

Dance in the curriculum drama essay



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Dance as a discipline is marginalised in academic discourse as an ephemeral, performance-focused subject, its power articulated through the body. In UK schools it

is a physical subject with an aesthetic gloss, languishing at the bottom of the academic hierarchy, conceptualised as art but located within physical education in the national curriculum (Downing et al, 2003; Brehoney, 2005). Placing additional emphasis on performance at A level also undermines the development of dance studies more widely within a subject hierarchy that places literacy, rather than embodiment, as a key factor of high-status knowledge.

Beyond the confines of the dance curriculum, these changes illuminate Foucault's assertions that power and knowledge are interconnected and that power produces knowledge (1979, 1980b). He outlined three core processes for exerting disciplinary power: observation, examination and normalising judgement. Bentham's Panopticon, a prison with cells constructed around a central tower, demonstrates how discipline and control can be transferred to the prisoners themselves. The inmates are always potentially visible to the guards and so must behave at all times as if they are being watched. They are their own guards, controlled by the gaze: 'Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be minimal cost' (Foucault, 1980b, p. 155). Foucault's second disciplinary technology, normalisation, is the way in

which behaviour can be aligned with society's standards, to correct what is seen as deviant. The third,

examination, is the combination of the other two and exemplifies 'power/knowledge' as it both establishes the truth and controls behaviour. This article illustrates how these processes work in the context of dance in education. Taking into account Foucault's suggestion that the traditional way of describing power in negative terms as something that 'excludes' or 'represses' should stop, that it is the productive aspect of power that creates reality, the article explores how dance in education

might be seen as both literate and a physical activity suitable for anyone, and thus to have more power in the twenty-first-century curriculum.

Yet dance is more than just performance: to dismiss it as purely bodies in action is to ignore not only the language of its own structural conventions but also the language in which it might be recorded. Currently there is little indication in school that dance, like music, has its own complex systems of notation. The current discourse of dance in education has normalised it as an illiterate art form and the removal of the notation component at A level has entrenched that perception. Furthermore, the idea that dance studies is solely about 'beautiful bodies in motion', the exclusive pursuit of slender, flexible females, is an unhelpful blueprint at a time when there is a need to encourage more physical activity to combat rising levels of childhood obesity. So if students are not to self-exclude from dance whether on grounds of perceived body type, gender or lack of academic currency, then

there needs to be a more inclusive, valued and thus more powerful form of the subject in the curriculum.

Dance in the Curriculum: an overview

Dance developed as a part of public education in the UK during the 1880s when Swedish educator Martina Bergman Osterberg brought Ling's physical education ideas to London. Physical training

was introduced in 1909 into what were then called elementary schools to improve fitness levels and encourage discipline and cooperation in young men. The dance aspect was perceived as an exclusively female pursuit (Brinson, 1991). Western dance tradition is still strongly associated with the female; as Ferdun points out, 'the term "dance" is usually associated with girls and feminine qualities by a significant portion of the dominant culture. Labelling dance as female prevents it from functioning fully as an educational medium. It limits participation by anyone, male or female,

who does not want to be associated with stereotyped gender images and practices' (Ferdun, 1994, p. 46). Whilst dance still remains a part of the PE curriculum, McFee (2004) argues for the distinctive nature of dance as an artistic activity, for its value in the curriculum within an education system that demands accountability. He adopts a personal enquiry view of education which stresses the importance of personal development. Drawing on the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) and David Best (1991), he argues that dance is a 'suitable medium' for such an educational endeavour. However, whilst for McFee dance should be treated as an artistic activity that has intrinsic value, the notion of dance being understood in such a way as to

make it accountable is at the heart of his text. His emphasis on accountability resonates with arguments around high-status knowledge and with the need for robust assessment in public examinations. Dance can be assessed as a sub-section

of physical education and is also available as a separate subject at GCSE (usually taken age 16 at the end of compulsory education) and at GCE A level (advanced-level subjects, taken two years later, which usually form the basis of university entrance).

