

A study of the perception and use of attention in undergraduate dance training classes

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Deploying action research methods this article investigates how students perceive and use attention in undergraduate dance training classes. A main aim of this research has been to develop strategies for encouraging agency in young dancers' attentional choices in order to facilitate confident navigation of the bricolage approaches that make up dance training today. I explore the contextual aspects of UK higher education dance training that impact upon practices and expectations of attention. I draw on the literature of mindfulness and pedagogic research to explore how attention flow can promote a sense of agency for dance students. This article contributes to pedagogic debates about the challenges of bricolage approaches and embodied connectedness in dance training. My research explores how a framework for attentional awareness could be beneficial to young dancers in training.

Keywords: dance educational research; dance training; bricolage; attention; agency

Introduction

This article investigates how students perceive and use attention in undergraduate dance training classes. In investigating attention use the study is concerned with all aspects of being receptive to the multi-layered internal and external world through multiple sensory modes triggered by multiple targets in dancing. One of the main aims of my research has been to develop strategies for encouraging agency in young dancers' attentional choices to facilitate more confident navigation of the bricolage approaches that make up dance training today. Drawing on the literature of mindfulness and pedagogic research this research explores how awareness of attention flow can promote a sense of agency for students in dance training. The research is based in my teaching practice. It is driven by the increasing challenge of building a sense of embodied connectedness through dance, both by forging connections across practices and by experiencing dance as an individual somatic enquiry rather than skills to be rehearsed. Two principles underlie this research. First, that particular uses of attention are embedded within different approaches to dance training. Second, that it is beneficial to dancers to utilise various points of view and attentional foci reflexively in the moment of moving.

The article begins by identifying the contextual aspects of UK Higher Education (HE) dance training which impact upon practices and expectations of attention. In reviewing recent shifts within the contextual aspects the article considers: an increasing range of dance-based practices; current 'bricolage' approaches to training; students' prepared-ness for HE study; and current research. I will discuss the design and interpretation of an action research project that probed students' perception of attention use in dance training classes. The questions driving this empirical study are: to what extent are dancers aware of their uses and choices of attention in training classes; what is the impact of expectation on attention use;

how can shifting rather than fixed attention benefit dancers; how can a greater sense of agency result from awareness of uses and choices? The main finding of this research is that students can benefit from an increased knowledge of different types of attention and by exploring this they can experience a greater sense of agency.

Context shifts and their impact on dance training

Dance courses in UK Higher Education have undergone significant growth since the initial challenges in the 1970s focused on discovering how to engage dancers through ‘responses to movement that [were] at once socially, culturally, politically aware’ (Bannon and Holt 2015, 221). Over the last forty years Dance in HEIs has dynamically responded to shifting research agendas and to creative, critical and interdisciplinary approaches to enquiry, as well as to professional practice trends. It is now widely acknowledged that Dance has outgrown its distinctive roles in scholarship, entertainment and art, and that its immediate and interconnected nature exceeds these individual value systems. Since their inception in HE dance practices have expanded - both within and beyond it. In particular, aspects of dance are commonly re-purposed as a tool of somatic learning amidst rapid technological advances and Dance’s holistic approaches are used to enhance well-being. Dance has been increasingly instrumentalised to focus on collectively, identities and inclusion. Dance processes and techniques have been re-glamorised in commercial competitions on TV and the web. In summary, Dance now attracts a wide range of participants to its varied practices (Burns and Harrison 2008) who bring broad expectations about its purposes and aesthetics. The shifting perceptions and expectations of what Dance ‘is’ have impacted on dance training practices. Most recently as participation has widened in UK HE there has been an increased integration of somatic approaches and commercial dance forms within the curricula (Reed

2015). At the same time the notion of a ‘self-styled’ training approach among practitioner-teachers has emerged from the dialectics and bricolage of ‘post modernism’ (Bales and Nettle-Fiol 2008). Susan Foster’s (1997) notion that after modern dance, bodies are being trained for ‘hire’ - for varied roles which can be ‘put on’ – still resonates across a broad field of dance activities. Today’s appropriated and eclectic (Bales and Nettle-Fiol 2008, 15) approaches to contemporary dance training are a result of increasingly diverse and integrated perspectives on Dance.

As purposes of dance technique in HE have shifted (Van Dyke: 2012) a range of theories and applications have been developed to prepare students to meet a breadth of outcomes, and to enable versatility. Extensive methods for building various skills and understanding draw on new pedagogic, scientific and aesthetic research underpin the wide range of foci now incorporated into HE dance training which, in the majority of contexts, replace earlier singular approaches to training dancers. Strategies for training are foregrounded in journals such as *Journal for Dance Education*, *Research in Dance Education* and *Journal of Dance Medicine and Science*. They include: integrating somatic practices for holistic approaches (Whatley et al. 2015; Fortin et al. 2002); drawing out the implicit social (Risner 2000), collaborative (Stevens 2017), problem-solving and enquiry-based learning (Raman 2009) of dance; ‘mega-techniques’ (Quinlan 2017) such as GaGa to interconnect skills; advocating clearer distinctions of technical and aesthetic purpose (Claid 2016) to distinguish various means and ends. Such differentiation has been possible in part both because ‘in no other form of education do so few “how to” rules exist’ (Batson 1990) and because of the interwoven nature of practitioner-led research and professional practice. These varied approaches have fortified the bricolage approach which Bales and Nettle-Fiol

showed to be widely adopted within the professional field, as expectations of training and employment in dance have evolved.

