

TRANSACTIONAL SPACES: FEEDBACK, CRITICAL THINKING, AND LEARNING DANCE TECHNIQUE

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Introduction

This article explores attitudes about feedback and critical thinking in dance technique classes. We discuss an expansion of our teaching practices to include feedback as bi-directional (transactional) and a part of developing critical thinking skills in student dancers. The article is written after we undertook research exploring attitudes and cultures surrounding feedback in dance technique classes within university setting in the UK. and USA. Using a hybrid ethnographic (practice as research) model we collected data through class observations, individual interviews with students and teachers, as well as journaling and reflecting on our own daily teaching practice. Pseudonyms have been used throughout and permission obtained from participants to include their voices in the article¹

At the beginning of our inquiry we were interested in exploring how students received 'feedback'. We thought this would involve discovering more about the forms and ways feedback can be communicated to students, particularly how a climate of negative feedback can be avoided in the classroom. However, as we carried out the research we realized that merely looking at how feedback is communicated constructs feedback as one directional. We questioned whether we had been placing enough importance on the notion that feedback can be *transactional*. Following John Dewey, we take the term *transactional* to indicate dynamic, co-created relationships and environments (Dewey 2008).

We realized that how feedback is communicated is significant, of course, but the means by which it is recognized as feedback by students, and how it is responded to is of equal bearing. This led us to consider the importance of students' (and teachers') critical thinking in our classrooms, as we felt student responses to feedback is as important as the action of giving it. By critical

thinking we are suggesting skills of evaluation that allow for synthesis of ideas and support the ability to have shifts in perception. Particularly, for our students to develop the analytical skills to let go of an essentialist approach to their perception of themselves as dancers, and instead critically challenge their habitual movements and notions of what dance can be. Thus we see critical thinking as supporting the co-construction and permeability of a transactional approach to feedback. Informed by Dewey's somatic starting point we approached the inquiry from a theoretical framework that places bodily experience as central – which we are calling embodiment. (This methodology is examined further in *Her life in movement: Reflections on embodiment as a methodology* (Akinleye, 2016)). In this paper we discuss how we have come to see a relationship between feedback, communication and critical thinking in dance technique classrooms.

The Inquiry

We became interested in investigating this topic because as dance students ourselves we both had unpleasant experiences with negative and authoritarian approaches to feedback. However, strangely, as teachers in university dance departments today, we have found ourselves sometimes reproducing the same environments for learning, that as students, we had previously rejected.

Higher education purports to value critical thinking, asking questions and challenging norms and yet the university dance class often remains a hushed space where the teacher directs students. Although it represents the extreme of a broad spectrum of teaching techniques, what Tony Geeves calls *teaching by terror* (1993) is still recognizable in many dance class environments. Robin Lakes (2005) suggests that authoritarian teaching methods are still prevalent across dance education and training. We had experienced how authoritarian and *teaching by terror* approaches do not embrace the need for constructive feedback and dialogue that is essential for the kind of critical thinking universities assert is valued. When we reflected back on our own past experiences we noted the importance of acknowledging the distinctions between negative feedback, authoritarian teaching, and *teaching by terror* and the multiple ways in which these might be defined (for instance Geeves 1993,

Lakes 2005, Stanton 2011). Regardless of the category of feedback our interest was in how well feedback could stimulate and nurture self-motivation and informed responses from students. The physicalized nature of ‘doing’ dance class means that as dance teachers we want to engage students on the multiple levels of consideration required for both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Schön 1987) that underpins the importance of critical thinking in dance training (Ambrosio 2015).

We were also aware that in the 21st century students are learning within a landscape enriched by a wealth of voices and perspectives (Feminism, Queer Theory, Africanist studies, Indigenous studies) that create alternative models for exchange and encourage students to critically evaluate information. These alternative frameworks highlight power structures in general society that can also present themselves in the dance classroom. Within this landscape it could be surmised that our role as teachers in a university setting involves more than simply developing a student’s physical attainment. However, we noticed that at times when we created the constructive collaborative atmosphere we considered would nurture critical thinking, students instead saw this as a lack of direction, authority, or authenticity² in the dance class.

