending to Movement: Somatic Perspectives on Living in This World*. Axminster: Triarchy Press, pp. 210-228.

Barbour, K. (2011), *Dancing Across the Page: Narrative and Embodied Ways of Knowing*, Bristol: Intellect.

Batson, G. (2008), 'Teaching Alignment', in M. Bales and R. Nettle-Fiol (eds.), *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 134-152.

Batson, G. (2009), 'The Somatic Practice of Intentional Rest in Dance Education: Preliminary Steps Towards a Method of Study', *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, 1: 2, pp. 177-197.

Batson, G. (2016), 'Moving Consciously: Somatic Transformations Through Dance, Yoga, and Touch', *Journal of Dance Education*, 16: 2, pp. 72-73.

Bernard, H. R. (2006), *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. 4th ed., Oxford: AltaMira Press.

Brodie, J. and Lobel, E. (2004), 'Integrating Fundamental Principles Underlying Somatic Practices into the Dance Technique Class', *Journal of Dance Education*, 4: 3, pp. 80-87.

Buck, R., Fortin, S. and Long, W. (2011), 'A Teacher "Self-Research" Project: Sensing Differences in the Teaching and Learning of Contemporary Dance technique in New Zealand', in D. Davida (ed.), *Fields in Motion: Ethnography in the Worlds of Dance*, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, pp. 233-254.

Burnidge, A. (2012), 'Somatics in the Dance Studio: Embodying Feminist/Democratic Pedagogy', *Journal of Dance Education*, 12: 2, pp. 37-47.

Clarke, G., Cramer, F.A. and Muller, G. (2011), 'Minding Motion', in I. Diehl and F. Lampert (eds), *Dance Techniques 2010: Tanzplan Germany*, KG, Leipzig: Henschell, pp 196–229.

Clegg, S. and Stevenson, J. (2013), 'The Interview Reconsidered: Context, Genre, Reflexivity and Interpretation in Sociological Approaches to Interviews in Higher Education Research', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32: 2, pp. 5-16.

Coogan, J. (ed.) (2016), *Practicing Dance: A Somatic Orientation*, Berlin: Logos Verlag.

Creswell, J. W. (2013), *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 4th ed., London: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Crow, A. and Sager, P. (2006), 'These dances Rise Up: An Interview with Eva Karczag', *A Moving Journal*, pp.7-12,

<http://threestonestudio.org/resources/TheseDancesRiseUp.pdf> (last accessed 22/06/2017)

Csordas, T. (ed.) (1994), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Davidson, J. (2004), 'Embodied Knowledge: Possibilities and Constraints in Arts Education and Curriculum', in L. Bresler (ed.), *Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds: Towards Embodied Teaching and Learning*, London: Kluwer Academic Press, pp. 197-212.
- Dryburgh, J. and Jackson, L.H. (2016) 'Building a Practice of Learning Together: Expanding the Functions of Feedback with the Use of the Flipchart in Contemporary Dance technique', *Research in Dance Education*, 17:2, 130-144.
- Dryburgh, J. (in press), 'Location of Possibilities: Exploring Dance Technique Pedagogy Through Transformation and Care', *Journal of Dance Education*.
- Dyer, B. (2009), 'Theories of Somatic Epistemology: An Inspiration for Somatic Approaches to Teaching Dance and Movement Education', *Somatics*, 16: 1, pp. 24-39.
- Enghauser, R. (2007), 'The Quest for an Ecosomatic Approach to Dance Pedagogy', *Journal of Dance Education*, 7: 3, pp. 80-90.
- Ehrenberg, S. (2015), 'A Kinesthetic Mode of Attention in Contemporary Dance Practice', *Dance Research Journal*, 47: 2, pp. 43-61.
- Fortin, S. and Siedentop, D. (1995), 'The Interplay of Knowledge and Practice in Dance Teaching: What We Can Learn from a Non-Traditional Dance Teacher', *Dance Research Journal*, 27: 2, pp. 3-15.
- Fortin, S., Vieira, A. and Tremblay, M. (2009), 'The Experience of Discourses in Dance and Somatics', *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, 1: 1, pp. 47-64.
- Foster, S. L. (1995), 'Harder, Faster, Longer, Higher: A Postmodern Inquiry into the Ballerina's Making', In *The Fifth Study of Dance Conference*, Guilford: University of Surrey, pp. 109-14.
- Freire, P. (1993), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Penguin.