Bricolage, defined as a construction from diverse things, enables students in dance training to have “a go” at everything” (Rafferty in Rafferty and Stanton 2017, 192). Advantageously, a bricolage-based training can give rise to unique juxtapositions of dance experiences and can lead to a synthesis of multiple ways of knowing dance. However, challenge is located in the need to synthesise often dialectical principles, values and languages of diverse activities and styles, in seeking to build a coherent and interconnected understanding of dance through individual performance. Helpfully Jenny Roche (2011) has re-oriented Foster’s (1997) concept by acknowledging the mutual impact of the dancers’ individual lived experiences and ‘moving identity’ as s/he embodies multiplicities as a ‘dancer for hire’. However, strategies for building an individual somatic awareness to, as Bannon and Holt (2015, 220) say, ‘exercise organisation over how they [the students] think and what they deem important to think about’ within bricolage approaches to training are more rare. To help student dancers to interconnect ways of knowing dance in order to navigate the landscape of dance training for themselves, Rafferty has suggested that there is a pressing need for teacher-practitioners to connect our broad yet ‘kindred’ (197) principles. Rafferty and Stanton explore the nature of a learning environment which will allow dance students to thrive in the current landscape. In my context as an HE dance teacher, I have become curious about how awareness of different uses of attention can assist students towards making connections across dance experiences.

This article’s research is rooted in my practice as a dance practitioner and pedagogue working in UK HE for seventeen years. My studio practice has been increasingly focused on bringing concepts of attention flow and bricolage approaches into dialogue, in order to

improve agency for navigating dance training in HE and beyond. I have been motivated by Kirsty Alexander's suggestion (2008 in Reed 2015, 214) that a 'consistent framework of values' might be found in kinaesthetic experiences, which could better support students by underscoring a 'continuum of somatic and traditional practices'. My research questions whether a framework for attentional awareness might support students in dance training. I will begin by reviewing the literature which has informed my study.

Literature Review

A survey of the literature shows a range of approaches to attention use in dance education and training practices. The field of inquiry is characterised by an undoing of a hierarchy of perceptual attention in which the visual has traditionally dominated due to signature pedagogies of re-creating demonstrations of dance. Much of the current research focuses on attention to sensations, echoing a recent growth in somatic practices in dance education. These have been documented in the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* and elsewhere by researchers such as Eddy, Green, Fortin, Dyer. This documentation is accompanied by a large body of research into the lived experience of dance. Somatic practices, often termed 'soft', commonly attend inwardly with eyes closed, encouraging attention to how moving feels. Conversely, attention is directed toward potential connections and inter-relations between self and environment in generative creative practices (DeSpain: 2014, Little: 2016, Olsen: 2014, Lepkoff: 2011, Fraser: 2016). By contrast, in codified dance techniques such as Ballet, Graham and, to an extent, Cunningham, as well as in other syllabus based dance such as ISTD and RAD, where didactic teaching methods have historically been developed, a tradition of translating visual kinetic forms into kinaesthetic sensations predominantly begs attention to precise movement forms for reproduction. Teachers develop ways expand upon this, for example Shantel Ehrenberg (2017)

has recently examined how the feeling of moving is useful to dancers, concluding that kinaesthetic attention is a particular aspect of dancers' multi-layered intelligence which should be explicitly nurtured. Ehrenberg (2012) examined further the challenge of 'intertwining' attention between the kinaesthetic and visual senses as a dancer tries to 'feel the way another looks' (200). She identifies and explores the 'gap' experienced between two embodied perspectives – 'internal' and 'external' in dancing. For me, exploring the nature of attention flow within and between dance experiences is a vital aspect of engaging with a broad range of approaches that are evident in dance training today. Navigating the values of different types of attention however, is often missing from dance training literature and approaches. Susan Foster (1997) sought to distinguish perceptions involved in dance training and performance by outlining three kinds of body awareness. She names: the 'perceived body' – that which is happening; the 'ideal body' which is desired; and that which is seen by another and correctable as the 'demonstrative body' - mediating between the other two. Inseparably rooted within a dancer's experience, Foster's three conditions each promote tendencies toward attention use, for example as dancers privilege the 'ideal' over the 'perceived' in codified forms. This offers a useful starting point for exploring how attentional targets vary, according to aims and expectations of the practice.

