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New Reflective Practice Research in Dance Education

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Guest Editor

Over the past 20 years, significant changes in dance and dance education programs indicate a shift from a narrow educational approach toward a more open and reflective discourse regarding different aspects in subject matter, pedagogy, and teaching and learning styles (Bannon 2010; Buck 2006; Leijen et al. 2009). Pedagogical practices in higher education dance changed dramatically in North American and many European countries focused mainly on mastery of a prescribed dance style (e.g. Graham, Limón or Cunningham modern dance style, or classical ballet forms) most of which was accomplished by copying the teacher (Smith-Autard 2002). Pedagogical practice gave little attention to students’ subjective experiences in dance or with cultivating student creativity, cognitive skills or decision-making. Beginning in the early 1990s, the pedagogy of postsecondary dance education moved toward more student-centered practices (Smith-Autard 2002), especially reflective methodologies.

Although reflective methods and practices are widely incorporated in studio and academic teaching in dance and dance education today, a cogent body of knowledge remains uncharted. What burgeoning reflective practice literature in dance that exists has come nearly exclusively from European scholars and researchers. For example, Lara Tembrioti and Niki Tsangaridou (2014) identified fewer than ten publications, of which only a fraction were empirical in nature. A keyword search of Journal of Dance Education archives revealed just three relevant articles. A special issue of research and applied articles on the topic of reflective practice is long overdue.

Editor Emeritus, Doug Risner sets the tone of this special issue with “Motion and Marking in Reflective Practice,” a research model integrating autobiographical narrative, reflective practice, and critical theory rooted in his experiences as dancer, choreographer, educator and researcher. Learning to reflect involves asking challenging questions about ordinary moments in our lives, both past and present. By understanding our actions and the meanings that result from these actions, we gain greater insight, grapple with our intentions, wrestle with our own practice and raise further questions. Risner’s model in action begins with narrative reflections recollected during a two-year research period. Each reflection is accompanied by visual and movement ‘artifacts’ (drawings and videos) that were created (a) in response to the narrative account, (b) prior to the writing of the narrative reflection, or (c) simultaneously with the narrative account and illustration. A great deal of this process occurs within a ‘free writing’ context, one free of inordinate preparation, judgement or scrutiny.

Jessica Zeller skillfully examines reflective pedagogical practices in “Reflective Practice in the Ballet Class: Bringing Progressive Pedagogy to the Classical
Tradition” by offering possibilities for merging progressive pedagogy’s humanistic philosophy with professional quality ballet training. Through reflective practice, Zeller asserts that progressive ballet pedagogy can preserve the classical tradition’s emphasis on form and style, allowing ballet pedagogues to serve as active stewards supporting the development of empowered ballet dancers who are prepared for the challenges of the profession.

In “Two-eyed Seeing: Moving from Paralysis to Action in Understanding the Legacy of Indian Residential Schools in British Columbia, Canada” Cheryl Kay describes her transformative journey as a reflexive dance educator tasked with implementing a newly published Ministry of Education 2015 curriculum aimed at building understanding of the legacy of the Indian Residential School experience for indigenous people of British Columbia, Canada. Empowered by the idea of “two-eyed seeing,” which acknowledges two sides to the healing process, Kay takes readers through a process of artistic introspection, circular reflection, and collegial collaboration.

In “Selfies, Dance, and Performance: A Multimedia and Multidisciplinary Collaboration” Kim Brooks Mata and Mona Kasra introduce their students to creative, multidisciplinary practices and methods in a mixed-media collaboration exploring concepts of self-representation and self-presentation through dance and new media. The authors’ findings indicate profound impact on their pedagogical approaches to dance and digital media design, including deeper perspectives about other disciplines and powerful ways to engage their students in a reflective co-creative process.

Concluding the special issue articles, Sarah M. Barry’s “Methods of Reflective Practice in a Service-Learning Dance Pedagogy Course” describes the redesign process of a pedagogy course for college dance majors in which the author sought ways to provide practical teaching experience that coincided with developing connections within the local community. Diverse methods of reflection proved key toward enhancing student experience beyond surface volunteerism by connecting the service of teaching dance to elementary students to broader and deeper personal learning about the community. Barry’s emphasis on the process of reflection aims to link course content to problem solving in real-world contexts, thus enlarging her students’ perceptions of dance pedagogy and dance in community.

Tembrioti and Tsangaridou (2014) remind us in a recent literature review of reflective practice in dance that, “Despite its wide acceptance, the notion of ‘reflection’ remains elusive and mysterious; has different meanings; and is used in a plethora of different ways in educational and professional settings” (4). However, each author presented in this special issue expands our understanding of the space, place and inclusion of reflective practice in dance, movement and dance-related environments. Secondary and postsecondary dance curricula have increasingly incorporated reflexive processes, restructuring pedagogical models in an effort to develop holistic student learning outcomes. A good deal of these curricular innovations in dance seek to develop students’ reflective practice capacities in which:

The reflective practitioner believes that not only do actions frequently speak louder than words, but that by attending to our actions in the ordinary, mundane events of our seemingly routine biographies we (1) come to understand ourselves and others to a greater degree, (2) recognize our own complicity in oppressive structures we seek to eliminate, and (3) inform our potential for individual and collective action for making a better world. (Risner 2002, 23)

REFERENCES