

# Dance, identity, technology

**Benjamin Dunks**, Artistic Director, Attic Dance embraces digital ways we can explore and understand the impact moving creatively has on our identity and sense of self

Those of us who have led dance programmes in schools, in particular primary schools have all experienced the moment when, after two sessions, the teacher approaches; 'I'm not sure what you're doing, but (insert name of challenging child) is different after dancing with you. They are just... calmer and more focused...' And then, after a couple more sessions, being approached by a random parent at the school gate: "Are you the dance instructor? I'm not sure what you're doing, but my little (name of child) is now dancing all around the house all the time, and is happier and more talkative and their school work is improving. It is definitely because of what you're doing, so thank you."

After one particularly inspiring and fantastic conversation I started asking myself the questions I should have been asking years ago. What is actually happening in these children when they dance with us? Why does their schoolwork improve after moving like they do in my session? And if I am able to find the information to answer this, can I develop and improve my session to enhance these things further?

From these questions and my subsequent research came my LEAP Primary Dance Programme, a programme for reception to Year 6 that explores creative movement through improvisation and making. Because this is a creative and 'improv' focused

experience, the participants have creative autonomy.

The work has most recently been informed by the Theory of Self-determination, initially developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan and since developed by many esteemed academics across the world. This is a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality and there is an area of this work exploring Autonomy, Relatedness and Competence that is very interesting for our work. I urge you to look at [selfdeterminationtheory.org](http://selfdeterminationtheory.org) to gain further insight. The LEAP programme is also informed by numerous papers and books on movement development, working memory, neural development, coaching and exercise science.

LEAP is the programme of work I used to explore a workshop at the People Dancing Glasgow conference in October 2017. The title of my workshop was Creating Cultural Identity through Individual Identity - The impact and importance of the process of creating and making in a primary school.

It was an exploration of the physical work primary school students explore in my dance sessions. Alongside this was a conversation about cultural identity, our roles and responsibilities in supporting a school and individual children in developing this cultural identity, how we might create the conditions for this cultural identity to flourish, how we use language in



creating those conditions and how we need to get out of the way of the learning these young dancers experience.

What we discussed further in the workshop was that when we get the conditions, the creative process and the learning process right our participants experience something fundamental about individual and group identity. They experience autonomous decision making, trust and collective activity that is individually different but cohesive as a group, plus a profound sense of authorship. The workshop was fantastic and my participants worked incredibly hard



Dartington in Devon to explore the possibilities of the motion capture. This is an experimental youth company, working with improvisation and creating, rather than with technique and learning pre-made choreography.

The 'mocap' we are using is a wireless-based 32 point suit, meaning we can watch the captured movement in 360 degrees. We are using the mocap in two ways. The first is to work with Unity, a gaming engine used for games and digital art to make interesting short digital movement works of the choreography of the participants. We will then explore these art works in augmented and virtual reality. The second use is as a training aid. We have base-lined each of our dancers in a two minute 'improv' solo and in February 2018 we will repeat the two minute solo so they can see the difference in how they are moving, the creative choices they are making, and the areas of alignment and structure they need to continue to work with.

The company is very excited by the possibilities this technology holds for them, in the way they are able to analyse their movement and in how they see themselves producing work as young artists. You can check out our facebook page to see some film and photos of the young dancers in action.

As we move forward into 2018 and further into the 4th Industrial Revolution, we think it is time we started to use new technologies, new research methods and new theories of the self and identity to quantitatively understand the impact moving creatively has on the rest of our lives. We need to qualitatively understand the impact this kind of dancing has on our identity and sense of self and take this research and shout about it from the rooftops.

We know our work changes lives. We know what happens to children when they are asked to be creative and extraordinary and to move their bodies as they wish to move them, as authors and makers of their own futures. If you are interested in talking with me further about anything in this article, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

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Clockwise from left: Member of Attik Youth, Dartington. Motion Capture Improvisation project; Torpoint Nursery and Infant School, Cornwall, LEAP programme; Landulph Primary School, Cornwall, LEAP programme. Photos: Benjamin Dunks.

throughout, asking amazing questions and truly committing to the process and experience.

During the workshop I was also able to work with the participants on the next step in researching the impact of our LEAP programme. That is where we attach accelerometers to the dominant hand of our participants to measure gross-motor action throughout the session, and in the case of schools, measure change week by week. There is a significant amount of literature linking an increase in range of

gross-motor movement with positive changes in cognitive learning. This new programme is where we can begin to see if this programme changes these movement patterns, and will begin to show us how the participants are developing.

Alongside accelerometry we have also begun to embrace other digital ways of exploring movement, notably with motion capture. From this 'mocap' we are starting to play with augmented reality and virtual reality. I am working with my youth dance company at