Commonly, expectations of dance and music training for young people are about improving the brain's executive attention networks (Posner and Patoine, 2009). Cognitive science research has revealed how these are useful in building coordination, concentration and efficiency, often through repetitions. However, an unhelpful stereotype that patterns of use, including attention, should be disciplined to enable the performance of an ideal which is automatic, or second nature – i.e. with a lesser focus on what is actually happening in the

intra-relational process of becoming, abound. Cognitive scientist and educational psychologist Guy Claxton (2006) has offered the concept of a ‘crate of creativity’ to indicate the value allowing and exploring attentional shifts during a creative process. His ‘crate’ gives insight into the potential shifts in the intensity, direction and social-ness of attention that can enable responsive learning. Valuing shifting attention contains echoes of Csikszentmihaly’s psychological concept of flow (2002) as the secret to happiness. However popular TV competitions such as *Strictly* and *So you think you can dance* reinforce still the role of tightly focused attention in achieving skills through precise repetitions. A focus on replicating fixed forms and ideals undervalues the richly interconnected modes of knowing and being.

The common assumption that attention should be disciplined to focus on holding one single certain thing, concentrating and practicing through dogged repetition can be damaging to the process of learning deeply. Engler explains that a primary difference between concentration and the well-known concept of mindfulness is that concentration ‘entails a restriction of attention to a single interoceptive or exteroceptive object, leading to a withdrawal of sensory and other inputs’ (1986 in Brown *et al.* 2007, 213). In this way, encouraging concentration can fail to appreciate alertness to the multiple kinds of attention useful for forging new relational connections within and beyond the body in dance training. American dance educator Susan Stinson (2015) has described dance and mindfulness as a state of consciousness which involves ‘being fully present in the moment’ through perception by the ‘whole body, not just my eyes’. Mindfulness encourages receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience (Brown & Ryan, 2003). This can be useful in training for being present and alert to the process of becoming. Research has shown that the

psychological state of awareness that is mindfulness can be useful in achieving peak performance in athletes. This is due to the flow states which are achieved by being present, letting go of outcomes and expectations/ experiences and focusing on the task (Ford *et al.* 2016). The literature on dance and mindfulness research is limited, although the PAM project at Huddersfield University promises growth in this area. Middleton (2017, 3), charting the role and place of mindfulness in performer training, quotes Blum (2016) describing the cultivation of a 'mindfulness of the body' undertaken by the dancer or movement artist as 'fine-tuning their awareness and control of subtle sensations and movements'.

The renowned independent dance artist Gill Clarke has explicitly contrasted the finer skills of attention which she says develop 'discrimination and differentiation of fine nuance in the process of moving' (2011, 248) with the repetitive and often didactic learning approaches of codified techniques that can encourage a single approach to development. Such discrimination of fine nuance is found through individual exploration (Biggs 1999) and problem-based learning approaches that invite multiple solutions via a wide 'perceptual' awareness. Dance Educator Erica Stanton values the role of repetitions in refining movement skills but proposes the concept of technique class as a laboratory for exploration because the 'aesthetic goals for dance technique are not achieved through mindless repetition' (2011, 89). Her laboratory proposal is invaluable because, as Clarke has also concluded, it can encourage dancers to explore motivations for 'tasting' sensations rather than for the 'forming of movement'. In letting go of fixed aims and noticing other, nuanced sensations and movements, Clarke noted greater use of abilities for 'turning attention' and 'noticing' in Wayne McGregor's technically sharp dancers on the *Thinking Dance Project* (in 2011, 247).

Nuancing attention requires a processual approach open to multiple perspectives and unknown solutions which can be a challenge for young dancers learning traditional techniques through a pedagogy of replication and whose expectations are embedded in polarities of success.

A historic focus on ‘fixed form outcomes’ is currently fostered by a growing culture of examining achievement, funding cuts and reduced provision of dance in schools, as well as in studio-based teaching. Progressing to HE dance, where curricula are broader, more responsive to progressions in professional practice and research, and where knowledge and skillsets are to be constructed through subjective negotiation and experimentation rather than being fixed by another, can be a ‘radical shift for some students’ as they discover new ‘rules of engagement’. In HE the teacher, neither anymore the provider nor director of specific technical knowledge, is a ‘facilitator of individual dance knowledge’ (Rimmer 2017, 223). To aid this shift Stanton’s ‘lab’ proposal (2011) focuses on peer working for experimentation and observation rather than relying on the teacher for definitive information about what is required in execution of the exercises and phrases. This encourages greater autonomy for advanced dance training and such perspectives would be well embedded within approaches to non/ pre-HE dance practice where codified and syllabus based styles (ISTD, RAD etc) demand rigid product-based criteria and where an efficient route to awards are often preferred. Dance Scholar Rachel Rimmer’s research has shown that changing a ‘doxic’ understanding of the unspoken way of things for 1st year HE dance students can be difficult. Becky Dyer’s (2010) research similarly indicates dance students’ ongoing preference for seeking satisfaction in being short-term ‘right’, rather than original. Stevens’ (2006) seminar report confirms that HE dance teachers widely found students unprepared for ‘the degree of evaluation, reflection and analysis’ required for higher order thinking and self-directed

learning in advanced training. Further, in a now more consumerist UK HE (since a tuition fee cap rise in 2010) great store is set by the satisfaction of student expectations. It is increasingly difficult for teachers to foreground processual and relational practices of experimentation and individuation to move dancers beyond their comfort zone towards ‘expressions of individual potential in moving’ in dance training environments (Bannon and Holt in 2015b, 220).

