

## Of ghettos and ivory towers

This is a version of the keynote presentation on inclusive dance and dance in Higher Education at the Symposium: Pathways to the Profession, Dundee in January 2012 by **Jürg Koch**, Assistant Professor, Dance Program, University of Washington (UW), Seattle, USA

**A number of speakers opening the symposium in Dundee commented on conferences addressing art, inclusion and disability going back to the 1990s.** The push therefore was for a symposium to end all symposia. In organising this event Scottish Dance Theatre and Caroline Bowditch demonstrated a crucial commitment to

access that moves across otherwise potentially isolated practices around performance and disability.

Picking up on the theme of isolation my keynote had two main concerns: How dance and disability can end up isolated from the mainstream as a kind of ghettoised practice, particularly where training is concerned. And

whether professional dance training really is an ivory tower, accessible to just a few, hand-picked individuals? I first identified some of the key challenges, before introducing Universal Design as a way to make concrete curricular and pedagogical changes for creating access while pursuing shared educational and

Participants, IDSI 2010. Foreground: Charlene Curtiss, Jeremy Cline. Photo: Tim Summers





training goals. Both the presentation and this summary are based on a more extensive chapter in Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren's (ed.), *Disability Pedagogy In and Outside the Classroom* (University of Washington Press, forthcoming).

### Key challenges

Internationally there are a good number of successful companies and artists working professionally in the field of dance and disability, yet access to training for disabled artists remains marginal. The challenges for accessible training are manifold and include: 1.) Physical Spaces 2.) Information and Technology 3.) Services and 4.) Instruction. Focusing on instruction of studio-based dance classes, I maintain that technique classes pose the single, major challenge to access and inclusion, while composition, improvisation and even repertory are largely deemed accessible. This is due to the position technique classes hold in degree programmes in the USA, occupying the main bulk of instruction time, and the conventions through which they are being taught.

Standard assessment criteria for technique classes require performers to: "Execute sustained movement sequences consolidating strength, balance, coordination, flexibility and control with accuracy, safety and technical fluency". Time and time again have I seen disabled performers demonstrate these very skills. They are accessible, as the generic language does not prescribe how a dancer demonstrates these requirements. While these standard criteria are widely

used in HE, the traditional teaching process usually still involves the copying of one standard phrase, fixing the general objectives into absolute and rigid forms (balance in third arabesque, double pirouette en dehors, tilts, hinges, contractions, etc.). In order to create access we need to move away from implicit, absolute criteria and work with a teaching process that addresses the generic assessment criteria.

Current dance and disability practice, however, also does not offer an 'integrated dance technique' that is readily transferrable into Higher Education (HE). While useful in the context of a specific artist or company, the process of teaching and training is often highly specialised and idiosyncratic. Disability and style specific approaches (e.g. Ballet for wheelchair users) are discriminatory in the context of HE. And, working with adaptations, where students and instructors work with multiple versions of the same exercise, either significantly slows down the teaching process or leaves the disabled dancers to fend for themselves. In the light of this discussion the main challenge is: How to train and assess the skills required of a dancer within a diverse student population?

### Curricular and methodological solutions

Ballet and contemporary techniques typically make up the bulk of the course requirements for a dance degree in many HE institutions. There are other techniques that are much

more accessible, but are not usually part of the required curriculum. They include contact improvisation, butoh, ballroom dancing, etc. Understanding that schools can't cover all forms of dance, I suggest the following:

1. Students can study techniques that are not offered in their institution but are relevant to their artistic interests, outside of the degree programme, or
2. Students pursue a series of independent, mentored studies where they explore, develop and practice their idiosyncratic training processes, material and compositional structures.

In both cases supervising faculty provide quality assurance and accreditation and all other subjects are studied within the degree programme. Implementing these curricular changes not only promotes greater diversity in the student body, but also an increased diversity of dance forms studied in HE.

While considering access for the more traditional technique classes I found the principles of Universal Design and Universal Design of Instruction (Sheryl E. Burgstahler and Rebecca C. Cory, published 2008) both challenging and helpful. Unable to address all of the principles of Universal Design, I will focus on Equitable Use and Flexibility of Use.

