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The value of sharing practitioner wisdom in a learning and teaching context for training contemporary dancers in a conservatoire

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The value of sharing practitioner wisdom in a learning and teaching context for training contemporary dancers in a Conservatoire

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Abstract

This article sets out to interpret the experience of three practitioners who are engaged with higher education contemporary dance training. It outlines an investigation into how the sharing of their teaching practices and approaches has allowed them to gain further insight into concerns they share between them. They will advocate the value of sharing practitioner wisdom and will explain how their teaching practices are supported by a non-hierarchical, dialogical student – teacher environment. The three practitioner voices will be heard as they move through the binary decisions that present themselves as they engage in a framework of sharing and renewing.

Key words contemporary dance education, practitioner wisdom, somatic processes, dance science, choreography, choreological practice

Introduction

This article will share the experiences of three practitioners who work within a dance and music Conservatoire¹. We will draw upon what we perceive to be effective approaches to teaching. The challenges of integrating new methods of teaching practice and the value of sharing our practitioner wisdom, within the delivery of Choreography, Choreological Practice, Contemporary Dance Technique and Dance Science are also explored. The aim of our collaborative work is to investigate how the sharing of our teaching practices and subject expertise enhances the way we teach. We teach different subject areas yet we

continue to learn collaboratively from each other because our questions are around pedagogical approaches rather than subject content.

As a Conservatoire of music and dance, our ethos promotes education and training which is both research-informed and research-led.¹ We nurture student dance artists to train, perform, collaborate and research in an inspiring, creative, intellectual and physical space. Our aim is to prepare students for a career in contemporary dance by giving them the opportunity to develop the technical, creative and performance skills needed to become *creative, versatile, independent and resilient dance artists*. Programmes are designed to help students gain the contextual understanding and the critical, analytical and reflective skills, which will inform and forward their artistic practice. To achieve this, members of faculty are encouraged to continuously review and renew their practice; applying innovative methods of learning and teaching from fields such as somatics, choreology and science thereby enhancing the creative and technical potential of every student. Our research is therefore located within both an educational and artistic context.

This article represents a point in time. Although the long-term aim of our collaborative work is to investigate how the sharing of teaching practices and subject expertise enhances the way we teach, the objectives for this article, are to show the value of sharing practitioner wisdom and working collaboratively. We hope this advocates working with people who have different lenses through which to interrogate similar questions around learning and teaching in contemporary dance. Further, our approach to listening and responding to each other while continuously critically reflecting upon our own practice appears in line with the somatic informed approach we try to facilitate within the work of our students. Glaser articulates in her article that ‘students learn to attend to sensation and explore a process of noticing what is going on in their bodies’

(2015: 44). This ‘noticing’ has informed our methodological approach to sharing practice.

We are not undertaking collaborative teaching as such, but rather, learning from each other in a way that is new to us and provokes and strengthens our teaching practice. Through the illuminating of ideas in this article, we hope to encourage others to consider more integrative and shared methods of planning, thinking and reflecting on teaching.

This article is structured into four sections. First, we explain how we shared our practices when we began working together. Secondly, personal narratives are provided whereby we explain as practitioner-teachers, what and how we teach. This leads to a discussion around mutual themes identified through working together and lastly, we pose questions and thoughts regarding the training of contemporary dancers within a Conservatoire setting.

Methodology

Our reason for initially coming together was to present our own individual teaching practices as a panel at a conference in France. At this point, there were few formal ways to work together within our own institution. We started by considering the mission and vision of our conservatoire and how our teaching methods may address the associated objectives. We soon realised that our coming together for this particular panel encouraged a more integrated and shared approach to addressing these objectives.

The journey together began in September 2013 with a series of meetings where we shared our own recent research (Whatley & Lefebvre Sell 2014; Nordin-Bates et al. 2012), both practice and text-based, and spoke about connections between our teaching practices and subject expertise.

Through these fortnightly meetings we reflected upon our experiences of applying new methods of teaching and mapped our ideas through diagrams and charts. Personal narratives were developed from our initial discussions and were continually developed and refined in light of those discussions over a two-year period. This process helped to reveal several shared themes. Three of those themes, which felt particularly pertinent to our teaching, were then further explored from a theoretical perspective.