In summary, common expectations of attention use in dance training, via repetition and fixed outcomes, can be unhelpful for operating within dance’s immediate and inter-relational nature at an advanced level. My research proposes that awareness of attentional foci should be more central in dance training to encourage individual experimentation and ownership. An action research project has explored how a greater awareness of attentional uses in dance training could be useful in ‘constructing coherent meanings from experiences’ (Bannon and Holt 2015b) to enable more confident navigation of dance’s varied approaches and enable deeper learning. It is widely agreed that individual agency is vital for growth towards originality in performance, finding out how training ‘fits within their current view of dance and of themselves as artists’ (Bales 2008). In bricolage-based training a challenge of agency can be in choosing what, as well as how, to think about in the moment of moving. I question whether a greater awareness of attentional choices can facilitate agency, and lead to individual strategy in choosing ‘what and how’ to attend in the multiple contexts and approaches of bricolage dance of the 21st century.

Methodology

To explore my research questions, I have used an action research methodology to work with dance students in physical skills classes. In seeking to understand the participants’ varied

experiences of attention use in this particular setting, second person participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury 2008) has enabled me to work reflexively with students as a group and as individuals. The action research used sixteen final year undergraduate Dance students three male and thirteen female all identifying as white British. This student group were selected because of their increased familiarity with approaches to contemporary dance in HE and thus their availability to the introduction of a new attentional foci and a more independent way of working. Miriam Giguere notes that '[o]ntologically, action research is based on the belief that all people have the right to create their own identities. This is also a central tenet of much dance education. I have heard many dance advocates promote the use of dance in schools on the logic that it builds confidence and a sense of understanding yourself' (2015, 26). Potential ethical issues were reviewed to allow students to opt in/out to parts of the data capturing and sharing and to record testimonies anonymously and after the course's completion to minimise the effect of teacher-student assessment perception. This was because the power imbalance might lead students to demonstrate conformity, and fail to fully address the challenge of my role as teacher-researcher with an insider-researcher position (Gibbs et al. 2017, 9).

The group had once weekly practical sessions for twelve consecutive weeks. Each session was divided into three parts and used a rotation of set exercises and open-ended exploratory tasks, peer observation, annotations, reflection, drawing and writing. Sessions drew on my own practice which includes Cunningham dance technique, yoga, choreology and improvisation. I developed bricolage-style sessions. This was a vital aspect of the methodological design in which various approaches were used to provoke multiple, comparable, interchangeable uses of attention, challenging expectation. A bricolage style approach to sessions is vital in bringing attentional aspects to the fore and allowing a focus on

attentionality as an intrinsic principle underpinning all dance experience. A bricolage style approach also enables me to bring together individual and ensemble focused exercises and combine learning styles which are free, open and exploratory with more formal, disciplined approaches. Technique exercises focused on replicating fragmentation and micro-rhythmic patterning to enable coordination. Yogic directions reinforced dimensions and directions of movement flow and whole-ness, and new-ness in repetitions. Choreological concepts such as STAR¹ and ChUMm² were used to highlight the nature of the change taking place within movement structures and virtual spatial forms beyond. Improvisation exercises encouraged present-ness, spontaneity and external relations. Repetitions and accumulations over the period were designed to build familiarity to enable insight into attentional use and any changes of habit. As part of the research students were introduced to concepts introduced by practitioners and scholars as indicated in the literature review. Reflection and discussion included attentional modes, targets, languages, mindfulness and flow. The session focus explored: apprehending kinaesthetically; looking, listening and self-chat; qualities and degrees of attention; placing and tracing attention; internal and external targets; letting go, noticing distinctions and working alone and with others. Following practical sessions, my teaching notes and observations, student testimonies via weekly blog posts and multi-mode journals, a focus group with semi-structured questions and anonymous questionnaires were used. These have allowed me to compare participants' ongoing experiences as the research emerged. A

¹ STAR is a choreological method for analysing the intrinsic structures of human movement and their mutual impact.

² ChUMm is a choreological method for analysing the way that choreutic units materialise – in terms of their design, progression, projection or tension

postpositivist approach to this research acknowledges the complexity of my joint position as teacher, researcher and course leader. My interest in multiple modes and targets of attention to be utilised in dancing has framed, shaped and underpinned the research. In seeking to understand students' experience of attention in this context, my interpretation has also been shaped by my setting open a wide pallet of possibilities from which to draw. In interpreting the research, I have been also limited by its small scale. To expand the results, a wider scale with other teachers will be beneficial.

Discussion

In this section I will discuss the research findings regarding attention use and perception and the perceived effects of shifting attention together with the potential impact upon a sense of agency.