We were interested to find out what dance students and teachers thought about the roles of feedback, communication and critical thinking in dance class. We restricted our inquiry to dance classes that taught Western Concert Dance techniques (such as Limón, Cunningham, or Ballet techniques). As we observed classes and spoke to colleagues and students, we noticed “*feedback*” in technique class was often understood as “*correction*”, a term that resonates with negativity (Stanton 2011), since it implies that the teacher holds the knowledge and that this transmission of information is one-way. The result of constructing “*feedback*” as “*correction*” seemed to create a focus on the physical motor skills acquired to execute a step, while the artistry of the students themselves became less developed. We noticed that this could result in students being very capable in a particular class but then not being able to transfer their learning to other movement styles or situations. We felt this led to the development of *good students* in a particular class but we are

looking to develop *dancers*. In other words, in professional settings it is useful if someone is “good at taking correction” but it is better if they are good at interpreting and understanding the intent of the movement as artists.

Talking to people and observing classes

During the inquiry interviews we spoke to a number of teachers and students, who had an expectation of an authoritarian model in dance class. Some teachers when discussing the environment in classes said they set rules: “obvious ones like no talking throughout the class”.

We are aware there is a need to maintain the flow of a class that can sometimes be disrupted by discussion. But we felt there was often an assumption made that dance classes should not entail students engaging in exchange of ideas (dialogue). In classroom observations students often appeared very quiet and non-vocal and teachers generally enforced this. This model followed teacher-centered notions for what a learning environment should *feel* like: the quieter the students are “the more likely it is that learning is taking place” (Windschitl 1999, 753).

Our observations of classes highlighted that feedback as a teaching tool is central to the common goal shared by teachers and students for improvement and progress (Barr 2009). But we realized how feedback was approached was influenced by what the student or teacher thought *dance technique* was for. Across the teachers and students we spoke to there was a range of assumptions about what technique was. How individuals constructed the role of technique in a dancer’s life impacted on their expectations of what feedback should feel like. For more traditional authoritarian approaches to technique as an absolute set of skills to be accomplished it was clearly logical that feedback took the form of *correction* and was scaffolded in a uni-directional transmission of information from teacher to student. But other teachers and students had more practicable and adaptive constructs for the role of technique and therefore feedback could also be more responsive.

Several teachers noted that studying a variety of styles or disciplines gives a dancer the skills needed to develop a strong sense of understanding of movement in general. One teacher working in higher education described dance technique as:

...for me it [technique] means to understand how the body is working...it's about understanding your body and how it functions in time, space and effort. (Alex, teacher interviewee)

Another teacher, Sam, remembered a realization as a student that technique was more than learning to copy the movement of the teacher.

I remember thinking, why am I learning this other person's material? [...] I remember doing one class...and all of her movement, exercises and phrases were very specific to her body type...and a lot of the things she did my body just couldn't do. (Sam, teacher interviewee)

A broad view of the nature of dance technique suggested that a dancer can find numerous ways to achieve an understanding of the dancing body and how it can move, using critical thinking to develop the ability to adapt to the diverse concepts of alignment inherent in different movement styles. But it is often likely it will take more time than the length of the course they are on (for instance in UK the three years of a BA course or four years of a USA course) for a student to reach a point where they can synthesize understanding across a range of movement styles into one personal approach to movement. We realized our own interest in student dancers developing critical thinking in terms of their activity in dance class is to facilitate them having a sense of ownership of their own technique that will allow them to carry on processing feedback long after they graduate our classes.

When students were asked the same question as the teachers, "what is dance technique?" responses were equally as diverse as the teachers. For some, technique was about training the body in preparation for dance performance employment, for others learning about their own and others bodies was more important.

...just kind of learning about the placement of your body and learning to work with what you've got, but then also trying to build on that.
(Pat, student interviewee)

Based on our classroom observations of hushed students responding to teachers' corrections we had expected the interviewee responses would describe the term *technique* as something that was rigid, (like a set of rules that could not be broken). However, our interviews revealed that technique was often seen as a set of tools to apply to movement, rather than restrictive/absolute conventions that must be followed. So it seemed that although critical thinking and synthesis of knowledge were valued as part of establishing a *good technique*, the environments for learning teachers and students created together in the dance studio did not nurture them happening. We looked at why this might transpire.

Challenges to identity: Roles of teacher /learner

Although students saw themselves as developing a personal technique that would involve universal movement principles for their own bodies, they still tended to see the learning needed to create this as coming *from* the teacher.