We engaged with academic papers from areas of performance psychology and education and it soon became apparent that we held mutual concerns around learning and teaching and further, that the more traditional manner of engaging in pedagogical research did not seem to be the ‘right fit’. As Schwartz articulates, the revelation of this ‘complex intellectual back and forth that arises’ when trying to negotiate territories of experience that are both outwardly ‘concrete and ephemeral’ (2014: 307) is an area many may struggle with whilst engaging with contemporary dance education and research. Through this identification, we modelled a dialogue approach to untangling our shared concerns, which authentically illustrates, as Schwartz describes, as a ‘cognitive/reflective/dialogic’ process.

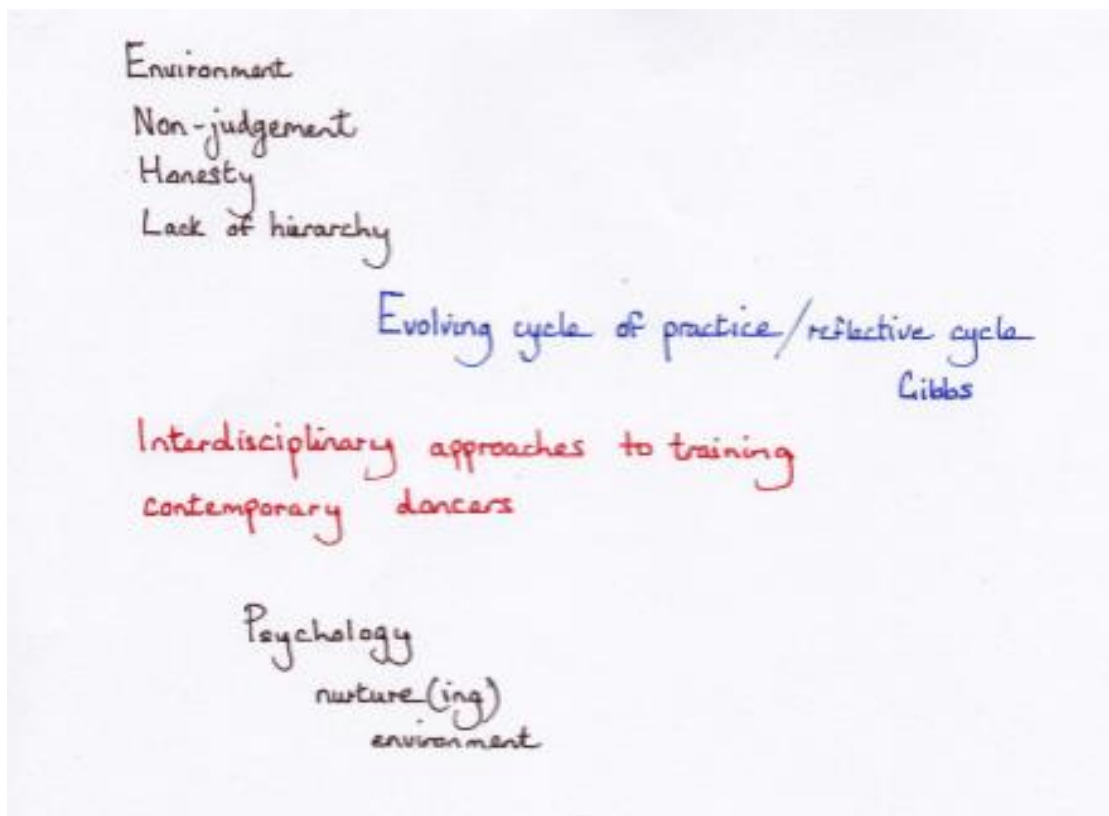


Figure 1: Visual mappings of our discussions

Our work is situated in practice and subsequently our methods of evaluating the extent to which our sharings lead to enhanced teaching take place through a cyclical model of critical reflection, observation and evaluation (Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, 1988). Through the sharing of our practice, we instigated dialogue around common themes. Discussions over the 18 months encouraged us to articulate more clearly, how we teach and by doing so, facilitated new methods of engaging with delivery in the studio.

Along the way, we have been attempting to untangle the term *collaboration*. The term collaboration refers to the act of working together cooperatively to achieve a shared goal. For us, while we all work in dance education, we have different areas of expertise and experience and deliver different subject areas. However we share an approach to teaching, which is driven by a common goal to empower students and help develop their skills as dance artists.