Articulating the Power of Dance: Ideology into Practice

Dance requires the development of physical skills just as other sporting activities do, but differs in that technical skill is not the end in itself. That skill must be used to create meaning; its main concern is aesthetic experience. Unsurprisingly, as McFee (2004) points out, many PE teachers have little interest in teaching dance. Not only does it require an understanding of dance technique if it is to embrace ‘masterworks’ – that is, known works in current repertory – but it also has an aesthetic aspect that makes it distinctive. Indeed, when combined with the particularly female orientation of dance, it seems somewhat ironic to place it within a department that is culturally perceived as masculine and essentially in opposition. But in spite of the implication that to put dance with PE is to fail to emphasise the subject’s aesthetic qualities, the dance as art model has become the predominant way of studying it. And this is a central problem for dance in education: the aesthetic dimension inherent in dance as an art form and

expected by the national curriculum, at GCSE and at A level, leads to this subject having no obvious department in which to sit.

All dance examination syllabi in school reflect the dance as art model. As well as having traditional written aspects, GCSE and A level have a practical component, carrying 70% and 55% of the total marks respectively (AQA, 2009). When first examined in 1986, the A-level syllabus required candidates to show ability to choreograph; to perform; to be able to read and use notation; to show knowledge of the constituent form and features of dances and their historical and

social contexts; and, finally, to be able to interpret and evaluate dances (University of London Schools Examination Board, 1986). Changes to the syllabus in 2008 resulted in dropping the notation requirement; they also streamlined the choreographic tasks and placed an added emphasis on health and safety in training and performance. The specification also removed the technical study and instead assesses technical competence through the solo choreography task. The power of the dance itself is examined through students' ability to analyse the choreographic structure of masterworks in essay form and to use defined compositional structures in their own choreography. It is also assessed through their ability to perform. The proportion of marks allocated for the practical components at both GCSE and A level reflects the need not only to understand dance in theory but also to use that knowledge in practice. It also points to the centrality of the body as the instrument through which the power of dance is articulated and made accountable through assessment. But examination is, in Foucault's terms,

under the power of the gaze. The gaze, whether on the dance itself or on the wider notion of dance studies in the academic hierarchy, influences what is seen, what is valued, what is deemed to have power. It influences the kind of inspection itself. If literacy is valued in the academy, then how might dance be written, read, considered and ‘interiorised’ under its inspecting gaze?

Dance is a language with its own systems expressed through choreography and performance. The word choreography itself derives from the Greek, choreia, meaning choral dance, and graphia, meaning writing. But if, as Cohan states, ‘dance speaks in a very special language, both to the doer and the watcher. It speaks of things “read between the lines”, things that are impossible to put into words’ (Cohan, 1986, p. 10), how can school students articulate those ‘impossible’ qualities, have

the power to express them in a way that is accountable, to use McFee’s (2004) term? Not just to read and write about dance, but to read and write dance itself? Foster states: ‘Literacy in dance begins with seeing, hearing and feeling how the body moves’ (1986, p. 58). From the high culture of classical ballet to the nineties’ revival of Lindy Hop, from contemporary technique to street dance, the dance ‘reader’ must recognise the qualities of those movements, consider their features, remember and identify patterns. The syllabus, whether at GCSE or A level, refers to constituent features and compositional devices that should be understood, and later ‘read’ in the masterworks studied for the latter. These include movement components (action content, dynamics and spatial arrangement); dancers (numbers, gender, physique, role); physical and aural setting; and the

development of dance ideas. Choreographic devices such as motif development, variation and transition are also required.

The cultural perspective

Reading dance is not only about its internal structure, it is also about its place within

culture: it is complex. The reader must understand the ‘choreographic codes and conventions that give the dance its significance’ (Foster, 1986, p. 59).