It seemed unquestionable for many students that teacher/student roles manifested in *correction* being *given* by the teacher (often accompanied by skilled demonstration on the part of the teacher), and that it was then the student's job to physicalize that information; akin to feeding a computer with data, which would lead to the correct result being produced. There was little or no mention of responses to feedback or any critiques of teaching/learning methods in the interviews with students. Student comments were generally about the *way* feedback was given rather than the type given. There was also a noticeable omission of the idea that feedback for learning technique could be self-initiated.

We began to feel that the interviews revealed more about the *culture of dance teaching and learning*, then how feedback supports the development of technique. The responses from students indicated a kind of dependency on

the teacher to provide *correction* and lack of interest in constructively self-motivating independent of the teachers' responses to their work. Students did not have a sense of "pulling" information to them but waited in the hope information would be "pushed" towards them by the teacher (Bryant et al. 2013). We realized that students did not seem to be aware of a discourse about the role of the teacher in the dance classroom. Sarah Moore, Gary Walsh, and Angelica Riskey discuss the problem of student compliance, suggesting that permissive students may be easy for a teacher to work with, but that lack of dialogue with students means that teachers become further entrenched in an authoritarian teaching style (Moore et al. 2007).

Just as this implied, students needed to challenge their identity as learners by taking a more active role in their education, we also found that teachers needed to be prepared to take a certain amount of risk when they stepped off their authoritarian pedestals. As we applied ideas of knowledge ownership in our own classrooms, we perceived that students could find personal responsibility and freedom to construct knowledge for themselves uncomfortable (Dyer 2010b). During our inquiry we tried challenging authoritarian models in our own dance classes by using more task-based exercises and group work. These tasks included working in pairs to explore reversing or developing a given exercise, using improvised sections within a technique exercise, working facing into and out from a circle or in different directions rather than students facing the same direction and towards the teacher, and analyzing the effort qualities or skill components of an exercise or movement phrase.

After delivering classes where we had specifically focused on using these approaches, a number of students said that they were happy for some of the new tasks and instructions to be part of their technique class and could see how they could learn through them. But observing the students working in this way, we saw that some looked unsure, unhappy or even irritated. At times this despondency seemed to arise from a fear the dance class lacked authenticity when it was not delivered in an authoritarian manor. Students appeared to have an expectation of what a dance class should *feel* like (including emotionally) that involved the very environments they claimed to feel

repressed in. When students found themselves in a transactional environment or realized they were a part of the co-creation of their learning they seemed to become uncomfortable and even questioned if it was a “proper class”. This could also manifest as confrontational as students perceived being critically involved in their own development as a lack of authority on the part of the teacher. We noticed across the interviews and classes many students equated this approach with the teacher not being able or proficient in the technique. Many students seemed to feel more comfortable with the teacher performing skilled demonstration followed by pointing out flaws in the students.

Of course, we felt that alternative approaches that promoted critical thinking did not mean that there was a lack of leadership or feedback, just that these take different forms. The role of student as just reproducing the teacher’s modeling belies student’s use of the critical thinking we were trying to encourage. As we challenged our own practice it was helpful to bear in mind Becky Dyer’s observations that for some students freedom of learning can be perceived as “*a burden and sign the teacher was not working hard enough*” (Dyer 2010a:123). The effect that alternative models of dance technique classes have on our own sense of identity particularly in terms of authority and confidence as teachers continues to unfold.

It seemed that in order to create a learning environment of feedback/critical thinking both students and teachers needed to collaborate in challenging the habit of conformity. We found that in order to develop a culture of critical thinking in the classroom we needed to be explicit with students about the links we were making between feedback and critical thinking. In order to have a productive relationship with students we needed to recognize that students would *require* a range of modes of feedback, and at times this might mean our feedback took the form that acknowledged some students’ expectations of an authoritarian power structure within the classroom. We felt the importance of what we were attempting to do was for students to be able to understand and recognize different kinds of feedback when they happened. We acknowledged that at different points in development both students’ and teachers’ capacity for ranges of feedback may be limited by their own perception of their identity

within the classroom. Despite these limitations, the relevance of being aware of different approaches to feedback and the implications they have on how one is engaging with dance technique is vital.