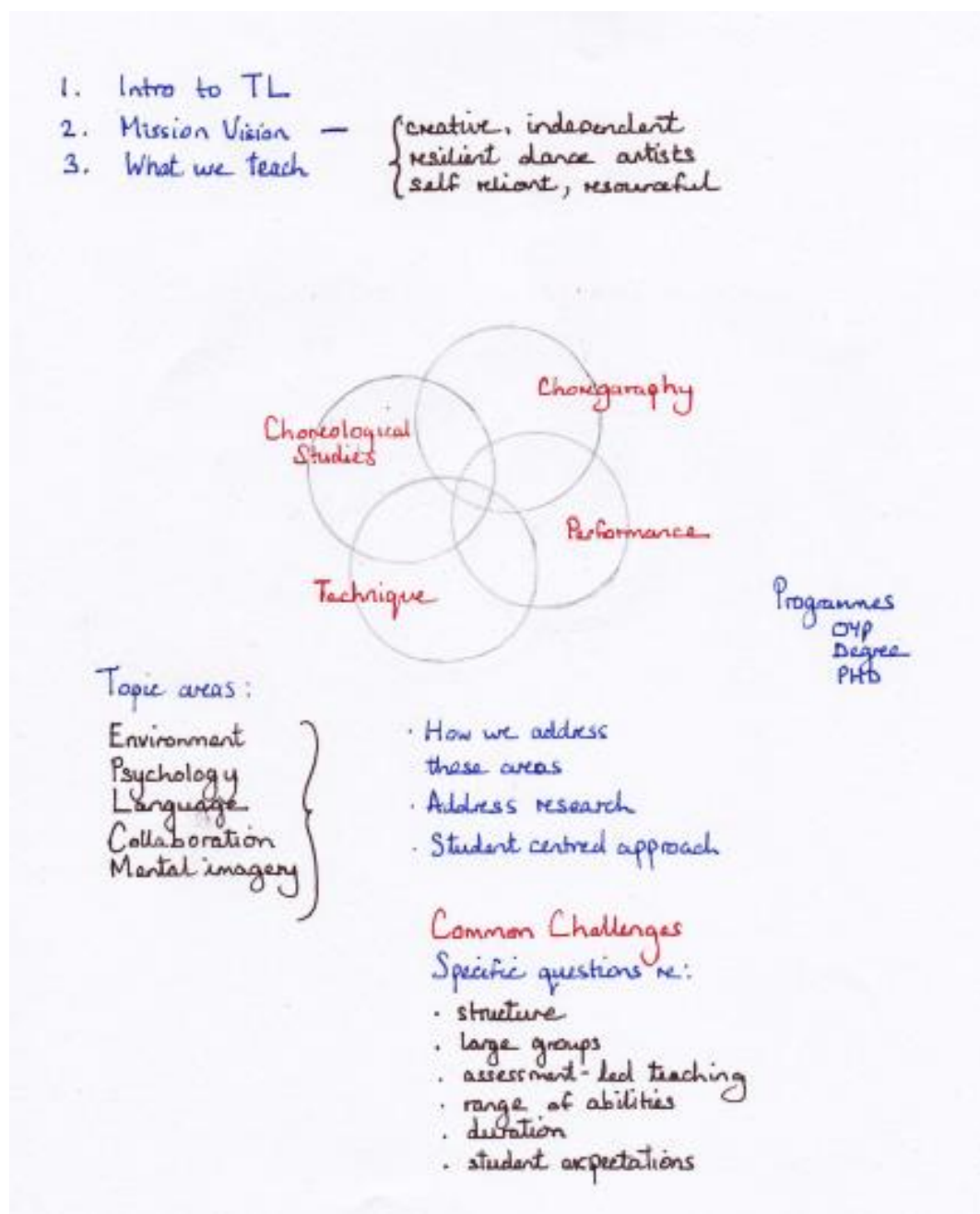


Figure 2: Illustration of connections

Personal narratives

Below is an arrangement of our practice-informed research and relatable personal narratives with an exploration of what we teach and how we engage

with teaching and learning. These narratives reveal our three common concerns, which are *language*, *environment* and *feedback*.

