

Teaching without trace: an aspiration for dance pedagogy?

Jayne Stevens

De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

Published as STEVENS, J. (2017) 'Teaching without trace: an aspiration for dance pedagogy?', *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies*, (XXXVII *Teacher's Imprint: Rethinking Dance Legacy*), pp. 52-56.

“The way I work, the way I look at work, the direction I've moved in, were influenced by what happened at De Montfort University—by the atmosphere created there. De Montfort University offered me teachers who were constantly asking questions. They were on a journey, they were artists themselves, so they were asking questions to themselves and we were witnessing them asking those questions. So in a way we were empowered to start asking ourselves questions”¹

These words from the internationally acclaimed British choreographer Akram Khan recall his time as a dance student at De Montfort University in Leicester (UK) where I have been teaching dance for many years. I had the joyful privilege of teaching Akram and very many other students who have gone on—to name but a few career pathways—to be choreographers, dancers, educators, community artists, curators and dance managers. Khan's observations reveal something of the 'imprint' his experience has had. He recognises his teachers as artists and sees both teachers and students engaged in a shared experience of journeying through questioning. I will return to these ideas later. Implicit in Khan's observations is a conceptualisation of a relationship between teacher and student, which is at odds with the whole idea of transmission.

The concept of teaching and learning as transmission has underpinned much conventional dance pedagogy especially, but not exclusively, in professional dance training (Buckroyd 2000; Price 2009). This concept can encourage students to see their dance teacher primarily as expert and authority. The hierarchical power relationship between teacher (as knowing) and student (as unknowing), which this concept presupposes has led, in some instances, to authoritarian practices (Lakes 2005) and to a focus on the student as a body (Ross 2004:169) and moreover a docile body (Smith 1998).

Recently, however, constructivist views of learning have become more significant in all areas of dance education. Key to such views is the suggestion that every student actively constructs her or his own understanding (and practice) and there is no transmission from teacher to learner as traditionally envisaged. Constructivist theories underpin a range of innovations in dance pedagogy involving, for example, peer and collaborative learning, problem solving, personalised learning and critical reflection (Stevens 2006). Such pedagogical approaches cast the dancer in

the role of active, co-contributor rather than in 'the traditional passive role of being taught through demonstration and repetition' (Main 2009:48). In the acquisition and development of skills, such as happens in dance technique, however, this re-positioning may not be immediately apparent. In dance class the teacher often supplies the movement content to be learned through replication. Movement material is communicated via non-verbal demonstration, observation and imitation. Conscious practice, which could conceivably appear to be mere repetition, is a necessary part of technical learning.

Learning has been understood traditionally as the acquisition of skills and knowledge. However, Phillip Martin (a former Dean of Arts and Humanities at De Montfort University) suggests that arts education is 'not primarily structured around the imparting of skills and competences, but one primarily structured around a series of engagements with a body of knowledge or (in the case of the practical arts) a body of practice' (2014:301). His distinction is, I think, important. It suggests that both teacher and student engage with, develop and are developed by a shared body of practice. It also questions the notion of an essentially two-way transmission between teacher (teaching) and student (learning). In fact Martin goes further to suggest that 'teaching' and 'learning' are not separate or even conjoined activities but an 'undivided practice' (Martin 2014:303).

Recent thinking about processes involved in learning has also challenged the primacy of the teacher-student interaction. Illeris (2009) summarises many social and experiential learning theories in a triangular model of learning. This triangle comprises the content to be learned, the learner's acquisition processes and the environment in which activity takes place. Content includes not only skills and knowledge but also beliefs, values, strategies and behaviours—whether taught or learned consciously or unconsciously. The learner's acquisition processes involve prior learning, expectations, assumptions and feelings (Illeris 2009: 10). The learning environment may involve action, imitation, communication, cooperation or competition. Learning then is the outcome of complex interactions between all these dimensions rather than a two-way transaction between teacher and student. This is not to deny, however, that teacher and teaching can exert a significant influence on learning. In this respect what matters is not only what the teacher does but also how the teacher is.

These considerations lead me to see my prime function as teacher to be that of enabling each individual student to consciously construct his or her own practice—whether that be choreographic, creative, pedagogic or technical—in relation to an established and an emergent body of practice that is broadly recognised as dance. This means encouraging students to see that they are in charge of their own learning (or non-learning) and to provide a practical means of constantly learning something new. At De Montfort University this has meant offering dance students the opportunity to learn the Alexander Technique and to apply this to their dance practice.ⁱⁱ

My colleagues have described their understanding of Alexander's technique and its application to dance in detail elsewhere (see Leach 2009; Stevens 2000; Leach & Stevens 1996; Huxley, Leach & Stevens 1995a & 1995b). In this article I confine myself to a consideration of the implications for the idea of a 'teacher's imprint'.

Let me consider a dance technique class. Whilst many dance educators and theorists have been critical of learning through replication, a common strategy in dance technique teaching remains that of the teacher demonstrating a sequence of movement, which then becomes the focus of the content to be learned. As well as demonstrating the dance teacher will need to articulate the intention and thought processes that the movement embodies and suggest strategies for optimum performance. Nevertheless, in my experience, many students initially see the demonstration as key because they assume that their goal is to mimic the teacher. They see the teacher's performance as the authentic, authoritative and 'correct' one. Such imitation is, as Harbonnier-Topin and Barbier (2012) have illustrated, a highly complex activity. It is not, however, from my point of view, the real essence of the task that the dance student is being asked to undertake.

The task is for dance students to investigate the movement for themselves and so make discoveries about themselves and the basis of their technique. However much the dance student may feel that some form of direct transference from body to body is happening and even allowing for what has been called an empathetic, kinaesthetic resonance (or imprint) on observing the movement of others, each dance student must, in practical terms, voluntarily direct her or his own performance.