- Garrett Brown, N. (2011), 'Disorientation and Emergent Subjectivity: The Political Potentiality of Embodied Encounter', *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 3: 1+2, pp. 61–73.
- Goldman, D. (2010), *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, USA: The University of Michigan Press.
- Green, J. (2001), 'Socially Constructed Bodies in American Dance Classrooms', *Research in Dance Education*, 2: 2, pp. 155–173.
- hooks, b. (1994), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, London: Routledge
- Kahn, P. (2015), 'Critical Perspectives on Methodology in Pedagogical Research', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20: 4, pp. 442–54.
- Karczag, E. (2014), 'The Role of Somatics', in D. Brown and M. Vos (eds), *Ballet, Why and How?*, Arnhem: ArtEZ Press pp. 148-150.
- leCompte, M. D. and Schensul, J. J. (1999), *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research*, London: Altamira Press.
- Martin, R. (1998), *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, London: Duke University Press.
- Moustakas, C. (1994), *Phenomenological Research Methods*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Ltd.
- Nettl-Fiol, R. (2008), 'First it was Dancing', in M. Bales and R. Nettl-Fiol (eds.), *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 101-25.
- Olsen, A. (2004), *Bodystories: A Guide to Experiential Anatomy*, Lebanon, NH: First University Press of New England.

- Quinlan, M. (2017) ‘Gaga as Metatechnique: Negotiating Choreography, Improvisation, and Technique in a Neoliberal Dance Market’, *Dance Research Journal*, 49: 2, pp. 26-43.
- Reed, S. (2016), ‘Dance Somatics as Radical Pedagogy: Reflections on Somatic Practice within UK Higher Education and Training in Dance’, in J. Coogan (ed.), *Practicing Dance: A Somatic Orientation*, Berlin: Logos Verlag, pp. 176-180.
- Sklar, D. (2000), ‘On Dance Ethnography’, *Dance Research Journal*, 32: 1, pp. 70-77.
- Spatz, B. (2015), *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*, Oxon: Routledge.
- Stanton, E. (2011), ‘Doing, Re-doing and Undoing: Practice, Repetition and Critical Evaluation as Mechanisms for Learning in a Dance Technique Class “Laboratory”’, *Theatre, Dance & Performance Training*, 2: 1, pp. 86–98.
- Stinson, S. W., Blumenfeld-Jones, D. and Van Dyke, J. (1990), ‘Voices of Young Women Dance Students: An Interpretive Study of Meaning in Dance’, *Dance Research Journal*, 22: 2, pp. 13-22.
- Weber, R. (2009), ‘Integrating Semi-Structured Somatic Practices and Contemporary Dance Technique Training’, *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, 1: 2, pp. 237-254.
- Weiler, K. (1991), ‘Freire and a Feminist Pedagogy of Difference’, *Harvard Educational Review*, 61: 4, pp. 449–74.
- Woods, P. (1996), *Researching the Art of Teaching: Ethnography for Educational Use*, London: Routledge.

### **Contributor details**

Jamieson Dryburgh is a dance lecturer at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London. He has taught Contemporary dance technique in various settings for over twenty years alongside a portfolio career as a professional dancer. He has performed internationally with Candoco, Yolande Snaith, H2dance, First Person, Physical Recall, Yelp! (Greece), Charleroi/danses (Belgium) and Tandem (Belgium) among others. He works as a freelance artist, teacher, choreographer and community dance practitioner. He is currently involved in PhD research in dance pedagogy at Middlesex University.