Naomi Lefebvre Sell

My primary delivery is within performance based components which lead to the production of original dance works. I also teach choreography, research methods, and supervise practice-based research as well as rehearsal direct. Originally from Canada, my background as a professional dancer includes work with both Butoh and Cunningham-influenced companies. My choreography has been commissioned and presented across Canada and Europe. I hold a BFA in Dance from Simon Fraser University and a MA Choreography and PhD in Creative Practice (Dance) from Trinity Laban.

My way of working is informed by my Doctoral research which examined the effect of mindfulness meditation on a creative process of dance making. For some dancers who are unfamiliar with working somatically, meditation can be a valuable way to encourage a highly disciplined, quieter and more self-reflective approach to moving and movement-making (Whatley & Lefebvre Sell, 2014). This particular research has led me to working in a way that focuses on the teacher being the observer and reflector through adopting principles of meditation, particularly the mindfulness approach. This approach is aligned with Rockwell's writing where she articulates that sitting before doing a work of art makes a space, creates a gap. The holding still is like clearing your canvas. Rockwell states that: making art in this way has nothing to do with what we conventionally understand as artistic talent. Instead, there is a new definition of talent: awareness (1989).

Through this *awareness* I hope to achieve an environment that is non-hierarchical and collaborative. Interestingly I had a recent collaborative

experience where the costume designer wanted to speak outside the studio and not in front of the students; upon reflection, I thought this was a missed learning opportunity; by allowing the students to witness the live problem solving, reveal the messiness of the process encourages a non-hierarchical approach to learning and teaching.

Through this environment and awareness I encourage students to reflect and articulate what they are attempting to create. Therefore my concerns are also related to the use of language and how we give feedback. By setting up a collaborative environment, I encourage the mindfulness concept of non-judgement when giving feedback to students and also in how students relate to each other through peer feedback. Acting without thoughts of gain or loss, right or wrong I find the students are freer to experience what comes up. I speak about what I ‘notice’ – rather than what I ‘prefer’, not making a value judgement on their work. This encourages a focus on ‘process’ – not end-gaming, the goal being to stay ‘present’.

Foster advises that in traditional dance training ‘students learn to duplicate the correctly demonstrative body and to avoid the mistakes of the incorrect body, they present (and are presented with) endless new variations on right and wrong’ (1997: 238). This embedded concept of ‘right and wrong’ resulted in a shift in my method of working. Learning to judge less was a significant development. For example, in one of my rehearsals the dancers spoke of how they were worried about judging each other and that they had a real sense of self-doubt. One dancer wanted to go to the floor in the improvisation but doubted herself, that maybe it was the wrong place to do so. They noticed how the notion of right and wrong came into play a lot in creative process and how it would create freedom if they judged less. Through understanding the effects of self-judgement, I lead choreographic workshops which focus on preparing the

students for the creative process, how the practice of mindfulness can lend itself to a sense of openness, which is suggested to be beneficial to the act of creating (Nataraja 2008; Jaksch 2007; Alfaro 2006; Monk 2004; Read 1997).

Another way that I work is through the use of imagery. I encourage the dancers to create movement material from images and feelings – rather than shapes – or how it looks externally. The concern is with getting the essence of each other's movement, which comes from their lived experience of it. The aim is to see if they can embody rather than copy. This is in direct contrast to the concept Foster (1997) describes as the 'hired body', a concept central in traditional dance training, where the dancer, so to speak, is hired out to the choreographer as the means to articulate and communicate the choreographer's ideas. By having an imbedded connection through imagery and intention then the need to 'clean' or 'mark' for sake of memory is eliminated as the movement was created from a place of 'feeling'. They engage with 'recalling' the experience rather than attempt to remember it.

My research has demonstrated that the learning environment, in which students explore more creatively, is one that is open, non-judgmental and nurturing. Zen meditation, although not often identified as a somatic modality, shares many of the principles of somatic traditions, particularly the 'concerns with accessing a quiet and still place from which to begin moving, and a focus on attending to the body's own inherent wisdom through encouraging a state where a 'beginner's body' is the source for moving' (Whatley & Lefebvre Sell: 441).

The practice of mindfulness in particular, has shifted dance making within studio and performance settings resulting in new training methods for dancers and choreographers in the leading/direction of dance making processes, and has informed dancers' engagement with preparation and performance of

choreographed work. Overall, it illustrated how meditation can expand Somatic Movement Education as well as influencing thoughts about teaching and research within a professional dance training environment (Whatley & Lefebvre Sell 2014).