The principle of Equitable Use with its demand for 'providing the same means of use', 'avoiding segregation and stigmatisation' as well as 'making the process appealing to all users', challenged my understanding of adaptations in particular. Non-disabled students in my classes, well versed in technical training, really struggled when >

asked to adapt material. Adapting, is a very different process compared to the usual demonstrate and copy methodology. It involves complex analysing, translating, composing, remembering and an independent performance. While unequal, these are however great skills for any dancer. So rather than ditching adaptation as a process, because it is inequitable, let's make it relevant to the whole class.

Moving away from 'working with adaptations' as an accommodation for an individual student I also changed the terminology to 'developing individualised material'. In this process I direct students to develop their own material through a series of verbal prompts. I provide a number of specific tasks and descriptions, which the students explore and improvise with. This is followed by varying degrees of setting and repetition. The participants, rather than copying me, explore specific movement principles according to their facilities. Body parts, amount of repetitions, space and tempo range

used, vary. Increasing specificity and moving towards setting, students select the material that is most effective for them, work with set time frames, exchange material with partners, integrate specific time qualities, etc. I use this general process for warm up material, unpacking specific movement vocabulary like plié, tendu and battement, as well as more complex centre phrases. Whether improvised or set, the emerging material allows me to ask questions and provide feedback concerning specificity, accuracy, alignment, full and safe use of a dancer's movement range, all important aspects of the assessment criteria for technique classes. As stipulated by the UD principle of Flexibility in Use, individualised material accommodates a wide range of preferences and abilities and is adjustable to the user's pace.

While I am only able to outline the main idea here, there are a number of ways in which I introduce, practice and develop individualised material in the

class collective. Depending on the group I may work exclusively with individualised material or use the methodology only once during a class. Students eventually vary anything from a single, specific movement to an entire phrase as it becomes relevant. What is important, is that I have these methodologies at my disposal and that the students are familiar with them. I consider the process equitable and flexible while pursuing shared movement principles and teaching goals that are relevant to professional dance training.

### Conclusion

It may feel that rather than discovering some magic solution it all sounds somewhat familiar. You use improvisation and creative process in your class, or you may think, well this is not a technique class at all. Technique in its root means 'skill'. Individualised material allows a greater diversity of dancers to train and demonstrate the skills stipulated in our dance curricula

Participants IDSI 2010. Foreground: Paulo Manso de Sousa, Laurel Lawson, Sheila Wiley, Jeremy Cline. Photo: Tim Summers



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through their movement range. I readily acknowledge other people also use improvisation and experiential material in their classes. If anything I am collecting best practices in individualised teaching. The process I suggest opens up a complex discussion, a discussion that I can't possibly conclude here. It involves prioritising generic skill sets over exclusive stylistic and traditional aesthetic preferences. It starts with a dancer using his or her natural turn out versus the traditional aesthetic preference of 180 degrees and goes into training dancers as self-aware artists. Far from suggesting I've arrived at the final destination these are some of the aspects I keep returning to:

#### **Access existing teaching goals**

Work with existing teaching goals for professional performers and examine how they are relevant to and can be met by a more diverse student body.

#### **Develop curricular and pedagogical solutions**

At the level of the curriculum consider multiple ways in which course requirements can be met and in technique classes introduce the use of individualised teaching material.

#### **Make it relevant, shift the discussion from disability to diversity**

Rather than isolating disabled participants as a separate group to be taught, shift the discussion from disability to teaching diversity. The approaches discussed here extend well beyond the initial idea of adaptations as a disability accommodation. They are relevant to a broad range of dancers in terms of body-type, age, level or type of previous training,

current physical form, individual learning goals, etc. I introduce and work with these approaches regardless of the make up of the group. In other words, do not wait till disabled students apply to your courses, do it anyway. It is in this way that disability and disabled students become a part of the full spectrum of diversity in our dance studios.

#### **Moving on**

While there was not necessarily a singular pathway to the profession that emerged from the symposium, there is a prevailing image that I came away with. Each individual artist and organisation working with disability, arts and access has a ripple effect that spreads and eventually connects with others. Whatever we discuss just has to be done and become part of our wider cultural practice.

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