Seeing myself dance: video and reflective learning in dance technique
by
Sally Doughty & Jayne Stevens

De Montfort University & ReP: The Performance Reflective Practice Project

A presentation at 'Finding the Balance' a conference on Dance in FE and HE in the 21st Century held at Liverpool John Moore's University on 23 June 2002

The use of video by professional dance artists, educators and students is now commonplace. In dance education video is employed for a variety of purposes. In this presentation we focus on the use of video to support self reflection on performance.

The work reported here is part of an ongoing project supported by the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning, based at De Montfort University. ReP: The Performance Reflective Practice project involves seven members of staff variously teaching dance, theatre and performance on HND, BA and MA courses. The project is concerned with examining how students of dance, drama/theatre and performance may learn more effectively from their practice by engaging with it in a reflective way.

Reflective thought and judgment are central to the artistic process and established features of arts pedagogy. It is what 'the best artists and pupils have always done in relation to their own work' (Cowan, 1998:31). Though reflection plays a significant role in current learning in dance and drama, the ReP project has found that the subject community–teachers, learners and professional artists–recognise a need to improve critical reflection on practice and to identify strategies which enable new professionals to acquire relevant skills. Indeed, the 1998 Quality Assurance Agency's Subject Overview report for Dance, Drama and Cinematics noted that curriculum aims and objectives for these subject areas 'consistently emphasise the interaction between theory and practice. In 60 per cent of cases an appropriate balance is achieved between practical production or performance and cultural, historical, theoretical and critical approaches. However, 40 per cent fail to *provide for adequate development of students' powers of analysis and critical reflection on practice*' (1998:5) [our italics]. The ReP project has therefore sought to identify and explore reflection in its various forms and to support and promote effective practice.

We begin today by explaining what we mean by reflection on practice. We outline the context within which we worked, the methodologies we employed and we report our findings.

Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning literature on reflection and reflective practice: an outcome of, and stimulus for, the increasingly significant (some might say, dominant) role that reflection has come to occupy in learning and professional development in a variety of disciplines. Indeed, in a world that is 'radically unknowable in many respects' it has been suggested that a 'desirable outcome for every higher education student, regardless of discipline, is to become a reflective practitioner' (Barnett, 1992,1997).

Reflective practitioners have been described as those who 'understand how to think and learn from their experiences in practice and to apply and monitor the outcomes of that learning' (Moon 1999:42). Current notions of the reflective practitioner owe much to the work of Donald Schön (1983, 1987). Schön acknowledged the complex, unstable and unique nature of practice within which professionals need to learn to operate. He emphasised an interactive relationship between theory and practice which he saw embodied by experienced practitioners. John Dewey, however, is generally acknowledged as the first educationalist to recognise and promote the value of reflection as a means of learning from experience. He advocated the necessity of learners being involved in doing but *then in thinking about what arises from their doing*. In this way meaningful and creative learning can ensue. For Dewey it was reflective thought that 'converts action that is merely appetitive, blind and impulsive into intelligent action' (1933:17). It is such 'intelligent action' that we wish our dance students and graduates to achieve.

Reflection encompasses a variety of cognitive and meta-cognitive activities that involve the processing and re-processing of experience and information. Reflective thinking might include 'relating, experimenting, exploring, reinterpreting from different points of view or within different contextual factors, theorising and linking theory and practice' (Moon 1999:33). Our reflections may focus on analysis (*how* something is done) or on evaluation (*how well* it is done) (Cowan 1998). We took both approaches in our work with students. In such ways and guises reflection can constitute a critical practice because it involves the learner in questioning themselves and their situation, making judgments about their performance and prompting action.

We have both used video regularly to teach and support learning in dance technique. Our current investigations develop previous work by employing video viewing and analysis as part of an overall strategy to enable students to develop and communicate understanding of their own dance practice. We used video recording and viewing as a focus for reflective dialogue both between students and between students and tutors. We also used video to initiate individual reflective writing and to support student self assessment of performance.

Viewing, analysing and evaluating the student's own performance on video was made an integral part of the teaching, learning and assessment of a level two contemporary dance technique module. The module involves ongoing dance technique and it introduces partner work. Achievement in both is assessed in class work and in the performance of an extract of choreography. A short duet was taken from the tutors' own professional repertoire. We elected to work with the repertory component as it offered potential for reflective dialogue between duet members. The purpose of this repertory component is to enable students not only to apply their individual technical and partner work skills but also to learn more about performance and its preparation. The module seeks to engage students in performance as a process. It emphasises rehearsal as ongoing enquiry rather than an activity characterised by repetitive practice. Through structured discussion and writing using video recordings of their own rehearsal and performance we endeavoured to help students identify, develop and articulate their understanding of the rehearsal and preparation process as well as their own technical achievement.

