Pedagogical context of practical dance classes in higher education

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Introduction

The main aim of my PhD research is to find out how modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) applications can be used for teaching dance. The format of both theory courses in dance education and theoretical courses taught in other educational fields - which have been successful in implementing ICT - are similar, therefore, the scope of my research lies on finding the possibilities for practical dance courses. The current paper will give a short overview of my research process. I will describe the main findings from my first study, which gives an overview of the similarities and differences in pedagogical practices used in choreography and technique classes in higher educational setting. I have included a literature review, description of data collection, and general findings of the study.

In general, literature on dance education indicates that dance education has moved from a fixed educational setting towards a more open discourse concerning different aspects in both subject matter, and teaching and learning methods. To illustrate this, Smith-Autard (2002) proposes a model for teaching the art of dance in education. She calls it a Midway model, because it incorporates elements of both educational and professional dance models. Unlike previous models, which have emphasized one aspect rather than another, the model highlights the need to pay equal attention to the process of dance, and the product of dance. She points out that the content of dance education should pay attention to knowledge in dance discipline as well as growth in creativity, imagination and individuality of students. She also suggests combining 'open concepts' in movements with defined techniques from the professional dance world. Finally, she identifies a suitable pedagogy of dance teaching, including a combination of a problem-solving teaching approach with a direct teaching method.

Similarly to Smith-Autard, in Creative dance for all ages (1992) Green Gilbert claims that training students' dance skills is not sufficient in dance education. She stresses the importance of developing students' concepts of dance in relation to their dance skills. Consequently, emphasis should be paid on both dance problem-solving and training throughout the processes of creating, performing and appreciating dance. An important addition to the above mentioned ideas has been emphasized by Butterworth (2004) and Lavender (1996). Both authors point out the need for collaborative learning through discussion and dialogue in dance education. All the above mentioned authors indicate the need to make choices and implement a variety of topics and methods to dance teaching practice.

The variety of elements into dance teaching and learning are set for dance students both by the educational setting and the expectations for future actions in the dance community. This variety calls for implementing new qualities into dance education. For example, there is a need to emphasize developing students' critical thinking skills (Warburton, 2004; Lavender, 1996). In order to increase choreography

students' ability to think critically, Lavender (1996) has developed a model of critical evaluation, which advocates students to observe, write, reflect, discuss, evaluate and provide recommendations for revision for features of a dance work in order to develop students' own aesthetic qualities for viewing, creating and performing dance works. Accordingly, this model should help students to become more articulate, creative, and confident dancers.

In addition, recent developments in dance education show there is an increasing need to pay attention to students' individuality and their experiences in learning to dance (Bracy, 2004; Buckroyd, 2000). Bracy's (2004) studied dance technique students at the university and concluded that, besides giving external feedback to students, dance teachers should encourage their students to find their voices and recognize the feedback which is provided by their own body. In order to facilitate students' ability to increase the awareness of their body, dance teachers should teach students to care for and train their body in an intelligent and responsible way (Fortin et al, 2002; Kovich, 1994; Cohen, 1993). Bannon (1997) points out that this includes, besides understanding how muscles and bones are being utilized to dance, encouraging students to feel what the movement feels like as it is happening. 'It represents a kind of kinaesthetic sensitivity' (p. 32). This fullest experience of movement is the main goal of somatic education in dance, which can be obtained by implementing various movement education methods, such as the Feldenkrais Method, Alexander Technique, Ideokinesis (Kovich, 1994) and Body-Mind Centering (Cohen, 1993).

Besides these above mentioned ideas on the important elements, which should be incorporated into dance education, there is relatively little evidence in the literature on the actual use of these ideas in dance education in the higher educational level. In contrast, Stinson (1994, referred to in Spurgeon 1997, p.9-10) describes the authoritarian nature of dance classes: 'in most dance technique classes, the teacher is the authority and the only recognized source of knowledge'. Similarly, Morris points out that, 'literature on the teaching professional ballet dancers has always focused on two areas: ballet vocabulary and training' (2003, p.17). She claims that teachers direct teaching methods in ballet technique classes, and students have little chance for an open discourse. Recent criticism on the authoritarian pedagogy used in technique classes comes from Lakes (2005). He not only describes the nature of the authoritarian pedagogy in technique classes, he also explores the reasons of such teaching practice.

However, the above-mentioned criticism on the pedagogical methods is mainly applicable for dance technique classes; they do not relate to the features of the pedagogy of the choreography classes. Practical dance classes consist of both choreography and technique classes. As it was discussed in previous paragraphs, literature on dance pedagogy suggests to apply several ideas and methods into dance education, however there is little evidence about how these pedagogical ideas are implemented in the whole range of practical dance classes. Additionally, theoretical findings do imply that the pedagogy in technique classes differs from the pedagogical context of choreography classes as discussed above. The aim of this study was to identify the differences and similarities of the important features of pedagogy in choreography and technique classes at a higher educational institute including the aims, the methods used for teaching, the assessment from choreography and technique dance teachers, and the support materials used in these classes.

1. Data

The research sample was taken from practical dance teachers who work at five different Dance Academies in the Netherlands and two higher educational institutions in Estonia, which teach dance studies. The inclusion of participants from both the Netherlands and from Estonia is due to the background of this study which is a collaboration between Dutch and Estonian dance educators.