When the dance student watches a teacher's demonstration s/he forms ideas as to *what* the movement is but has to determine *how* the movement comes about and how to direct her/himself in order to perform it. The realisation that everything the dance student does, regardless of how it might feel, is the outcome of her or his own direction in terms of both thought and action is vital. In higher education we talk about developing an independent learner but in fact every student already is independent and in charge of his or her own learning. The ability to consciously direct her/his self is the prime purpose of learning to apply the Alexander Technique.

Similarly, the dance teacher can only really teach meaningfully from the basis of her or his own investigations and ability to consciously direct her or his own activity. It is in this sense that teacher and student together engage in what Martin called an undivided practice in which all parties are involved in a continuous, constructive, self-determined learning process. Whilst not wishing to deny the teacher's example, the reality is that teacher and student are, in fact, companions in learning (as Akram Khan recognised). In this relationship the teacher employs her or his experience of, progression in and engagement with the Alexander Technique and the body of dance practice to aid the dance student's own journey.

The aim of teaching then is that each student should consciously construct her or his own practice rather than adopt that of her or his teachers. We all 'store memories of past experiences including those of lessons learned and taught' (Stinson 2004:154). However, it is the capacity not to be bound by these—a capacity honed through learning to apply the Alexander Technique—that provides a means for significantly new practice to emerge. It is in this sense that I wonder if the ultimate aim of teaching should be to teach without leaving a trace?

References:

- Buckroyd, Julia. 2000. *The Student Dancer: emotional aspects of the teaching and learning of dance*. London: Dance Books.
- Harbonnier-Topin, Nicole, and Jean-Marie Barbier. 2012. "'How seeing helps doing, and doing allows to see more: the process of imitation in the dance class.'" *Research in Dance Education* 13 (3): 301-325.
- Huxley, Michael, Martin Leach, and Jayne Stevens. 1995a. "Breaking Down the Barrier of Habit: an Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Ideas of F.M. Alexander and the Theory and Practice of Dance." In *Border Tensions: Dance and Discourse*, edited by Janet Adshead-Landsdale and Chris Jones, 155-180. Guildford: University of Surrey.
- Huxley, Michael, Martin Leach, and Jayne Stevens. 1995b. "The Integrity of the Whole: the Application of the Ideas of F.M. Alexander to Contemporary Dance Practice—a Reappraisal." In *2nd International Congress on Dance and Research*, edited by Nicole Bardaxoglou, Clairette Brack and Maria Vranken, 273-280. Brussels: Vrije Universiteit.
- Illeris, Knud. 2009. "A comprehensive understanding of human learning." In *Contemporary theories of learning: learning theories in their own words*, edited by Knud Illeris, 7-20. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lakes, Robin. 2005. "The messages behind the methods: the authoritarian pedagogical legacy in Western concert dance technique training and rehearsals." *Arts Education Policy Review* 106 (5): 3-16.
- Leach, Martin. 2009. "The problem of 'feeling' in dance practice: fragmentation and unity." In *Global perspectives on dance pedagogy: research and practice*, edited by Tresa Randall, 130-8. Birmingham, AL: Congress on Research in Dance.
- Leach, Martin, and Jayne Stevens. 1996. "The Dancing Self: Conscious Direction of the Body in Performance: The Alexander Technique in Dance Performance." In *The Body in Dance: Modes of Inquiry. Paradigms for Viewing Artistic Work and Scientific Inquiry*, edited by Nancy Stokes and Janice LaPointe-Crump, 113-122. Greensboro NC: University of North Carolina.

Main, Lesley. 2009. "The pedagogic significance of modern dance training on the Twenty-First-Century dancing body, with reference to Doris Humphrey's dance technique and movement philosophy." In *Global perspectives on dance pedagogy: research and practice*, edited by Tresa Randall, 47-53. Birmingham, AL: Congress on Research in Dance.

Martin, Philip W. 2014. "Key aspects of teaching and learning in arts, humanities and social sciences." In *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education: enhancing academic practice*, edited by Heather Fry, Steve Ketteridge and Stephanie Marshall, 301-323. Abingdon: Routledge.

Price, Heulwen. 2009. "Pedagogy in ballet studies at the undergraduate level in the United Kingdom." In *Global perspectives on dance pedagogy: research and practice*, edited by Tresa Randall, 80-85. Birmingham, AL: Congress on Research in Dance.

Ross, Janice. 2004. "The intractable body: student bodies from classrooms to prisons." In *Knowing bodies, moving minds: towards embodied teaching and learning*, edited by Liora Bresler, 169-181. Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Smith, Clyde. 1998. "On authoritarianism in the dance classroom." In *Dance, power and difference: critical and feminist perspectives on dance education*, edited by Sherry B. Shapiro, 123-146. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Stevens, Jayne. 2006. *Rethinking dance technique in Higher Education*. Report for PALATINE the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Dance, Drama and Music. Lancaster.

Stevens, Jayne. 2000. "Keeping Students Dancing: Dance Injury Prevention in Practice." In *Dancing in the Millennium*, edited by Juliette Crone-Willis and Janice LaPointe-Crump, 400-403. Washington, D.C.: Dancing in the Millennium.

Stinson, Susan W. 2004. "My body/myself: lessons from dance education." In *Knowing bodies, moving minds: towards embodied teaching and learning*, edited by Liora Bresler, 153-167. Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

ⁱ Khan, Akram (no date) *De Montfort University: What people say*. [online] [Accessed 6/3/17]. Available from: <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/what-people-say/alumni/akram-khan.aspx>

ⁱⁱ The Alexander Technique has been taught at De Montfort University by Dr. Martin Leach since 1992. It was previously taught by Dr. Susan Davies having been introduced by Brian Door in 1985.