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## Dance HE Paper - Final Draft

### **Introduction**

Within this positioning paper I would like to present a number of ideas surrounding dance pedagogy within Higher Education, specifically the impact that current university structures and pedagogical approaches have on the notion of producing 'sustainable graduates'. If, as Shreeve et al (2010, 125) discusses, arts education should be concerned with 'uncertainty and open-endedness', I ask the question, are we able to foster this alongside current institutional demands? If not, then what effect does this have on current dance graduates?

My discussions at this stage are formed from personal critical reflections upon two embodied roles, my role as a Senior Lecturer in Dance at Leeds Beckett University and my work as an artist/choreographer.

To set some context, over the last three years alongside working at Leeds Beckett University, I have been involved in several choreographic projects where I have worked with dance graduates from two higher education institutions, Leeds Beckett and Hull School of Art and Design. These projects include a period of choreographic research and development as part of the 'Thinking Dance' event at Yorkshire Dance in 2014, the creation of new choreographic work for the Hull Dance Prize 2015, and most recently another period of choreographic research at Leeds Beckett University over the summer of 2016. The work created on these projects has centred around ideas of 'contamination', based on an exploration of Drew Leder's (1990) text 'The Absent Body', specifically his notions of 'dysfunction', 'disappearance' and 'absence'. Whilst I intend not to elaborate on this choreographic practice with much depth, I do acknowledge that the content of these explorations has had an impact on what is discussed here.

However, what this paper intends to focus upon is the actual experience of working together with graduates on these professional projects, and how that prompted an initial need for reflection on my pedagogical practice.

For instance, during the summer of 2015, whilst working on a new choreographic work for the Hull Dance Prize, I experienced a very turbulent relationship with the dance graduates I was working with. This relationship forced us to have to extend and intensify the making process and address our own responsibilities and behaviours within that process. It was an experience fraught with anxieties about position, responsibility, ownership, skill, and creativity.

I use the term anxiety here, because drawing upon the work of Giddens (1991), I believe that the acknowledgement of my own anxiety during this particular creative project, of my 'not-knowingness', what Giddens might describe as helplessness, posed a threat to the integrity to the graduates own security system, and the knowledge/understanding that they had achieved through their degree programmes (Giddens, 1991, 43). It was this threat that began to make explicit apparent 'gaps' in my understanding of established pedagogical approaches, my application of them in practice, and their impact on dance graduates.

Whilst, of course I recognise that many collaborative projects can be fraught with anxiety and conflict, Ellis and Poole (2014) in their work on collaboration and violence, would even suggest that collaboration prospers under conditions of antagonism. There was something more specific about the problems the graduates and I encountered when working together that began to transfer attention away from the choreographic work and back on to our previous relationship of working together at Leeds Beckett University.

Firstly, I was uncomfortable with the relationship between the graduates and I, which kept being enforced by their need for rigid structures and clear instructions at each step of the creative process. A traditional teacher - student hierarchy became recognisable in the way we were operating within the studio. Secondly, I felt pressured by their constant drive towards 'ends', finishing points, a job 'done' - so to speak. Thirdly, what both these issues and other occurrences highlighted was their apparent 'fear' of ambiguity. Whilst the nature of the choreographic project I had established demanded ambiguity in relation to the strategies and vocabularies explored, we struggled to operate within that space and consequently, tension, unrest, and hostility arose.

I acknowledge that part of this issue was certainly based around a moving away from our previous professional relationship, I had been lecturer, I had guided and promoted learning, being the signifier of assessment, of measures of success perhaps. But there is more to this. Drawing on the work of Mike Neary (2009, 2010, 2012) and his exploration of the concept of 'student as producer', I would argue that the conventions associated with such a relationship, established by the current university environment, were being taken for granted by the graduates. In doing so, they were inadvertently assuming a natural attitude to the structures of creative practice, by applying the same conventions.

### **Pedagogical Considerations**

It appears then, and I suppose what I'm about to say is common sense, that students desire stability, they want to feel secure in the way they need to orientate themselves so they can have what Giddens (1991) would describe as 'faith' in the 'system'. Whilst of course as a pedagogue I would like the students to feel secure and have trust in their educational experiences, once such structures, and the reliability of persons is removed, it has been my direct experience that they struggle to find the approaches and the skills needed to manage professional transitions, crises, and circumstances of high risk that are needed in creative practice (Giddens, 1991: 37).

I propose that perhaps one of the reasons why students have become so 'faithful' in the strict structuring of the HE system, for example its compartmentalisation of content through modular approaches, and its often invisible hierarchies, is to do with the changing approach to and wider understanding of 'student centredness'.

As discussed by Neary (2012) for many of us, teaching and learning within the 21st century is embedded with a focus on independent study, problem-based learning, research based teaching, as well as student centered and student led teaching and learning, which research tells us, enhances student engagement and achievement. In my own teaching practice I have always attempted to adopt what Elen et al (2007) terms a 'transactional' view to teaching and learning, where students and teachers are jointly responsible for the success of the learning process, a role that does not lie far from one of collaboration within choreographic projects. However, based on my experiences of working with graduates on the creative projects mentioned, on reflection, it would appear that within current university structures I have become more 'fearful' of this approach, particularly in adhering to a culture of 'educational transparency', where everything from the moment of planning must be outlined and made explicit to the students.