Emma Redding

Alongside my leadership and research work as Head of Dance Science, I teach contemporary dance technique and lecture in Exercise Physiology.

I originally trained as a dancer and performed with the company Tranz Danz, Hungary and in Hong Kong. I hold a BA (Hons) in Dance Theatre, an MSc in Sports Science and a PhD in Biological Sciences. I have been the Principal Investigator for several research projects into the development of dance talent in young people, music and dance health and Co-Investigator for a current study into creativity and mental imagery.

As a relatively new field, the purpose of dance science is to enhance dance practice, performance and health by drawing upon scientific disciplines such as physiology, biomechanics and psychology. Dance Science is essentially a collaborative endeavour since it examines complex issues relating to dance education and training from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Further, the majority of researchers within the field of Dance Science are dance practitioners, educators and therapists, all with an intimate experiential knowledge of dance. Interestingly, the role of somatics education has been debated among dance science researchers since discussions in the early 80s at the American Dance Festival. This is important given the challenging position the field of Dance Science has occupied within dance in the face of sceptics who are concerned that science would somehow dilute the dance focus (Barr 2015). Rather, the dance emphasis within Dance Science has become more the focus in recent years and this has led to new collaborative groupings of people

from areas such as somatics, psychology and motor learning. What I continue to learn from Dance Science and somatics informs how I teach contemporary technique.

An example to illustrate this is the role and effectiveness of the mirror in the studio (Radel 2003). The debate within Dance Science literature is that while the mirror provides a source of visual feedback for the correction to postural alignment, it may not enhance dancers' sensory systems in the same way resulting in detriments to their skill development (Batson 2008; Radel 2003). Dancers who display better balance rely more heavily on proprioceptive strategies than visual input, a quicker feedback system in any case (Hutt & Redding 2014). This in turn, has led to an appreciation of the value of somatic principles advocating learning that favours feedback, which is self-referenced over visual feedback through mirrors. I always begin class standing away from the mirror so that the initial warm-up emphasises the importance of focusing attention to one's own felt body and I speak about registering bodily sensations from the beginning of class hoping that students will maintain such awareness throughout. Interestingly, more than half of the dance studios at our Conservatoire do not have mirrors and anecdotally, this seems to have made a positive impact not only upon the dance students' ability to self-reference but also in relation to the way in which they explore the weight of the skull in falling and recovering and moving in and out of the floor.

Another important area within discussions in Dance Science is the role of physical fitness and its relationship to dance performance. It is recommended that dancers improve their cardiorespiratory and anaerobic fitness in order to be able to meet the demands of varying choreographic works, which are often higher in intensity than class (Wyon & Redding 2005; Wyon et al. 2004). However the typical technique class is not designed to improve dancers' fitness

because its overarching purpose is to develop skill and artistry. The challenge therefore, is to address the concern for more continuous higher intensity movement for fitness, alongside the need for thoughtful and reflective technical practice, which often requires time for stillness and slower moving. Rather than lecturing students about this, it has been more effective within my teaching practice, to invite students to feel their bodies becoming fatigued as a result of sustained and continuous moving. The impact of this exercise appears to be more far-reaching than a lecture of the findings of academic research. In this way, students learn through sensing and doing rather than from written and verbal forms of knowledge.

Historically, the role of mental imagery in dance has been debated within the field of Somatics and more recently, Dance Science. While pioneers such as Todd (1937) and Sweigard (1974) promoted the benefits of using mental imagery in the mastery of skill acquisition and more recently, Franklin (1996) and Krasnow (2010) with regard to conditioning, the role of mental imagery as a tool to enhance the creation of movement is under explored. I try to use a range of imagery modalities when teaching technique since research has found that multi-modal imagery is linked to creativity (Kosslyn et al. 2006). For example, I will invite students to see the shape of their skull buoyant and floating (visual), hear the sounds around the room as they move across the floor (auditory) or notice the folds of their joints as they crumble into the floor (kinaesthetic).