Aspects of attention use

At the outset of the research project it was evident that students possessed only a limited awareness of how they chose to use their attention. Students, while aware that dance exercises drew attention to different aspects of training and required them to attend to lots of different things in lots of different ways, had not previously considered the effect of different modes, targets and qualities of attention upon their dancing. One student said 'it had never occurred to me to choose what to focus on'. As a result of exploring uses of attention through verbal, visual, imaginary and relational means via different materials there was a noticeable increase in perceptual awareness of the effects of attention across the student group. Most students' perception in dance classes was, in general, dominated by the visual, via demonstration and using the mirror for visual feedback. However, this visual-kinaesthetic means included also

their peers. As Ehrenberg has found, other dancers are helpful to an individual as s/he re-imagine ‘how she might look and feel’ in performing particular movement phrases (2012, 200). An awareness of being seen and seeing the ways others interpreted and responded to improvisational tasks was also noted as affective in absorbing attention and impacting on experience. Listening to instruction and getting individual notes were also highly rated as ways of best using attention. In class work we experimented with dialling up and down the ‘volume’ on internal chatter and recollection of notes to increase capacity to perceive in other ways. Exercises designed to invite closer attention to the feeling of movement through proprioceptive and kinaesthetic senses used moments of lability and leaning in and out of balance. Working in pairs to rest hands on another's back allowed each to feel the movement of the torso both internally and externally. Students expressed familiarity with attending to the feeling of moving in yoga, somatic or improvisation activities, where the felt sense is integral in producing movement impulses. However one student, in describing the effect of attending kinaesthetically during technical phrases, had discovered that she could ‘stay *in* it [a set position or pattern] longer to focus on the feeling of movement’ to ‘fill it out more’. Discussion groups, tasked with describing the feeling of moving showed most students to being agreement that attending to the feeling of movement produced by set materials was beneficial. It helped students to feel more *in* their bodies through a heightened phenomenological awareness.

The bricolage style session design evidently helped students to access different kinds of attention –beyond those commonly associated with particular approaches. By interchanging habitual modes of attention use students felt able to cross reference experiences and practices. This was particularly beneficial in engaging with lived dance concepts. For example in one ‘round the leg’ exercise students used ChUMm to direct their attention to breath in filling out forms, in producing motion in space and in affecting distance between

parts of the body. One student chose to explore breath across set materials of the class, saying that it ‘made a huge difference to her control and presence’. She reported that her ‘perceptual body’ awareness, employed to monitor breath in technical exercises gave her a greater sense of control. In directing her attention to ‘perceptual body’ to focus on breath rhythms and their affect on her movement, rather than the exercise material and fixed form outcomes, the student experienced dancing in a new way. Findings revealed a consensus among students that increased attentional awareness enabled progress in their dancing which enhanced their understanding and performance. My observations concur with this. A useful discovery was that repetition of phrases and exercises could be used to explore shifting attentional focus rather than to rehearse attentional focus. An undoing of a hierarchy of knowing and expectations of the role of repetition was necessary to achieve this. Using repetitions to practice lively negotiation of attentional concepts was valuable.

Several students reported feeling more able to experiment with attention when there was less going on. One student reported that ‘if its slower I can think about what I should be working on. Taking time to stop and think between helps’. Stanton’s question - whether awareness of an ‘ability to address several activities simultaneously as they are dancing’ is useful (2011, 96) resonates here. In the focus group, students concurred that ‘when there is a lot going on, there is not time to think’. In working with set movement phrases of unpredictable transitions and junctions, quick changes and fragmented patterns, some students found there was insufficient time to focus attention beyond organisation. They felt that refining attention use required additional thinking time. Simple exercises, introduced to explore further how attention is used in ‘picking up’ material as well as in rehearsing and performing phrases, were effectively used. For example, a simple walking exercise seeking to adopt the posture of another and an interpretive improvisation exercise each encouraged

empathetic engagement with movement quality in ‘picking up’ material. More confident approaches, i.e. allowing body parts to lead, or less uniformity, were seen when students resisted focusing on the organisation, but some confessed to feeling overwhelmed by challenge. It was evident that students needed longer to assimilate ideas about attention. Students found it helpful to introduce, apply and reflect on concepts and approaches before applying the new-found awareness of connections or perceptions to a different kind of exercise. An example of this is in using feelings and images of ‘pulling up’ in centre exercises - noticing where attention is drawn, and how - via the balance of straight and curved choreutic units in the body when ‘pulling up’. ChUMm was again used to help reflect on movement resonances felt beyond the kinesphere – projecting and progressing beyond the spaces of the body. In the subsequent traveling exercise students were encouraged to flow attention in and out of the body as they moved between imaginary visual and kinaesthetic modes and to notice how changes in attention impacted on movement. This multi-stage approach acknowledged that awareness accumulates over time and best allowed students to assimilate this new way of working. In this example I noticed a greater freedom in performed movement, i.e. lingering more viscerally, extending beyond, spiralling into phrases as individual choices allowed uniformity to recede. However, the challenges of risk, uncertainty and not knowing are complex and a need for longer periods in which to accumulate practice was evident. Work was most effective when time was made for materials to settle before layering new attentional foci and, in the example given above, the following improvisational task revealed a length and lightness in many performances.