When I consider this, I begin then to recognise why the dance graduates I have worked with may struggle with ambiguity, because for myself, ambiguity is already, even in my planning of teaching and learning being suppressed. I question then as Neary, Winn, Elen et al (2012, 2007) and others have done, whether the pedagogical processes I aim to adopt in practice 'such as student centred learning' are in themselves becoming **functional rather than radical**? Of course we do not want our

pedagogies to overwhelm students, for as Giddens suggests, '[B]asic trust is a screening-off device in relation to risks and dangers in the surrounding settings of action and interaction (Giddens, 1991: 39), and we may assume transparency and institutional structure is part of developing that trust with students in higher education. But if pedagogy, shaped by institutional structures and 'educational transparency' is equally a threat to the creativity and artistry of our graduate students, what else can we put trust in?

Within my research Mike Neary's concept of the 'Student as producer' has further illuminated some of these concerns. Briefly, 'Student as Producer' is an approach to pedagogy that places 'research' at the centre of practice, with academics and students working collaboratively towards the same research goals.

In their 2009 paper on this approach Neary and Hagyard make a context for their discussions by introducing the reader to the Student Protests that took place in Paris in 1968. Whilst I do not wish to go into detail about this here, Neary and Hagyard, citing Ross (2002) states that one of the most significant moments of these protests was when the students **'refused to act like students'** (Neary and Hagyard, 2009, 214). What they are making reference to here is that during the protests the students refused the behaviours that their current education was instilling in them. This becomes significant when we align this with current research into the present effectiveness of 'student-centred learning' approaches (Elen et al, 2007) and the particular behaviours and collective student identities that have begun to become synonymous with this approach.

What many of the critiques of 'student centredness' unpack is the assumption of a collective 'student identity' that actually does not place the individual learner at the heart of learning/of practice. Instead as Neary, Hagyard and others discuss, the current idea of 'student - centeredness' has begun to play into the hands of the controversial notion of 'student as consumer' (Neary & Hagyard, 2009, Neary, 2010, Boden & Epstein, 2006). With students embracing the position of a 'right to' do because they are at the centre.

Like Neary and Hagyard (2007), Boden and Epstein (2006) I am not suggesting a return to teacher-centered learning but rather a questioning of what would happen if neither role was thought to be centered? What would happen if we began to question such functional pedagogies and instead find time and space to discuss radical pedagogies, which consider ways of '...problematising the relationship between teacher and student as to provide some critical context for the institutions within which students and academics are working - and a basis for their relationships within a social world' (Neary, 2012: 250). Like then the premise of 'student as producer', if we could find different ways of 'being' with our dance students, radical ways of producing curriculum and research together, we might begin to change the potential for creative practice within the university and make more significant changes to the sector at large.

To further this point, Neary's 'Student as Producer' '...is based on a negative critique of the current university structure...', and the specific dysfunctional structure he refers to is the idea that research and teaching work against each other because there is often a resistance to include students within research projects. He this discussion with Lawrence Lessig's work on 'Free Culture', which offers a critique of dominant cultures which may restrict creativity. Within these discussions emphasis is placed on 'permission', 'creators (and let's add students here) get to create only with the permission of the powerful, or of creators from the past' (Lessig, 2004: xiv). When I reflect upon the process of working with graduates and undergraduate dance students, I might ask then, where was 'permission' aligned, or looked for? And, what affect does this have on the students, and my own, understanding of academic and creative freedom?

For Neary, he believes that if we begin to work with the students in the role of producer, and collaborate, remove 'permissions', then this 'enables both students and academics to do more than restructure curricula and pedagogy, but to challenge the very organising principles upon which academic knowledge (and I would argue creative practice) is currently being [exchanged] and produced' (Neary & Winn, 2009: 208). It is not simply about redesigning curriculum and pedagogical approaches but the principles and structures of knowledge exchange/production and creative practice within the university and how students and academics may collectively contribute to that.

### 'Gaps'

Within my own processes of working with dance graduates there were several 'dysfunctional' structures at work that were reflective of, if not enforced by, our previous experiences of working together within university settings. To reiterate these, an enforced hierarchy, a need for structure, transparency, all of which, by not being addressed within the creative process, but instead accepted, were causing problems for the choreographic work.

The turning point in the creative process of making the Hull Dance Piece was my own conscious moment of resistance, of me saying, perhaps 'admitting' is a better word here, *I don't know what this work is, I don't know where am I going, I don't know what this material is, I don't know what this material should feel like on your body, only you can tell me what this vocabulary is*, this was the point when change began to occur. What this change involved was the recognition of 'Gaps', 'Gaps' between their expectations, my expectations, our roles, our behaviours, our perspectives. Just note that 'Gaps' is a term I am borrowing here from Ellis and Poole, (2014), whose work I will discuss further in a moment.