While the teaching environment has long been considered by somatic practitioners as key to optimal learning, dance science research is beginning to address this issue through psychology research. Goal achievement and motivation theories advocate that teachers should consider their learning environment, language and feedback in order to nurture autonomy and intrinsic

motivation among dance learners (Ames 1984; Ames 1992; Quested & Duda 2010). I try to achieve this through dialogue with my dance students, which reinforces individual effort over attainment, cooperation between peers and process goal setting. A few years ago, a student asked me to give her more direct and specific feedback in class and commented, ‘because my other teacher is in charge of every cell in my body (personal communication)’. I explained that I am not in charge of every cell in her body and that rather, she might consider taking the responsibility for registering her own bodily changes and taking on both my feedback and the feedback she gives to herself through a process of self-referencing and noticing. This is an on-going challenge.

Alison Curtis-Jones

My specialist area of Choreological Practice² encourages understanding of the nature of relationships, spatial form and dynamic resonance in movement and is integral to my artistic and pedagogic practice, including contemporary technique, performance and composition.

I hold a BA (Hons) in Dance Theatre, and MA in European Dance Theatre Practice from Trinity Laban. I have performed with UK based companies and my choreographic work has been commissioned and performed internationally. My recent work with Summit Dance Theatre, winner of the Swiss ‘Dance as Cultural Heritage’ award, re-imagines ‘lost’ Rudolf Laban³ works. My current doctoral research at University of Roehampton explores transmission processes from archive to production.

My approach to movement as Living Architecture and Body-as-Site is central in my work, drawing from somatic approaches facilitated through imagery and proprioception. I use Laban’s principles of Choreutics to experiment with spatial planes and geometric forms such as the cube and icosohedron. Dance students

explore locations in space corporeally to encourage acute understanding of spatial articulation and how this can be used to generate material for dance. When students understand harmonic principles of space they can rupture choreutic laws, allowing them to create a new living architecture. I engage with principles critically through interrogating practice rather than preserving principles in a traditional form and move away from the idea that Choreutics is just geometry by raising awareness of how dancers inhabit space. I adopt a ‘what if?’ approach in my teaching; moving away from command style towards a guided discovery approach where students are led to discover through divergent tasks. I also encourage meta-cognitive strategies, ‘how do I learn and how do I move?’ activities and discussion and address different intelligences through a variety of teaching styles (Mosston 1986; Fleming 2006; Gardner 1983). Students are encouraged to question the notion of centre, decentralisation and experiment with multiple centres to challenge perceptions of three dimensional space. Rather than begin with teaching principles, I encourage students to discover the principles through experimentation.

When giving feedback, I consider language, its function and impact on students. Hattie and Timperley found that feedback has a greater effect on achievement than any other factor within teaching (2007). I use choreological language to reinforce learning and skill acquisition, illustrating what students have done and offering alternatives to encourage new approaches, experimentation and risk taking. Interrogating dynamics and natural affinities in Effort (1947) and experimenting with motion factors of Time, Weight, Space and Flow, encourages questioning of habitual movement choices. Choreological order is the way natural affinities within motion factors function. For most, it is largely unconscious and by encouraging consciousness of these movement practices, students can adhere to, or rupture, natural affinity vocabularies.

I use these principles to re-imagine Laban's dance theatre works. Much has been written about Laban's theatre practice (Preston-Dunlop 2013; Dorr 2008; McCaw 2011) but embodied practical (re)creations of Laban's works are scarce. The (re)creations contribute to current debates on transmission, transformation and transmutation (Lepecki 2010) reconstruction, construction (Franko 2011) recreation (Preston-Dunlop & Sayers 2011) re-invention (Burt 2003), re-imagining, (Lepecki 2010) re-staging (Pakes 2014; Barba 2011) and retrievability (Pakes 2014). Re-embodiment of past dances with embodied corporeal knowledge provides insight into the work for dancers and audiences that studying documentary materials alone cannot provide, (Pakes 2014) producing the 'body-as archive' (Lepecki 2010). The (re)creation process is different to reconstruction where dancers learn a series of steps; (re)creation is about re-envisioning, it is not preserving or exhuming work. Dancers contribute to process and shape the work, which encourages autonomy and ownership, resulting in a change of surface form with each mounting.

My practice encourages students to embody movement through imagery, meaning and intention rather than specific steps and counts. Students learn by doing and discovering rather than observational practice such as use of mirror, they become mindful of bodily sensation and feel the movement first, before it is given shape or form. I prefer to facilitate movement without influencing dancers responses with recordings of past performances and encourage group cohesion through proprioception; raised consciousness and sensorial awareness of the ensemble, moving together with organic solidarity, affiliation in shared space, mutuality and collective consciousness, so that unison work is felt and sensed corporeally, rather than seen objectively from the outside. When dancers engage in cognitive responses (decision making – 'where shall we go next in the space, who's leading?') movement becomes mechanical rather than organic,

and cerebral rather than corporeal, aligning with Bainbridge Cohen's view that embodiment is a being process, not a doing or thinking process (2008).