This complexity is reflected in the way choreography is examined, for example, at A level. The written papers ask both for discussion of the component features of a dance, but also to demonstrate how the dance relates to its cultural context. In other words, the papers ask the candidate to be able to ‘read’ the dance in terms of form and context – for example, to understand not only how Christopher Bruce creates the power of

‘Ghost Dances’ (1981) through technical means, but why such a powerful and searing indictment of political oppression, the disappeared of Pinochet’s Chile, was significant. The practical examination calls for the student to ‘write’ dance, to compose both solo and group choreography. The compositional components described above are to be used in this writing.

But as Adshead (1986) points out, dance composition, where the elements of dance are put together in a recognisable construction, is only the beginning of choreography. ‘Understanding the

crafting of the piece only takes us so far and while it might in principle be the aspect of choreography most understood, dances are imaginative

constructions designed to do far more than string steps together in a neat and tidy way, or even in an untidy conglomeration of movements' (Adshead, 1986, p. 20). The power of choreography is not just about using form correctly, it is about creating meaning and its effective communication to the audience. Dance in education, then, as examined at GCSE and A level, requires students to 'read' dance through understanding its own language of compositional devices, making reference to the cultural context of the practitioners and masterworks studied. There is also the requirement to 'write' dance using those same compositional structures, and the solo must reflect the characteristics of a

specific practitioner. Having envisioned and created meaningful artistic relationships derived from knowledge about dance, the student must have the technical skill to realise them in practice. Those qualities have to be conveyed to the observer through the dancer's instrument, the body. Young observed that 'it is power, not knowledge, that counts in education' (Young, 2008, p. 94). And power can be constructed as the power of Foucault's gaze (Foucault, 1980b). Dance knowledge encapsulated in its internal concepts of literacy may not have status in the eyes of those who have the power to create the curriculum and endorse its values; it has little power as academic currency. Dance as articulated through the body is similarly problematic: Shilling (2004) develops Bourdieu's conception of the body as physical capital which needs to be 'converted' into other forms in order to have value. But according to Foucault, the body itself has a complex relationship with power.

As former ballerina Jennifer Jackson notes, ‘ The focus on the body, as against the person who dances, links standards of perfection to the instrument of the dance rather

than the dancer or the dancing itself’ (Jackson, 2005, p. 32). Dance in education does not immediately appear to share this professional obsession with technical perfection either in the national curriculum or at GCSE and A level. Syllabus documents

make no reference to technical excellence; no statements are given to indicate standards by comparison to technical qualifications. The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) mark scheme for the 2009-10 choreographic section of the GCSE level paper which asks candidates to show ‘ appropriate and sensitive use of dancers’ skills and attributes to communicate the dance idea’ (AQA, 2009, p. 4), and my discussions with practical examiners reiterate the notion that dancers are

used to ‘ illustrate’ the choreography, that their performance is not assessed, for a choreographer’s skill is, in part, to use what abilities the dancers have. In this view, the body is pushed aside, as if dance can simply be reduced to representation, not embodiment. But this is disingenuous: the power of dance is inevitably mediated through the body and the body cannot be removed from that representation, leaving embodiment and representation in irresolvable tension. A professional choreographer can indeed ‘ tailor’ the dance to the strengths of the performers, but those dancers will already be in possession of the docile body created through years of

technique classes. School-level student choreographers creating dances for examination have to work with dancers who might – but equally might not – have technical skill. And so the technical skills of the dancers available to the candidates will affect both their choice of steps and the aesthetics of the performance. As one dance teacher colleague observed, ‘ I am sure you could look

at a dance performed by two different candidates and think that one was better because you are more impressed by the performance of one – because she was a better dancer, or slimmer, or more elegant’ Even with the best intentions, it is very difficult to remove the effect caused by a poor performance and a body that does not conform to normalised expectations because the two are so inextricably linked. And so the self-correction of the docile body is not limited to technical excellence but is also

affected by the expected body shape, even at school level. Foucault describes the ideal body of the soldier, the muscular physique and bearing that replaces the ‘ peasant’. In dance, as in society, there is an ‘ ideal body’ myth, the normalised body

