



Encouraging the Acquisition of Transferable Lifelong Learning Skills in a Hybrid Pre-vocational Ballet Classroom: Blurring Boundaries between the Traditional and Student-centred Democratic Pedagogy

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Abstract

Interrogating some of the legacies of classical ballet, such as its traditional teaching methods and values, it was found that the authoritarian pedagogical style that uses drill and repetition to train the dancer is a common practice among ballet teachers, including the normalization of power imbalances in the classroom. My intervention with 'tradition' explores the ballet studio as the site in which by development and the application of democratically-oriented pedagogy and student-centred learning and teaching methods in the ballet classroom, the educational aspect of ballet education is celebrated. Through the research project that underpinned this article it was found that by incorporating collaborative activities, multiple ways of learning, and student active participation in the co-construction of knowledge, opportunities for the acquisition of transferable lifelong learning skills were provided. Students were encouraged to be more reflective, inquisitive, and creative thinkers. Finally, I argue that this enhanced approach to learning and teaching in ballet supports pupils to become well-rounded, active, responsible, and self-reliant dancers.

While there is a body of literature that considers the theory of democratic pedagogy and student-centred teaching and learning approaches, there is significantly less literature that specifically addresses the ways in which primary school ballet teachers attempt to apply this methods in practice. This paper presents the results from an action-based research that was designed, in part, to address this gap. Five female students, ages twelve and thirteen, from a state-run pre-vocational ballet school in Croatia participated in this qualitative research study. It has been found that the role of ballet education is not only to learn a codified set of steps through 'traditional' pedagogy, but to foster an acquisition of transferable lifelong learning skills in order to meet 21st-century expectations for students' learning.

The traditional teacher-centred/didactic approach to ballet pedagogy was disturbed and extended by post-colonial ways of thinking. An 'in-between', 'hybrid' classroom space that connects the tradition and past with the present and the future was generated through this project. Such an alternative classroom environment stands for new opportunities for learning and meaningful teacher-student relationships. I suggest that through the process of negotiation across differences between traditional and student-centred approaches in a hybrid classroom, it is possible to refashion ballet education to overcome the contradictions and tensions that exist in the traditional ballet studio.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades the pedagogical emphasis in education and dance education has shifted from teaching to learning and lifelong learning [20]. Lifelong learning is seen as "the overarching concept"[14] and "the most important educational paradigm of our time"[15]. This prompted me to ask how I could implement the transferable lifelong learning skills of reflection, dialogue, inquisitiveness, creativity, and collaboration within the traditional/didactic learning environment of the ballet studio. Enabling learning that is valuable to my students at this moment and in their future became a crucial consideration as with each new generation we evidence increasingly diverse student population in classes and most of them do not become ballet artists. Nevertheless, the Croatian national ballet curriculum (originating from the Russian model of the Vaganova ballet school) was imported and pedagogies transferred without appreciating the local socio-cultural context. The longstanding history of the Vaganova method dictates *how* classes are taught (demonstration, explanation, and repetition drills using an authoritarian/command teaching style), as well as *what* is taught (an extensive syllabus that requires a single 'correct' way of performing movements); the emphasis is placed on *training* the dancer rather than on a more well-rounded ballet *education*. My concern is that a pedagogy that does not take account of students' different backgrounds and learning styles is ineffective in maximizing



students' development as learners. And while my students may be active performers, they passively absorb information in a narrow, training-based programme that impedes development of independent creative thinkers. Different authors have challenged practice where the pupil is the passive recipient of new knowledge and the teacher is an 'all-knowing expert' [6; 10; 21]. Additionally, literature has shown that that preparation of dancers which relies on duality that privileges the body over the mind does not promote critical thinking and understanding at more than a superficial level [1]. The above-mentioned and similar studies have helped me realise that creating an *educational* environment, and making my classroom student-centred and effective for the acquisition of lifelong learning skills, requires challenging 'traditions' and 'taken for granted' beliefs about ballet pedagogy, and re-examining the particular historical, socio-cultural, aesthetic and ideological conditions which cause ballet's training regimen to continue existing in the way that it does.