I use visualization techniques through imagery to help dancers find sensation, intention and authenticity in movement. Imagery is a powerful tool and used effectively, can encourage expressivity and creativity, improve ability to perform movement and increase efficiency in the execution of movement (Franklin 1996). Bramley (2002) and Buckroyd (2000) state that positive forms of speech and imagery can enhance an optimal emotional environment to facilitate learning and creative practices. I use visual, kinesthetic and aural imagery, from biomechanical in technique teaching, to creating an imagined environment for choreographic practice. Imagery is used throughout my rehearsal process to clarify intention. My recreation of Laban's *Nacht* (1927) depicts images of the underbelly of the Weimar Period and mass industrial society; images of utopia and dystopia from the film *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) and Brecht's perception of Berlin were referred to throughout, to help understand the socio-political and cultural context, to clarify intention. Laban refers to 'inner attitude' and connection with this inner sense or intention encourages expressivity. Vivid, evocative, imagery can move beyond the *what* and facilitates the *how*, enhancing qualitative content and transforming movement. The instruction 'lift your arms', will manifest differently by adding '...feel the sun on your face'. How intention is embodied and made visible leads to a conscious state of awareness and expressivity. Fraleigh states, 'to bring the dimension of awareness of movement is a conscious act. We do not automatically ask ourselves how our every movement feels, or what effect it is having on us' (2014: 254). I use imagery to aid memory when recalling movement. In the retrieval process, by referring back to the association of images used to inspire movement, rather than counts, students remember the

source and feel the movement material kinaesthetically, rather than objectifying shapes or steps.

My (re)creation of *Green Clowns* (Laban 1928) is an expressionist work borne out of deeply felt sensorial experiences.⁴ In the section, *War*, by referring to the floor as terrain or referring to images of land mines, how might dancers place the feet? With eyes closed, they are encouraged to feel every part of the foot, distributing the weight carefully. This type of activity encourages greater awareness of articular, vestibular, muscular, tactile, aural channels by removing the dominant visual sense. The image is emotive and creates meaning.

Discussion

We have identified common themes across our teaching, which can be articulated both within our practice and through theoretical literature. These concerns relate to the learning environment: how best to create an optimal learning atmosphere, feedback: how best to guide and support students through a range of strategies, language and the use of mental imagery: how best to draw attention to students' practice and utilise imagery as a method of learning and creating. It is worth noting that these concerns are themselves interrelated and share characteristics in practice. In this sense, our focus is not to seek ways of addressing them individually, but to develop an integrated and somatic informed approach to responding to them.

Environment – we aim to address the environment in a way that fosters effective learning by providing an atmosphere free of judgement, which encourages students to self-reference and an atmosphere of curiosity and discovery (Batson 2014). For example we all tend to encourage students to give peer feedback and we pose questions, which lead them to reflect on their experiences rather than us as teachers solely evaluating the outcomes.

Therefore, fostering an enquiry based practice, where the students become more self-aware as we teach through questioning.

Feedback – we aim to adopt a non-judgemental approach to communicating with students and each other utilising a range of strategies, encouraging us all to be open, available and responsive to comment. For example, in class, we comment on *what* is presented or shown rather than referring to our own personal view of it, thereby encouraging a dialogue between peers and teachers that fosters mutual respect.

Language and the use of mental imagery – we aim to facilitate a method of practice where a considered use of language is adopted and one which encourages students to recall and create movement material through images, meaning and intention rather than shapes and counts. For example, we encourage students to engage within the origin of the creation process when refining a dance work, this may be returning to a particular image or verbal task from where the movement was derived. Within group work, a shared understanding of a given intention is more valued than the correct placement of an arm or leg.