constructed as the aesthetic standard, the object of the observer’s gaze. Following Foucault, Green (2002) describes the ideal body of the female dancer as seen by her student participants, the long legs, the flexible, skinny body with no curves, thin face, long hair. An ideal, constantly striven for, self-policed, ‘ light as a feather. Never eat sweets’ (Green, 2002, p. 135), emphasising the sentiments of students and teacher referred to above. The self in the mirror is not checked just for technical accuracy but for any

excess fat. The skinny dancer, existing on caffeine and cigarettes, is part of the

dancing myth, if struggled against in reality. But the importance of – indeed obsession with – maintaining the perfect dancing body can lead to a range of eating disorders (Thomas, 1995). Perhaps addressing this concern might be one of the ‘benefits’ referred to in the restructured GCSE specification – that is, an understanding of health and safety in dance. Additionally, seeking to question the objectification of the body can result in a deeper understanding of the nature of dance and of its role in society (Shapiro, 1998, p. 10).

The male professional dancer’s body is more contested, especially within the essentially patriarchal structures of ballet. In the nineteenth century he was caught between two competing discourses: if he looked muscular, strong and vigorous, he appeared too contrasting to the sylphlike ballerina who took the central role. But if he looked too ethereal and aesthetic, anxiety was generated in the theatre-going public through perceived homosexual overtones, a link that still persists whatever the reality. Male dancers in the contemporary idiom are perceived as more masculine than their classical counterparts, in part emphasised through the differences in classical and contemporary technique and choreographic principles, yet doubts regarding sexual orientation still remain in popular thought (Burt, 2007). The film *Billy Elliot*, in which Billy struggles to be permitted to dance, illustrates this perfectly: boys should play football or learn boxing – dancing is for girls.

What is more, in theatrical dance, the body is on view – and most frequently a female body – and with it historically, a link with moral laxity. The female

body has long been regarded as a source of discord and danger to the patriarchal order, through ‘distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death’ (Bordo, 1993, p. 5). Churches preached against social dance on grounds of immorality in the close physical proximity of male and female bodies, whether it was the introduction of the waltz in

Victorian England or the perceived depravity of the tango and Charleston in the 1920s (Brinson, 1991). The theatre itself was the domain of women of questionable morals. Foucault saw the body to be central in the operationalising of power. Since the female body is repressed in a patriarchal culture and cultural representations of it (Fraser & Bartky, 1992) – that is, it is seen as the ‘other’ to be controlled by the male, the relationship between dance and gender is influential in articulating the power of dance. The female body can be seen in terms of competing discourses and social control. If the power of dance must be expressed through the body, and that body is female (or if male, then with potentially homosexual overtones), then the dance expresses not power but subservience within that patriarchal hierarchy. And in the school curriculum, the body is similarly positioned and manipulated, its realities hidden (Oliver & Lalik, 2001).

Bakhtin (1968) argued that these ‘impure’ meanings around embodiment could be

overturned. Taking the world of medieval and Renaissance carnival as depicted in Rabelais’ novels, he showed how the worldview was upturned, where usual power structures were inverted and the boundaries between

what was considered pure or profane could be crossed. The body image itself moved to a celebration of the grotesque but at its extreme – ‘ it never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body. It is a

point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception’ (Bakhtin, 1968/1984, p. 318). But carnival is transitory: participants can only be temporarily free of Foucault’s disciplinary technologies. In professional dance, the power of the choreography is essentially expressed through performance, and – outside a carnival world view – the lithe, trained dancer is considered uniquely able to interpret the choreographer’s ideas with the docile body.

Dance and the Curriculum 2: Notating Dance

But if in school the choreography is merely to be ‘ illuminated’ by the performer, then perhaps an alternative way of dealing with the potential interference from the use of (inadequately) docile bodies would be to ask dance candidates to write down their intentions, to allow the power of their choreographic choices to be examined in isolation from the power of the performing body. The question then arises of how this might be achieved in a curriculum that does not acknowledge the existence of dance notation.