Within the creative process for the Hull Dance work once these 'gaps' were acknowledged, and I appreciate there is a slight paradox emerging here, then choreography began to be born of the ambiguities and dysfunctions present, not in spite of them. We used all of this to create the work, we held stillness a little too long, chose a sound score of a womb that never changed apart from in volume, we placed our hands and heads into places that are normally seen as private, we chased absence in the body, and found pleasure in dysfunction. I could never demonstrate to the graduates the choreographic material or describe it to them, all I could do was try to make them uncomfortable within their own body, to offer ambiguous strategies and tasks, and of course, as soon as the choreography was comfortable, that wasn't the choreography anymore.

It is these creative 'gaps' that are critiqued by Ellis and Poole (2014) within the chapter 'Collaboration, Violence, and Difference' when discussing their collaboration on the work 'Because We Care'. Within this chapter they unveil, using Žižek's Parallax Gap, the violence that emerged in their making process together and how creativity was found in both the violence and the 'gaps' or blind spots between them, 'blind spots', they suggest '...that could only be revealed by someone or something else' (Ellis & Poole, 2014: 210). Whilst the context of their text is specifically about reimagining collaborative relationships and violence within creative practice, their words and reflections have been useful to me in making sense of, and in beginning to think differently about how I might work towards a radical pedagogy. Because what their work teaches me is to stop being 'faithful' and instead embrace the 'fear' of the gap between my own pedagogy and the structures that surround it. This is not to present a binary, instead it is about placing 'faith' in my 'fear' of those 'gaps' in order to move my pedagogy forward.

When I reflect upon my current pedagogical practice it's not that ambiguity or these 'gaps' don't exist but it's easy, for example, to say to students when ambiguity presents itself in teaching and learning that, 'it's fine', 'it's ok', 'don't worry you'll understand it later', or perhaps worse 'it's ok not

to understand' . When actually, all this does is smooth over the gaps so ambiguity stops being real for those students. They don't experience the gaps, should we instead be saying 'yes you should be fearful but how are you going to deal with that'. I propose that many academics, including myself, have developed ways of dealing with these situations in order protect ourselves, because we are worried that the student will think we don't know what we are doing, what we are talking about, that we can't help them, because we don't want a low NSS score. This might be described as a kind of 'institutional anxiety' (Bonfiglio, 2015) .

The way then we try to fill those gaps is through concepts of ambiguity - rather than ambiguity itself.

As artists, choreographers, creative pedagogies surely it is these 'gaps' that we should be chasing - yet my understanding, based on my experiences of working with recent graduates it that the pedagogy that exists within the current environment of higher education cannot risk such gaps. Hence, we fall into a habit of filling them in order to keep the student content. This is not an attack of any ones personal pedagogy rather a reflection on how I find myself operating within the regulations, the policies, the bureaucracy, the metrics I am often then measured against.

However, I understand that to reject the university system altogether to say that dance, art, performance, cannot exist within the structures of the academy is simply to reverse the binary, again to close down gaps and ambiguities. I suggest it would be better for us to explore the ambiguities, the gaps many of us do feel anxious about - between artistic practice, university structures, wider institutional metrics, research cultures and our pedagogy. For myself this is the next paper.

## Conclusion

In trying to find a conclusion to this paper I was reminded of a piece of feedback I received following a sharing of work on the first project Thinking Dance. Following that sharing one of the first points of feedback I received was that '*I should be working with professional dancers*'. This specific piece of feedback really struck a chord with me for, in my choice of dancers I had not really considered their role as recent graduates and the significance of this on the choreographic material. I questioned, did working with graduates alter the process, what did it bring to the process, and what did it tell me about these young artists? The impact here on reflection has been great and in fact its impact on my pedagogy and artistic practice, has encouraged me to do more of the same. Whilst I am not at the stage yet to offer a model for radical pedagogy based on the experiences of working with graduates, I am not even sure a model would be useful, I am able to isolate certain points of significance which require further research when thinking about my pedagogical approaches. I present them here for ease in a list.

- **We (the graduates and I) were stimulated by the same questions, but with an apparent differences of position**
- **We were not relying on any single person's previous techniques/skills - understandings**
- **We actively worked with conflict and ambiguity**
- **We were all equally responsible for the project/the choreography**
- **Nobody could speak on behalf of the other - because their was a sense of the work only being able to be felt, language was addressed as a barrier**
- **We recognised and worked within the 'gap' between self and other**

In returning finally then to the notion of producing, or encouraging the idea of sustainable graduates, I would like to finish by borrowing the words of Walter Benjamin (1915) and ask How do we secure an environment for dance education that is 'grounded in the productivity of its students' (Benjamin, 1915), as well as academics? What might this do to the landscape of dance and creative

practice happening within the University? What might it do to challenge the structures that work to suppress the ambiguity that is discussed here? Furthermore, how can ambiguous creative practice inform and feed into ideas of knowledge production, exchange, generation, new pedagogies, and the shape of higher education. In addressing these, can we do more to produce graduates who can work with us to secure and evolve a exciting dance landscape and future professional practice.

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