We recognise that dance education and training within the UK has changed considerably in recent years as discussed in several articles and reports (Dragon 2015; Soot & Viskus 2014). There appears to have been a shift from a model of transmission of knowledge (movement vocabulary) from ‘expert’ to ‘learner’ to one that fosters a range of strategies that acknowledges a two-way dialogue. Professor Kneebone proposed in his recent Keynote speech (Foundations 2015) the idea of reciprocal illumination between two parties as opposed to knowledge exchange from expert to non-expert. This is supported by Friere (2014) and others who advocate a non-hierarchical approach to learning and teaching in

Higher Education. Soot and Viskus (2014) argue that today's teachers must broaden their teaching strategies and in many ways, this view has encouraged us to share our practice and concerns to enhance our work. We feel our approaches have particular relevance to the educating of artists whereby the goal is one of facilitation and guidance rather than knowledge transfer.

Several articles and texts within the pedagogical literature point to inquiry based teaching whereby the role of the teacher is interrogated and students are encouraged to be critically reflective, curious and responsible (eg. Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993; Kimmerle & Cote-Laurence 2003; Raman 2009). In dance, this could translate into an environment where the student is invited to become more aware of their individual body and taking a more active role in their learning.

Shapiro (1998) also speaks of the shift in dance teaching from disembodied knowing to embodied knowing resulting in a new relationship between teacher and learner. Batson (2014) explains how somatic practice has evolved from being a so-called non-technique existing outside of the teaching of codified contemporary techniques to an acknowledged form of teaching entirely integrated into contemporary dance training. The focus has moved from *what* is taught to *how* and our research together illustrates this.

Reflecting upon our journey so far, several insights have been identified:

By working together, we have better understood our own teaching practices and are also able to articulate them more clearly to others. We have been invited to share our work not only with colleagues at our Conservatoire but also externally at international conferences. Importantly, our sharings with colleagues have led to an invitation to develop a professional development programme for faculty,

which aims to disseminate our own findings as well as encourage other collaborative groupings.

Through our engagement with literature, we have appreciated how questions in learning and teaching can be asked through a variety of lenses. For example in Dragon's recent article she questions the developed culture of teaching and learning within dance; highlighting her concern of the 'perpetuation of authoritarian teaching practices' where methods of teaching and learning are 'silently embedded into dance classroom experiences without explicit explanations to students of the origins, purposes or philosophies underlying the methods' (2015: 25). Dragon advocates for dance educators delivering within Higher Education to be 'transparent to students about pedagogy in their classrooms' (2015: 25). It appears evident that many of the issues discussed in this article regarding optimal learning and teaching practice in dance are being explored through literature in the fields of psychology, education and dance science and through practice. An important reflection is that our engagement with each other, our students and the wider academic context is a collaborative, and somatically informed encounter.

One of the challenges for us was finding a shared language. We each have different approaches to reflecting, critiquing and talking about our work. We also have different methods of presenting our work and this proved challenging partly because we were concerned about respecting and listening to each others idiosyncratic ways of doing things. While we are practitioners who often work in studio settings, to date, our work together has taken place verbal encounters. We look forward to the next step within our journey as we interrogate our work further through practice itself.

Conclusion

This article has outlined an investigation into how the sharing of our teaching practices and approaches has allowed us to gain further insight into how we teach. Through the act of collaborating, we realised that our concerns around learning and teaching within contemporary dance training are shared even though we teach different subject areas. We have been able to identify, through our collaborative learning, that our shared concerns relate to language, feedback and the environment and through examining these concerns, we have been able to refine and renew our teaching practices.

An important finding for us is that our collaborative work, which encompasses inductive explorations of practice, engagement with academic research and our own intuitively developed practitioner wisdom, is valuable and worthy of dissemination. Our work together continues to evolve. We look forward to sharing our model of working collaboratively, apply further, our insights and perspectives to our teaching practice within contemporary dance and continue to question how best to facilitate and nurture the development of contemporary dance artists and encourage colleagues to consider more integrative and shared methods of planning, thinking and reflecting on teaching.

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² Choreological Studies explores contemporary developments of Rudolf Laban's Principles and Practice. It is a system of analysing the grammar and syntax of the language of movement through practice and views the human body from a structuralist perspective. This approach also examines the multiple grammars of dance as a theatre art. Choreutics explores Space Harmony.

³ Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) dance artist, innovator, thinker, analyst, founder of German Expressionist Dance and Labanotation

⁴ Laban's pioneering work from as early as 1910 in Monte Verita, Switzerland involved experimenting with felt sensation of the expressive body, which could be seen to be aligned with somatic principles.