A benefit to the students involved in this project has been to focus on their role in creating learning for themselves rather than knowledge being ‘teacher transmitted’ (Walton 2011, 569). Most students responded that they had gained a sense of now ‘knowing my body

better'. As the project progressed, this was noted as helpful in regard to: managing injuries; monitoring own progress; deepening approaches through less technical ideas such as imagery, breath and working with others; and deepening awareness through apprehending kinaesthetically. In his analysis of the literature pertaining to current pedagogic research through action research, Gibbs *et al.* (2017, 10) summarise that the two-way engagement, while not necessarily resulting in higher achievement, helps encourage deeper learning. This became evident in my study, in the sense that ownership emerged for many students for whom the mixed-mode, lab-style approach enabled exploration of attention in productive ways and, for many, led to a review of existing practices. There was broad agreement among students that exploring a range of attentional foci in different materials better enabled embodiment, helping them to go beyond copying set materials, and in shaping the dance experience for themselves. Some however continued to value 'knowing' through familiarity. In choosing what to focus on, one student said that 'since being aware of attention it has completely changed how I think when I'm dancing.' For many students, a stronger sense of agency was apparent as individual traits emerged in set phrases and improvised materials, provoking experimentation.

The research confirmed that manner and style of individual materials influences attention use and expectation. We used Foster's ideas about the body to consider the ways in which materials which were set, familiar and repetitive drew attention to the re-production of Fosters' 'ideal body'. Amongst students there was broad agreement that this is about attention to a precise visual recreation and measuring progress against demonstration, correction and instruction. The findings concur with Rimmer's and Dyer's – that a definitive approach is most highly valued in technique exercises that anticipate didactic teaching. Remembering notes in order to 'do it right' indicated perception of a 'demonstrative body' –

with attention aimed at dealing with corrections. However, as the research progressed, students perceived the effectiveness of shifting attention from an external source (demonstration, description, correction) to a feeling - 'I can think about moving the forms myself rather than what they look like'. Re-visiting these assumptions about how they used attention, rather than thinking about attention seemed to create a pathway to a new kind of meaning within their dance experience. As part of a refining process, time spent shifting and reflecting on attention evidently benefited performance. One student distinguished a scale of attentional targets across approaches as: the exercise; the body; the process. A continuum of attention via: perceiving and translating materials and tasks; their experience in the body; and noticing what is changing over time indicates a kinaesthetic take on Foster's IPD proposal. While continuing to distinguish past, future and present relationships to the dance as the experience evolves, it re-appropriates her focus on an identity in the making, towards an embodied experience of change. A number of students reported finding it easier to be present - 'I can relax more, being present to what is happening'. Others remained suspicious that there was too much thinking involved - 'I become confused and don't know what I'm looking like and I can't be attentive to one thing'.

Noticeable distinctions in the notion of 'I' appeared throughout the project: a) an awareness of individual self in attending to things in class and b) an awareness of the I that is embodied in dancing the materials (the work of the class). One student found that alertness to attentional exploration and choice 'helped me find a stronger sense of my *self* in dancing'. Another, noting that a sense of losing control often lingers, said that in working quickly 'there is an affect on what comes out'. Another student said of attentional choices, that 'it allows me to choose to work on particular things, and to deal with how I'm feeling that day. This is indicative of the ways that holistic sensing and alertness to forms produce more

sensual or analytical reflections. It reflects a phenomenological awareness of both who I am and what I am doing but its reflection is vital in strengthening a sense of agency. As students were encouraged to explore their new knowledge of attention in dancing and to reflect upon this in discussion with others, their sense of agency grew and a number reported that they felt a stronger sense of ownership of their decisions and experiences following the research project.

Shifting attention

In investigating the notion of shifting attention during activities and repetitions, amongst modes, targets, body parts, self and other, approaches offered by mindful techniques and by Claxton were useful. In particular they were useful in changing perspectives, letting go and noticing novelty and distinctions. A focus shift away from the end-goal of re-creating movement seemed to benefit a capacity to be present in making choices about the process of moving. However it should be noted that a proposed 'framework' disrupted 'mindful' approaches, making it more difficult to focus on the present and allow a free flow of attention in the moment. A flexibility towards targets of attention, which mindful techniques encourage, have helped students to make discoveries during repetitions of material by changing perspective. Brown et al (2007, 213), has specified that 'in its fullest expression the mindful mode of processing involves a voluntary, fluid regulation of states of attention and awareness.' They suggest that fluid awareness operates like 'a zoom lens', moving out for a wider perspective and 'zero[ing] in on situational details (213). Changing perspectives is useful as dominant and recessive focus, targets and modes shift. A similar distinction is made by DeSpain between awareness (peripheral noticing) and attention (as in drawing closer) in improvisation (2014, 168). One questionnaire respondent noted the affect of shifts in intensity

saying, 'I can use my attention to deal with instructions or more lightly, with just noticings.'

Promoting awareness of potential shifts in attention, between perception, ideals and approaches, self, teacher, peers and materials is an implicit aim of this research. Some students struggled with approaching set materials with a fluid state of mind/body to zoom and zone, reporting that shifting attentional focus and changing perspective throughout exercises could be disorienting. One student spoke of a maze like feeling and of 'not knowing what I will find'. Indeed, a few students indicated that adjusting attention was distracting from the work of focused technique practice, separating the two concepts while others noted that complex and sometimes unpredictable traveling movement made attentional practice more difficult. When reflecting on shifts students indicated their predominant aims during parts of the session, chunking concepts to deal with the sense of overwhelm. The research has reiterated the ways that changing perspective can challenge young dancers' common expectations of dance training, i.e. holding on in terms of technique, focus, stamina and intended outcomes. While the action research has shown that exploring and reflecting on attention can be beneficial, it has produced a consequence of over-thinking for some as feedback loops were being monitored and anticipated by students. Offering alternate perspectives was effective but threatened to be overly teacher-led, i.e. further instruction on what to attend to, rather than a discovery-based approach. This danger, as Quinlan has said of Gaga, is that potential autonomy is undermined by the act of 'teaching' aspects which were otherwise intuited, to greater or lesser success.