Literature review revealed that the dominant trends in ballet teaching were inherited mostly from the 19th century industrial model of schooling [8] which was not aimed at engaging students in personal inquiry or independent thinking, but rather training them to be capable of following orders and repeating patterns of activity. Underlying traditional ballet training methods is a powerful pedagogy that has iconized the body as "an instrument to be controlled and moulded" [22] and placed an emphasis on rote learning [18] and student assimilation of ballet's strict rules, routines, and tradition through a daily ritual - the ballet class. The emphasis on repetition, discipline, and the authoritative elements [13] as well as the elements corresponding to the "banking model of education" [9; 16] - where "the student is viewed as an empty vessel to be filled by the teacher's expert deposits of information"[12], remain largely implemented in ballet classes.

Identifying the most prominent and longstanding features of ballet teaching practices and evaluating them, made me realise that it is necessary to challenge not only the preconceptions about teaching and learning approaches in ballet that are understood as 'normal', but the very nature of the classroom relations and the imported ballet curriculum which does not reflect contemporary educational values.

An action-based research was designed to address the outlined concerns. It made explicit my action-reflection cycles in an on-going pursuit of improvement, including my evolving understanding of what it means to teach ballet from a student-centred perspective, while fostering an acquisition of transferable lifelong learning skills in the ballet classroom.

2. Methodology

The study took place at the state-run pre-vocational ballet school in Rijeka, Croatia, in March/April 2014 when students repeat the exam repertoire and go through the same routine daily. Over the course of four weeks, five female students aged twelve and thirteen from my 4th grade ballet class participated in the project. Not to compromise the exam preparation, two types of methodologies were drawn upon. One is my traditional/didactic, teacher-centred pedagogy reflecting the way I normally deliver ballet lessons. The other is the new, alternative practice reflecting a democratic, student-centred approach to teaching and learning I have taken my students through in one 60-minute session per week. The structure of my regular ballet classes was preserved during the study period - classes were 90 minutes long, had a particular theme/problem, and followed the usual pattern of *barre*, centre, and across the floor work. During the research period I differentiated my instruction, made it more inquiry-based and directed with explicit formative assessment activities, such as student learning journal.

The experience of learning ballet within a concept of democratic teaching was provided in additional once-a-week 'alternative' sessions. Shifting the emphasis from delivering the content and its specialisation to students and their involvement in the learning process, the goal was to ensure students' fullest participation, instil in them a greater sense of responsibility for their own learning, and make them more engaged in reflection, inquiry, discussion, collaboration and creative activities. Each session incorporated three 20 minutes assignments: a critical friend/peer assessment, the choreography assignment, and classroom discussion/feedback on the learning journals. As I was striving to break away from the limitations of traditional pedagogy, the teaching strategies being used were an attempt to address both the *how* and *what* of my teaching.

3. Data analysis

Qualitative data was collected using a variety of sources - class observations noted in my learning/teaching journal; videotaped lessons; student learning journal; and group interview with the students. The journal proved to be an efficient tool for students to reflect, ask questions, analyse progress, and identify areas that may need improvement. My findings offer similar observations to what Costa and Kallick [7] reported, saying that reflective rather than routine practice moves students



beyond the passive assimilation of mediated knowledge into the realm of enquiry and habit of thinking about their experiences. This, in turn, enables deep and life-long learning [7]. Furthermore, the results revealed that student journal entries were helpful in determining whether pupils are ready to move on to the next instructional level and provided an opportunity for conversation with their teacher (myself). The choreographic task (implemented to address the collaborative and creativity-promoting activities), was found as personally fulfilling and engaging by all pupils; moreover, they expressed how I should provide them with similar learning opportunities in the future. As my role as an expert became less emphasised, it was possible to distribute authority and expertise more evenly in the classroom. Selecting movements to use in their dance sequence, the students practiced shared decision making and built confidence in the ability to make effective choices; they developed confidence and became motivated learners who contribute to the group effort. Finally, the choreographic task demanded pupils to communicate in the creation of movement composition, thus, it also enabled them to deepen their relationships.