Standard VHS video equipment was used. Students are familiar with this format and can view it readily. Each pair of students kept a cassette on which consecutive recordings of their partner work were logged. This provided an ongoing record of the development of their work. For the first few weeks, the students were engaged in learning the repertory material and the partner work principles underpinning it. In demonstrating the material and teaching it to the students we, as tutors, were careful to reflect-in-action by making explicit our thought processes as we danced together. In talking and dancing in this way we modelled an approach to reflection on practice in action. Other research suggests that talking out our thoughts aloud and thinking about what they reveal is profitable for students and teachers (Cowan 1998:5). Nothing was recorded on video until the students had learned a sufficient amount of material then each duet was recorded in class. The students made subsequent recordings in their own learning time.

The students were asked to view this initial recording, discuss it with their partner, and undertake two pieces of individual reflective writing in response to it. We found an interplay of reflective dialogue and writing to be effective in helping students to identify and refine their own perceptions and then to crystallise their observations and condense their thoughts (Lavender 1996:75). In the first instance they were asked to write about their initial reactions to self-viewing; how they felt about watching themselves on video, whether the work *looked* different to how it *felt* 'live' and to elaborate on both. In the second instance we suggested that they note their observations on their performance, drawing upon either specific observations of self or partner, or on the duet as a whole. They were asked to focus on the visible features of the performance. These reflective writings were used by the students to inform further development of the material

and their use of video, and by us, as tutors, to gauge the level and nature of reflection that the students were undertaking.

We recognise that reflection is not necessarily easy or straightforward. It is not something students can simply be sent off to do (Burns & Bulman 2000). The act of self-viewing, or self-confrontation can produce a range of reactions from enthusiastic acceptance to shock and embarrassment (Saunders & Hargie 1989). It was vital therefore, that the students understood how and why video was being used in the module and were adequately prepared for the experience of self-viewing. Even so, it was evident from discussions with students and from their writing that this self-confrontation strongly influenced how they viewed their work on tape.

In the next session, therefore, we viewed samples of the videos together. Performers were invited to refer to their first piece of reflective writing and share their observations. Many students found it difficult to articulate what they *actually saw* on the video, rather than recall what it felt like to perform or to watch them selves. As facilitators we encouraged students to look for and describe *visual evidence* from the video footage, to support or supplement their personal *feelings* about the work.

 Students then returned to studio-based work considering their observations and addressing them in practice. Students also learnt more of the duet, so they were involved in reflecting on familiar movement whilst also learning new material. A much longer sequence of material was then filmed. The students were asked to undertake the same reflective writing exercises as before, but also to consider whether the work had developed in response to their initial observations. They were encouraged to look back at the first recording and use it as information. On reading the students' reaction to self-viewing, there is evidence of how the video record was used to assist reflection and comparison.   For example, one student writes;

> On watching the second clip of Mary and myself, my very first thought was "Oh my God, it still looks so slow!" I could not understand it because we've really been working on speeding it up and when we're doing it, it feels as though we're racing through it. However, when I re-watched the first video clip I saw that, in fact, it is now definitely faster moving. The second thing I noticed is that there has been a big improvement on all the points we'd picked up on last time. For example, I'm extending my arm on the handstand, Mary is keeping her head on the floor until I bend forward to pull her up and we are both working together more as a duet.

The student has reflected upon her observations from the first recording and has identified improvement. She offers evidence from the recording to support her view.

In considering the video record students were beginning to compare and evaluate their various performances. Initially we steered students away from responses as to how gratifying or disappointing their performance seemed and towards an analytical approach in which they focussed on the components of the performance and the processes whereby it was being achieved. As we moved from analytical towards evaluative reflection we turned our attention to identifying and applying criteria and to encouraging students to reach criterion referenced judgments rather than, for example, comparing their own performance to ours.

In doing so we drew on John Cowan's approach to assessment that develops from an identification of 'sound standard' (2001). Cowan suggests that most motivated students on a well taught module will submit work of a sound standard; that is work worthy of a mark of 55 per cent (being midway between a pass at 40 per cent and the first class threshold at 70 per cent). Cowan has found that establishing a shared understanding of what constitutes sound standard with students is useful in enabling them to clarify their understanding of what they are striving to achieve and in supporting a transition to self assessment. Using the video record we discussed assessment criteria with students and developed an agreed description of 'sound standard' for each criterion. In doing so we emphasised the need to consider evidence from the performance to support a judgment and we drew the student's attention to the inter-relationship of performance process and product.