Embodied Learning

Within the complexities of our own teaching environments we are aware that for the dancer critical thinking is not always verbal but is within the physical execution of the dance step itself. In the advance of developing a climate of explicit critical thinking that university level work demands, we feel there needs to be a shift from seeing dance knowledge as being the skill of moving with articulation to seeing it as part of a larger actualized movement-based (somatic), knowing (epistemology) of the world. In other words, dance is knowledge in its own right not just a tool for the creation of a particular aesthetic.

The communication of feedback for critical thinking is then understood as a way to help students build knowledge. It is also important to recognize however powerful their desire to dance, students should not be learning in the bubble of the dance studio. When a student accepts the challenge of problem solving in a ballet class we would encourage them to do so within contexts that reach out beyond the studio walls and includes their own stance on gender, class, culture etc. When a 21st century student accepts a power structure of unresponsively absorbing a teacher critiquing them, they understand they are taking part in power models that are also debated and interrogated elsewhere in the university. We refer here to our acknowledgement above that university students are engaging with theory such as Feminism, Queer Theory, Africanist studies, and Indigenous studies in other university classrooms.

We noticed that expectations of what feedback would address highlighted a tension between the development of student's physical virtuosity and their critical thinking, as if they could not be part of the same thing. We question this assumption of separation and wonder if it is not dance cultures tacitly accepting a mind/body divide. When we see the dancer as embodied rather

than made of mind and body we can better realize the moving dancer is critically thinking and analyzing as they move. Taking this embodied approach of the mind-full body (Dewey 2005), critical thinking becomes the reflective practice of the student's actions (from the micro of a technical step to macro of the way they approach behaving in the dance classroom). Therefore, feedback to encourage critical thinking is as much about students' physicality of movement as it is about a theoretical concept of what dance can be.

Our somatic starting point of embodiment is grounded in the importance of seeing the lived experience as transactional, the interaction of sensing bodied-Self in the world (Sharpio, 1998). Therefore, we felt the effectiveness of feedback could be considered through the longevity of transaction and response it generates in the student and in how well it is productively interacted with. The learning of a dance movement involves transferable learning and knowledge. It is not limited to its own execution. The notion of feedback could be interpreted along a spectrum: from the separation of mind/body to an embodied approach. At one end of the spectrum where mind and body are addressed as if separate, feedback is non-transactional taking the form of information to explain why something 'is' such as why a step is not correct or to justify a grade. This kind of feedback tends to manifest in the authoritarian classroom. At the embodied end of the spectrum feedback is transactional, taking the form of stimulation to engage in the exchange of dialogue and questioning. This is the form of feedback we were interested in and we found it needs to be supported by the encouragement of critical thinking and attention to modes of communication.

In developing this second form of feedback, teachers and students need to explicitly work together to construct classroom environments that acknowledge that the embodied experience of dance offers unique learning, teaching, and feedback situations that challenge, and bridge constructions of a divide between the mind and body. This means to actively challenge the idea that one is either physically proficient or mentally proficient and replace this with the idea of the transactional mind-full body. The goal would then be for feedback to be a part of the recognition of critical thinking as a bodily

practice: supporting a student's development of life-long engagement with their dance technique.

Universities purport that education in the 21st century needs to encompass the development of individual, creative approaches to learning. Sitting within the university walls dance departments have a unique opportunity to model approaches to education that challenge the separation of mind and body (subject and object) and offer alternatives such as embodied, transactional learning spaces. As dance-artists we understand the notion of *response* and *co-creation* and *process* that are inherent in critical thinking and yet we do not always embed them into the culture of our classrooms.

Conclusion

In exploring the role of feedback in our teaching practices we have now moved away from engaging with feedback as an *object* to be given, to seeing feedback as bi-directional and valuable in terms of what it initiates: *how* it is engaged with. Following Dewey (2005) when he suggests that 'mind' is a verb (the mind-full body) we have come to see feedback also as a verb, rather than a noun. To paraphrase Dewey, feedback *denotes all the ways in which we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves* engaged in the development of our students (Dewey 2008). Then within the dynamic of 'doing' feedback, communication, critical thinking and dance technique manifest. We see this article as a letter to students and teachers to discuss the ideas we have highlighted here: a way to continue the dialog of collaboration with teaching and learning in and beyond our own university settings.

Endnotes

1. The research was approved by University ethics board, IRB and followed rigorous ethical procedures including consent forms and reviews during our process.
2. For instance, students did not feel a 'proper' ballet class would include them asking questions.

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