Further bonds were forged during the discussion sessions. As students voiced their opinions and listened to that of their classmates and the teacher, the activity helped to build trust and understanding between both student-student and teacher-student. By providing students with opportunities to reflect upon and question their practice and their personal selves, their needs and challenges were acknowledged. On numerous occasions students expressed they wish to see that their contribution is respected and praised. This discovery led me to providing new situations in which students' engagement in classroom activities would go beyond participation toward making their own contributions, giving my students the opportunity to express their own values and to be heard.

This project has also enabled me to move beyond employing exclusively traditional assessment methods to recognizing how various formative assessment procedures might help me form and inform learning and provide my students with the opportunities to "become progressively independent of the teacher for lifelong learning" [19]. The students' group critique of their performance showed on the video, peer evaluation, and self-assessment activities, changed my role "from that of the only reference for feedback on performance to one of a variety of sources"[11]. The evidence further points to the enduring relevance of these strategies to my own learning and development. According to previous studies, teachers "who strategically and intentionally participate in formative assessment practices...undergo profound transformation in their professional growth" [2]. As instructive processes become significantly more dialogical, inquiry-oriented, collaborative, and guided by formative assessment activities, I noted that my teaching became more individually tailored and effective.

In all, the data confirmed the appropriateness and success of the applied strategies showing that by providing students with opportunities to develop and apply the skills essential to lifelong learning they were no longer passive recipients of knowledge or dependent on teacher, but active practitioners in a collaborative process of knowledge co-construction. Consequently, the students appeared to be more self-confident, involved in, and responsible for their learning. Finally, the data analysis revealed that the intervention made me become a more resourceful, reflective, informed, and responsive teacher, and that changing what I teach was a step toward changing how I teach.

Upon further review of the research data, an issue was encountered that exceeded the scope of this project and reaches into a wider area of theoretical and philosophical inquiry - the element of hybridity. The notion of hybridity is the mainstream discourse of cultural studies [4], and the key concept in postcolonial theory [3]. As Pieterse writes: "hybridity denotes a wide register of multiple identity, cross-over, pick-'n'-mix, boundary crossing experiences and styles ... and erosion of boundaries" [17]. The juxtaposition of my two teaching paradigms and two types of classes overlapping over a set time frame made for a 'hybrid' learning experience. Learning in such an altered environment, within this "Third Space" [5] that celebrates the connections between classroom practice and socio-cultural context that informs the practice, it was possible to address students' learning needs and incite creative learning experiences in a dialogic interaction. Formerly unnoticed values and relationships were celebrated and we were able to transcend the boundaries set by cultural conditioning, age gap, and the roles we play. Being exposed to both interruptive and creative forces of this alternative learning/teaching space made me realize I need to move beyond my old way of thinking that was revolving around opposing relations such as 'for/against', on the grounds of my new understanding that one should be open to two worlds simultaneously - to 'both/and', to the realm of possibilities, negotiation and the rich plurality of voices and values that have been latent and quietly awaiting to be called forth into the openness.



4. Conclusion

Taken together, this research project provided a theoretical and design framework for a change toward a democratically and dialogically-structured, student-centred learning environment in a pre-vocational ballet school. It also offered reasons why to look to concepts of third space and hybridity when trying to clarify our pedagogical goals and challenge established modes of ballet training. It was found that a hybrid ballet course might be a connecting thread between the disparate parts of curriculum, classroom, and the outside world, and a bridge between a traditional and educational approach to teaching ballet.

The concepts central to post-colonial theory have helped me to move the discussion beyond dualities of teacher-centeredness and student-centeredness; in real-life classrooms neat categories of teacher/student-centred practice collapse in the face of unpredictable, non-linear classroom environment and the complexity of learning and teaching process. I find this to be the most important contribution of this small-scale practice-based research. The scope of this research was limited due to the small number of participants and short time frame, but despite the limitations this investigation has been highly valuable to my own learning and development as a teacher and it will hopefully extend a conversation about the necessity of incorporating more student-centred approaches to learning ballet and teaching strategies that are most effective for accomplishing such a pedagogic change.

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