Having agreed a description of 'sound standard' we asked the students to apply the criteria to a video recording of our own performance and we discussed their findings. For reflective dialogue to take place effectively 'the student learners become the centre and focus of the dialogue' thus shifting it 'away from the transmission of the material to how the learners are working with the material in the here and now' (Brockbank & McGill 1998:5). This is no easy matter and as tutors (and eventual assessors) we were aware of the need to acknowledge the imbalance of power relationships between tutor and student, which inevitably affect the dynamic of the classroom. Despite initial hesitation, however, the students began to apply the criteria and to assess our performance in relation to sound standard rather than assume that our performance set the standard against which theirs would be judged.

Students were encouraged to continue to record and reflect on their work independently. The next time that their performance was filmed during class time was at assessment. Two simultaneous recordings were made of each duet. The students then used one recording with which to self assess their own performance in relation to sound standard. We, as tutors, used the other recording to reach our assessment of their performance independently of the students. We then met with each duet and together we discussed and agreed these assessments. In these meetings students were asked to provide evidence from the video recording to support their judgments.

Throughout the period of study video was used to initiate and to sustain a range of reflective activity. In Schon's terminology, the student dancers used video to engage in reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action. Using the video record performers worked with a re-presentation of performance that they considered in relation to their own involvement, recall and response and which then formed a basis for revised action in rehearsal and performance.

In their final evaluations the students reported the ways in which the video had fuelled and focussed such reflections. Experience, like dance, is ephemeral and the video provided a stable artefact, which could be viewed together, paused and rewound in the course of discussion. It also provided an ongoing record of each duet enabling students to see change and development over time. Through self-viewing students gathered information about their own performance which they recognised supplemented, and at times conflicted with, their experience as performers. They noticed aspects of their performance which they were unaware of at the time of performing. As Watson and Wilcox (2000:61) suggest aspects and implications of experience are not always apparent 'in the heat of the moment' but may become significant in the process of reflection-on-action. In becoming aware of different perspectives and in being able to resolve, or at least accommodate them, learners may be better able to engage in critical self-assessment.

Some students found self-viewing on video disconcerting and uncomfortable. They needed considerable re-assurance and guidance to encourage them to return to the video record again and again in order to examine their own performance. The reactions which they reported to self-viewing, however, brought to the fore values and expectations which are not routinely voiced or questioned but which underpin our practice, our expectations of performance and so our expectations of ourselves.

As tutors we found that as students grew more accustomed to and practiced at viewing the video record of their performances they were more able to describe, analyse and evaluate their own practice. Dance students need, and indeed many value, opportunities to improve their skills in linguistic and written communication (Feck, 2000; Mitchell et al, 2000). As the students became more familiar with discussing their practice on a regular basis and developing sometimes quite personal and idiosyncratic vocabulary to do so they became noticeably less reliant on tutor feedback and more able to monitor their own performance. In this way they demonstrated increased self awareness–self awareness which is a necessary pre cursor to the development of autonomous, independent learning.

We expected to find video to be a useful tool in facilitating reflective practice. It has also, however, benefited students in other ways. This has been particularly the case in developing independent learning and communication skills.

References:

Barnett, R., ed. (1992) *Improving Higher Education*, Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Barnett, R. (1997) *Higher Education: A Critical Business*, Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Brockbank, A. and McGill, I. (Eds.) (1998) *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education,* Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, Buckingham.

Burns, S. and Bulman, C. (Eds.) (2000) *Reflective Practice in Nursing. The Growth of the Professional Practitioner,* Blackwell, London.

Cowan, J. (2001) *Plus/minus marking–a method of assessment worth considering?* ILTHE www.ilt.ac.uk

Cowan, J. (1998) *On Becoming an Innovative University Teacher. Reflection in Action,* Open University Press, Buckingham.

Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process.,* D.C. Heath, Boston.

Feck, M. C. (2000) In *Dancing in the Millenium* (Eds, Crone-Willis, J. and LaPoint-Crump, J.) Washington, D.C., pp. 168-174.

Lavender, L. (1996) *Dancers Talking Dance. Critical Evaluation in the Choreography Class,* Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL.

Mitchel, S., Marks-Fisher, V., Hale, L. and Harding, J. (2000) In *Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts* (Eds, Lea, M. R. and Stierer, B.) Open University Press, Buckingham, pp. 86-96.

Moon, J. (1999) *Learning Journals. A Handbook for Academics, Students and Professional Development,* Kogan Page Limited, London.

(1998) *Quality Assessment of Drama, Dance and Cinematics 1996 - 1998: Subject Overview Report*, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

ReP: The Performance Reflective Practice Project
www.hum.dmu.ac.uk/Research/PA/ReP

Saunders, C. and Hargie, O. (1989) The Effects of Video Feedback on Students' Evaluation of Self, *Journal of Educational Television,* 15(3), pp.143 - 153.

Schön, D. A. (1983, 1991) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action,* Ashgate, Aldershot.

Schön, D. A. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.