The inclusion of improvisational exercises within my methodology has shown the value of alert-ness to attentional flow, promoting an ability to know 'each moment differently' (Little 2015). Novelty and distinction enable potential relations between attentional targets. However, in encouraging students to embrace unplanned perspective shifts and let go one

student said ‘I don’t know what’s going to be there’, anticipating her future position. Another student commented on her understanding that letting go to allow attention to change, meant there is always more to develop. She now has a sense of ‘inquiry, rather than just getting it done’. This sense of inquiry in shifting attention is echoed by Daniel Lepkoff (2011) who has said that in an ‘intensely physical state of questioning’ in improvisation, ‘my attention (is required) to be constantly in motion’. Reliving a CI experience, he goes on ‘[w]hen my attention stops moving, my interpretation of what is happening becomes fixed and my vision becomes conventionalized, and thus the questioning disappears.’ In particular, strategies for letting go and shifting intensities, modes and directions has been beneficial for deepening engagement with a focus on a processual enquiry. Students were encouraged to notice the nature of attention happening ‘in the moment’ and the effects of constant motion of attention in relation to letting go. Peter Fraser has directly linked the role of the constant ‘motion’ of attention with ability to reduce a fixed, forced, and habitual practice. The proprioceptive dialogue made possible through shifting attention by ‘constantly renewing these acts of attention to the body’s states and processes’ (2016, 73) was explored in sessions. Some students, inevitably, found that holding one thing was easier to ‘just dance’ and found shifting modes to renew attention to be overwhelming. Creative solutions were in some cases diminished where students were not able to move beyond their preference or familiarity for controlling focus. While a deepened state of enquiry into the movement practice seemed to be happening within the student group, my observations of class work indicated that predominantly cognitive aspects of attention, rather than whole-body perception were a focus – letting go requires a plan! In noticing novelty and distinctions, one student found that shifting attention in and out of the body led to over analysing, reducing her ability to take risks. While the findings confirmed that discovery and problem solving are more possible by letting go and

allowing change, they also revealed a challenge in letting go of the known to be present in each moment of dancing in the context of peer observation. In particular, the radical shift in perceiving technical exercises through shifting attention created an apprehension for some that they will ‘stand out’ if they don’t achieve the phrase the same as others. There is an innate challenge in balancing a combination of controlling and allowing of attention and awareness in dance classes. Some students found that ‘allowing’ transferred the concept and responsibility for perceived ‘right-ness’, enabling them to find a new way to think through the detail of dance working as individuals. Others felt they ‘lacked knowledge about what to look for’, reiterating Rimmer’s ‘doxic’ problem of expectations of fixed form outcomes and the teacher’s role. In defining attention as ‘focused noticing’ Fraser (2016) captures the tension between a singular intention and a wider bodied/mindfulness in my dancing.

An interesting discovery was the impact of attention shifts on intra and interpersonal relations. The fluidity here promoted a consideration of how movement is triggered by particular attentionalities and its effect on a sense of interconnectedness. In using Claxton’s ‘crate’ as a framework for visualising attention flow and its impact, a discovery was made about interconnectedness apparent in allowing small shifts. During an improvisational exercise for varying the intensity of attention in observing and annotating another’s movement one student reported that an awareness of ‘their attention as well as my own’ happened, requiring her to re-balance her ‘attention and awareness’ (DeSpain). One student expressed the two notions as un-pairable, saying, ‘I can’t hold both layers’. Claxton’s distinct ‘direction’ of attention, encouraging an awareness of shifts between internal and external targets revealed a wider interconnectedness. In the focus group attention shifts beyond ‘self and other’ towards environmental aspects, (music and cues) were noted. Students spoke of flow in terms of attending to one thing at a time where ‘each time that

thing changes, it shifts so quickly'. The group were surprised to agree that the external stimuli were as important as what was happening within the body (coordination, impulse, timing). They concurred that the stronger the cues that required a shared external focus, the stronger the sense of working as a group. Claxton's 'social-ness' of attention similarly affected students in terms of inter-relational flow. Students spoke passionately in the focus group about contact work in terms of the transformation of touch in finding synchronicity with others. Agreement was expressed that as they shifted the intensity and direction of their focus toward another they empathised, or 'cared' more strongly and felt more connected. A dancer's particular empathetic sense of putting myself in your shoes is explored by Warburton (2011) as one way that dancers learn from others and go beyond mimicking movement, to imagine how it feels for another to move this way. One student described the transformation from a single focused point of contact into a wider awareness of 'holistic' synchronicity. Insight was gained here as each student diagrammatically mapped the experiences they described. A further task, working with hands on and visual observations before modifying their own movement, had similar outcomes. Through deeper awareness and a physical feeling of empathy – of attending with another in different ways – a deeper interconnectedness was achieved, echoing Stinson's experience. This indicates a value to working with others towards bodied/mindfulness. Nita Little attributes such inter-relational attention shifts to a decoupling of power and control. She sees the action of giving attention as an action of 'empowerment' (2016, 250), suggesting that in the intimately shared practice of CI the notion of paying (and thus controlling) attention, diminishes. An awareness of the role of focused empathy has caused me to re-evaluate comments such as 'where I stand in class really affects how much I am able to attend and how aware I am of what I am doing in relation to what others see of me'. This echoes Ehrenberg's research which showed that the

