

Community-based Creative Dance for Adolescents, and their Social Wellbeing: work in progress

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Introduction

My thesis is based on the creative dance experiences of a group of teenage community dancers who are members of East Lothian Youth Dance (ELYD). Membership is by audition and selection criteria include attitude and commitment as well as ability to dance. East Lothian Council offers a number of creative dance classes, and some, but by no means all, of the dancers in ELYD have graduated from these other classes. Some of the dancers also attend private technique classes, e.g. ballet and highland dancing, and a few pursue various sports. ELYD aims to stretch their capabilities as dancers, by offering a more demanding range of dance work, augmented by input from contemporary dance companies which come to perform locally, and ELYD itself is performance-led. The fact that the stimuli are largely contemporary dance-based is becoming more significant to the study as it progresses. The medium, it seems, allows the dancers greater freedom for creative experimentation than a rigidly-defined technique does. Although the dance artist who led the class at the time of information gathering, encouraged the dancers to draw on their other dance skills from time to time, contemporary dance prevailed.

Underlying Principles of the Topic

My exploration into this subject is underpinned by such theorists as Polhemus (1996), Royce (2000), and Thomas (2003), who have written extensively on the place of dance in various cultures, and the effects of the socialisation process on body movement. These represent a social constructionist approach to understanding the symbolism associated with the body and movement – an ‘outside-in’ approach (Bruner 1996), in which the individual is subject to external forces which mould her/him according to social convention.

Conversely, Gardner (1999) adopts a cognitivist, ‘inside-out’ model of how creativity from within the individual enables her/him to push back the boundaries which restrict knowledge and participation in the world, to gain a new level of understanding and acceptance of their state of ‘being in the world’ (Husserl 1970). Bruner (1996) regards this as being an objective approach, where the individual can distance him/herself from the external world and produce new, original thought to increase knowledge and effective participation in society. This concept of creativity is supported by Esquivel and Hodes (2003), who agree that the production of original work, irrespective of the discipline in which it is created, is evidence of creativity. The constant interplay of subjectivity and objectivity, in shaping our relationship with our environment, is supported by Bourdieu (2003), whose concept of ‘habitus’ refers to the support structure of internalised social norms and values, inculcated through conditioning from birth and modified through socialisation and knowledge acquisition. Bourdieu sees the process as being one of ongoing negotiation between the external, determinist forces, which

condition us and impose restrictions on us - the 'field' (1993) within which we live - and the internal desire to be free and creative.

Methodology

This is primarily a phenomenological study, aimed at exploring the links these young dancers make between their dance experience and the feelings of wellbeing they experience when interacting in the wider community, outwith the class. Gaining *their* perception is fundamental to the credibility of the research. My own background in community dance will inform how I reflect upon the interaction in the class and how I interpret the dancers' explanation of what the process of creating dance means to them and their relationships beyond the class, so I acknowledge the hermeneutic influence (Heidegger 1996) in my approach to the study, enabling me to maintain reflexivity. The research was conducted over an eight-week period, with the classes being held weekly. In Yin's (2003) terminology, this is a case study with multiple units of analysis, aimed at uncovering the multiple truths concerning how the dancers make sense of their world. The methods of data gathering were:

- Participant observation: the fact that I was present in the room, with a camera, made me a participant, inasmuch as my presence might have in some way altered the dancers' behaviour.
- Interviews: these were conducted either with individuals or pairs of dancers, using a semi-structured interview schedule.
- Individual journals: it was hoped that the opportunity to reflect on their practice might inform the subsequent interviews, but, as only two were returned, it was difficult to comment on whether they had had any impact on how the dancers perceived their work.
- Graffiti walls: the dancers had the opportunity during every class to write their thoughts and comments on a large piece of paper. The novelty began to wear off after the first few weeks, so later 'walls' were structured, with questions or statements inviting the dancers to complete them and hence ensure a greater degree of relevance.
- Group discussions: By involving the dancers in discussions about the material I had gathered, I was putting them in the role of co-researchers. The first discussion involved a group of dancers helping with the first-stage analysis of the graffiti walls. They sought out commonalities and colour-coded them. The ensuing spontaneous conversation about the comments centred on why certain individuals might have responded as they did, and how other people's remarks compared with their own. Two other groups watched the video material, and their comments gave me insight into how and why they interpreted the creative task the way they did. They asked a lot of questions of each other, relating to the composing of the dances, and I asked them questions about the interactions and working relationships during choreography and rehearsals. Discussion also served to ensure that they shared similar perceptions about the nature of creativity and of dance.

Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis is underway as I write. The approach is largely thematic, guided by the literature and balanced by the need to preserve the phenomenological nature of the study. I am seeking to elucidate how the dancers perceive the network of relationships between each other, between them and their community outwith the class, and the external influences on the class, which may affect the dance art they create. Through this I aim to understand how they make sense of their world through their personal experience of creative dance, and to what extent it influences their feelings of social wellbeing as they interact with the wider community.

Conclusion

An individual's experience of social wellbeing is a unique state and can therefore only be understood through their actions and their own interpretation of these actions. I am seeking the commonalities and the differences in their understanding of how the creative dance experience impacts on their lives by determining what tools they might gain from the class context which help them to negotiate their place in the community and mould their 'habitus'. I seek to demonstrate trustworthiness of the findings by comparing the views of the individuals with each other and reconciling them with my own. This reflexive process allows for personal perceptions about the dancers' state of 'being in the world', which enrich the study, rather than detracting from it. Conclusions can be drawn from the multiple layers of information, to create a detailed picture.

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