There are two main systems of notating dance, Labanotation and Benesh. Labanotation, devised by the influential dance figure Rudolf Laban, was published in 1928 and is used to record movement across a range of dance styles. Without notation, there is little chance of being able to accurately

reproduce the movements; one can only know about the dance and its role within that particular culture. In spite

of its availability, notation was used very little, with a resultant lack of documented dance scores (Redfern, 2007) although the number of scores is now gradually increasing. In the United States, for example, the Dance Notation Bureau, located at the University of Ohio, uses Labanotation to create a record of dance works, so that dance scores can be accessed and used in the same way as music scores. Other institutions in Europe and elsewhere are similarly collating notated dance

works. These works are then available for interpretation, as are other art forms. And, as Redfern (2007) points out, increasing the number of interpretations of an art work increases its stature; the power of the dance can be enhanced by inviting different ‘ readings’ of its texts. As well as creating records of dance, notation use can also have learning-outcome implications. Goodman’s (1976) theory of notation suggests that the created score defines a body of knowledge. Warburton (2000) goes on to argue that trying to express that knowledge verbally can be counterproductive because of what he refers to as the ‘ ambiguity and redundancy’ of spoken

language. He illustrates this by explaining how the verbal description ‘ to glide’ for a ballet step called a ‘ glissade’ sets up expectations of the kind of movement to be completed – that ‘ gliding overlaps the meanings of travelling and leaping ... moreover, to tell the dancer to perform a travelling-leaping-action-that-skims-across-the-floor permits a variety of interpretations’ (Warburton, 2000, p. 195). The anecdote he tells goes on to

explore the problems of description and how one particular ballet mistress resolved this by demanding repetition until he performed the step properly – the power of the dance expressed through the body, not through words. But although a dance step is a bodily experience, rarely conceptualised in terms of its component parts,

notation, he asserts, might provide the means for this conceptualisation in a way that language cannot. He concludes that ‘ if the goal of dance education is to help dancers increase their abilities to use dance concepts, to “ read, write, and dance” dance, then notation-use is a good tool for doing so’ (Warburton, 2000, p. 210), since it enables movement, concept and notation to be linked, which improves learning.

Dance notation has never been a requirement for access to dance courses, whether at degree level or for professional training. Few institutions offered the particular AQA specification in which it appeared, and so many potential students would have been unable to study it. It is available for study in professional training courses at specialist dance schools and also features in some dance degree courses as an option. But at school level, the situation is rather different. From its inception in 1986 until restructured and examined for the first time in its new format in 2009, notation was a part of A-level dance, both for conveying the technical study to the teachers and their students and also as a separate test. Originally, according to one examiner, it was included at A level, ‘ for mainly cultural reasons. Dance has been regarded as an illiterate art for too long. There are few scripts or records of materials, so dance is seen as a time-based art, disadvantaged in

comparison with drama or music. We wanted to help bring it into line with the other arts' (Ridley, 1992, p. 37). Literacy, as

used here, can be defined by the ability to read and write dance scores using either Benesh or Labanotation. At that time, the latter was the dominant choice of candidates; later examiners' reports note the ability of students in both forms (AQA, 2008).

The first – and rather indirect – test of notation skills at A level was through sending the compulsory technical dance study to centres in notated form. However, unless the students were extremely confident with notation, above the standard required for the exam itself, they were unable to read the complex scores themselves and thus were reliant on their teachers for their choice. This had important repercussions. Perhaps the first classical study might be slow, a piece of adage requiring balance, control and strength, whilst the second might emphasise speed, elevation and intricacy, a piece of allegro. Dancers tend to be more comfortable, and thus more competent, in one rather than the other. If the teacher decided to teach both studies then candidates would be able to choose their preferred option; if not, then some students would have to learn, perform and be assessed on a technical study which did not reflect their best performing ability. One solution was the option to buy video recordings from the National Resource Centre for Dance at the University of Surrey. However, this raised a further problem: any performance is inevitably an

interpretation of the notation, not the definitive answer. The Resource Centre attempted to minimise this by offering a male and a female interpretation of