role of others can be productive in ‘imagining ways to feel *and* do the movement (2012, 209), enabling a sense of agency. As a pedagogue, I had underestimated the value of perceiving self in relation with others in dance training classes yet a main finding has been in recognising the value of inter-relational flow, which is more evident in ensemble or pair working, through external targets and kinaesthetic empathy. It can be concluded from this that a focus on ensemble and pair working enables a sense of inter-connectedness, helping to free up attention flow.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this research has been to explore awareness of attentional choices in undergraduate dance students with a view to building up individual agency for the bricolage-based training of the twenty first century. All students who participated in the action research found the research design increased their knowledge of different types of attention and changed the perception of many regarding their use of attention. All students found the exploration of an increased knowledge of attention to be empowering, even those who chose not to take risks with new ways of experiencing attention.

In this study the driving questions have been: to what extent are dancers aware of their uses and choices of attention in training classes; what is the impact of expectation on attention use; how can shifting rather than fixed attention benefit dancers; how can a greater sense of agency result from awareness of uses and choices? In exploring these questions through action research I have discovered that at the outset students had limited awareness of the role of attention in shaping their experience. During the study students’ perspectives on the value of opening up attentional awareness varied. Those who found exploring attention

use across different types of dance practice helpful, predominantly felt it enables progress in their dance work by challenging their expectations and subsequently feeling more *in* their bodies. Many found that it had empowered them to make choices about their experiences in spite of their expectations.

Most students found the notion and strategies offered to explore how attention can flow between targets and modes, rather than seeming fixed, to be intriguing but challenging. Mindful approaches helped students adopt a wide focus, allowing freer attention shifts, find new connections and deepen enquiry. A sense of being an agent in their learning allowed many to interchange concepts from other contexts and types of dance practice to help them make sense of their experience. For others the expectation that a singular focus point could be more efficient or effective for them to just ‘get the work done’ reiterated expectations of a directed-learning approach. It was discovered that students were particularly responsive to external targets of attention in group working for greater inter-relational flow. In this action research the desire to feel in control of information processing with techniques such as chunking, pacing and knowing was often tested against fluid and flexible approaches of mindfulness such as changing perspective, letting go and noticing distinctions. While for many these have been considered useful in freeing up habitual patterns of fixing attention to create a more interconnected dance experience, for others it has been harder to allow alternative methods to affect experiences.

The bricolage-based approach encouraged a wide focus on attending to movement somatically and relationally, allowing students to explore their experiences of aims, modes and textures. The draw-back of this approach to sessions is that it lacks clear aesthetic aims which can be challenging for young dancers, both in terms of clarifying targets for skills building and in terms of managing expectations. Developing a multi-stage approach and

allowing more time produced greater freedom in dancing. As an insider to the phenomenon of exploring attention uses in dance, I have been able to inspire and support change in students' established practices and encourage self-criticality. In comparing and contrasting different uses of attention and considering how attentional choices impact upon their experience in practical sessions, a number of students have felt overwhelmed as questions about I, expectation and control emerged from their enquiry.

It can be said that an attentional focus has benefited dance students in terms of owning individual experiences. Further research is required to uncover ways to better prepare students for the potential disorientation of seeking and noticing, controlling and allowing, and for the challenge of balancing expectation, attention and agency for themselves. This must be built into classes over a longer period. However, it has become apparent that in placing value on the processual and relational act of attending to unfolding movement many of the dancers have felt more present and more able to define the conditions within which the movement unfolds. This has embedded a sense of agency- a sense that they have the right to make choices and exercise a sense of ownership over the materials.

My research questioned how a framework for attentional awareness could be beneficial in dance training. The research has indicated that cross referencing attentional aspects of dance learning and utilising common principles can improve interconnectedness in dance training but can seem overwhelming. A potential strategy could be the development of individual frameworks for conceptualising attentional targets, modes, flow and impact. Future research will investigate the wider use of models to conceptualise attentional flow and the individualisation of them using digital software.

It can be concluded that increasing knowledge of attention in order to open dancers' awareness of expectation, approach, habits and preferences can be useful in training. Even as

the role of making individual attentional choices might be commonly undervalued, exploring knowledge has here increased a sense of agency. Practicing being tuned in to attentional shifts and their consequences can afford young dancers an insight into the importance of choice making and identity making in defining their experience of the dance. This is undoubtedly of benefit as dancers work to become individual learners and performers.

Notes on Contributor

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