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each piece, but the essential problem remained. Students therefore copied the interpretation when perhaps they could have offered an equally valid, or possibly even better, interpretation from the score itself. The power of the dance as notated and to be interpreted was subsumed into copied technical performance. The specific notation component was also examined practically: students were tested in groups of six, each candidate having a different dance score. They were given sixteen bars of their chosen notation (either Benesh or Labanotation) to decode and perform. The bars were repeated in performance, to create a thirty-two-bar sequence. Thirty minutes were given in which the notation not only had to be understood but also memorised, then fitted to music and a creditable performance rendered which was itself graded. Candidates had to cope with distraction as well as having to race against the clock: the music was played periodically during the thirty minutes, which was potentially distracting if, at that moment, the individual was not ready to put the steps to music but was perhaps decoding a specific section. The memorisation aspect also meant that whilst a candidate might be able to read the notation and perform it with score in hand, marks would be lost if they could not perform it accurately without the score. If notation is a tool of dance, a way of recording movement, then memorisation and performance can hardly be a fair test of the ability to read it. One could read a poem for a test, but just because those lines were not remembered accurately would not be a reason to assume the person could not read. This memorisation aspect

shifted the emphasis from reading the notation to one of demonstrating that understanding by way of perfected performance. The task was not a straightforward test of notation literacy but rather one of memorisation demonstrated through bodily skill. The power of dance was once again articulated through the performing body.

Nevertheless, successive examiners' reports throughout this period indicated the increasing familiarity of students with notated scores, and hence an increasing ability to cope with them. For example, in 2008, the report noted: 'As stated in previous years, some candidates are to be congratulated on their achievements. It was pleasing to see a number of candidates dance the whole 32-bar score and gain high marks in this component of the Unit 5 examination. This continues to be a positive progression over the past couple of years, indicating an increasing confidence in preparing reconstruction skills' (AQA, 2008, p. 4). Yet the restructured 2009 A level removed the examined notation component completely. AQA suggested a 'summary of benefits' of the new syllabus, which included encouraging critical engagement with dance as an art form, providing a suitable foundation for pursuing dance in higher education, providing experience of choreography and performance, and, finally, encouraging a healthy lifestyle (AQA, 2008). However, according to the National Dance Teachers Association (NTDA), the notation component was dropped because AQA was concerned about the ability of teachers to deal with this aspect of the course. 'Too few teachers were able to teach notation to a high enough standard and ... examiners had seen too many crying candidates attempting the notation part of unit five. It seems that we as teachers have failed to meet the

standards required to deliver this part of the course successfully' (NDTA, 2008, p. 13). Those teachers trained to use the system acknowledged the difficulties it posed, but nevertheless the outcome can only be seen as a retrograde step. Rather than calling for an improvement in teaching standards, this significant aspect of dance scholarship was dropped. The gaze of the literate hierarchy was rejected, not interiorised. So whilst schoolchildren may routinely be expected to understand that music has its own form of language –

that is, music notation – there is no such expectation for dance; dance in schools is taught as if it were an 'illiterate' art form – that is, as if its notation does not exist. An unfortunate effect of this is, as Redfern (2007) points out, that 'a lack of interest in dance scores is perhaps what makes for, or at least reinforces, the tendency to concentrate on performance rather than the work; and this absence of a tradition of studying a dance script in the way that it is imperative for musicians or actors to study their scores or texts means that relatively little has been expected or demanded of

the dancer in respect of interpretational ability' (Redfern, 2007, p. 197).

Notation is thus important for the development of dance studies. It allows dance works to be

recorded and studied other than during the performance itself, giving dance a language equivalent to music. It can also enhance learning. But reading and interpreting through notated scores (however unskilled) is no longer a possibility at school level, and whilst writing scores was expected only at a

very basic level, this too has gone. In addition, complex and analytical notation gives academic weight to a subject so often seen as unsuitable for serious study. It is also assessable in a

way in which the more ephemeral aspects of the subject are not. The absence of notation at A level cannot help but reinforce