The research sample consisted of 20 randomly selected Dutch teachers (13 technique teachers, 7 choreography teachers), which is 9% of the total population of practical dance teachers in higher educational institutions in the Netherlands, and 10 randomly selected Estonian teachers (8 technique teachers, 2 choreography teachers), which is 50% of the total population of practical dance teachers in higher educational institutions in Estonia. The final sample consisted of 30 practical dance teachers (19 females, 11 males). Of the teachers 21 were teaching dance technique classes and 9 choreography classes.

2. Instruments

Data about the pedagogical context in practical dance classes was gathered using a paper and pencil questionnaire and an interview. Interviews were recorded on tape. A questionnaire was designed based on findings from the literature review. The questionnaire contained five parts. It has been piloted with two teachers (one Estonian teacher and one Dutch teacher).

2.1. Questionnaire

The first part of the questionnaire contained six questions measuring personal characteristics. The second part had six questions measuring descriptive information of the practical dance course(s) taught by the teacher. In addition, teachers were asked to identify which kind of preliminary knowledge is needed to enter their course. In this part of the questionnaire, teachers were also asked to indicate, which support materials are used in their courses.

The third section included 11 pre-structured questions measuring the use of teaching aims based on findings from the literature review, mostly Smith-Autard's (2002) Midway model. In addition, based on Warburton (2004) and Lavender (1996) teachers were asked to indicate how often they apply an aim such as developing students' critical thinking skills in order to observe, describe, analyse, write and talk about dance works. Finally, based on findings from the pilot test of the questionnaire two questions were added, which were, how often is the aim of their course having students to formulate personal reflections on their learning, and how often do they apply teaching pedagogical skills. This resulted in five assessable sub-categories (see Appendix).

The fourth part of the questionnaire consisted of five pre-structured questions about the teaching methods used by teachers mostly based on Smith-Autard (2002), and on Butterworth (2004).

The final section of the questionnaire included seven pre-structured items measuring assessment. All these items were formulated according to the above described teaching aims. This resulted in five assessable sub-categories (see Appendix).

The questions had a pre-structured format on a 5-point Likert type scale (with 0 never applied and 4 very often applied). The overall table with the pre-structured items, mean scores and standard deviations can be found in the appendix. In addition, teachers could fill in an additional open-ended question for each section, which provided an opportunity to indicate their often applied teaching aims, teaching methods, assessment and support materials respectively, which were not described in the pre-formulated questions.

2.2. Interview

The aim of the interview was to gain additional qualitative information about how teachers apply pedagogical aims, use teaching methods, assess their students, and use support materials. The result of a pilot interview was that it was difficult for the teacher to provide examples about aims, methods and elements of assessment, which she had rated as rarely and sometimes applied in the questionnaire. The interview was structured according to questionnaire data of each teacher. Therefore, questionnaire items, which had been rated as 3 or 4, were used to trigger information how these aims, methods, and elements of assessments are used. In addition, if the teacher had indicated in the questionnaire the use of support materials, more information was asked on how these are being used. Out of the 30 teachers, who completed the questionnaire, 10 were selected for the interview, based on a variety of answers and six institutions represented. One transcribed interview was left out from the analyses as many of the discussed issues were not related to the research questions.

3. Results and discussion

The main aim of the study was to identify the pedagogical context of practical dance classes in higher educational setting. Although both technique and choreography classes deal with practical aspects of dance education, some aims, methods and elements of assessment were applied differently in the two groups. The most often applied aim in technique classes was training students' physical skills and learning a specific dance style. The most often used method in this group was direct teaching method and most often assessed elements in this group was assessing physical skills of the students. Choreography teachers on the other hand applied most often aims related to developing students' creativity, imagination and individuality, encouraging using personal feelings and intuition and formulating reflection. The most often used pedagogical method in this group was problem solving method and the most often assessed element was students' creative expression.

These findings about two groups of practical dance education confirm findings from Smith-Autard (2000) about the two opposite spectrums of teaching models incorporated into today's dance education. According to the educational spectrum the main emphasis of learning should be paid on the process of students' personal development, and according to the professional spectrum of the model, dance education should prepare dancers and choreographers who are able to develop and present excellent dance performances, main emphasis of the education lays therefore on the product. The results from the current study showed that pedagogy in choreography classes is more related to the educational side of the spectrum and pedagogy used in technique classes more related to the professional spectrum of the model. In accordance to the literature review, confirmation can also be found for claims stated by Stinson (1994), Morris

(2003) and Lakes (2005), who described an authoritarian nature of teaching methods in technique classes. The results of the current study indicated also that in comparison to the teaching methods used in choreography classes the main method in technique classes is a direct teaching method, where teacher sets the learning tasks and asks students to replicate these. Evidence was also found for other findings reported in the literature review. Accordingly, important elements of dance education are developing features related to students' individuality (Bracy, 2004; Buckroyd, 2000), developing students' critical thinking (Lavender, 1996; Warburton, 2004), applying problem solving and collaborative learning methods (Gilber, 1992; Butterworth, 2004). These pedagogical aspects are however mainly incorporated into choreography classes in this study.

It must be mentioned that some of these aspects are also important elements in technique classes such as developing students' individuality and using personal feelings and intuition, formulating reflection about the process, and learning meanings associated with movements. There is however a semantic difference about how these aims and/or their contribution are viewed in two different groups of practical dance teachers. In brief, choreography teachers see these aims as independent goals and technique teachers interpret them mainly as essential sub-goals to train and perform physical skills. For example, choreography teachers find it important to discuss the meanings associated with movements in order to learn ways to communicate with the audience of the dance works. On the other hand technique teachers find it important to teach the meanings associated with movements in the movement creation scale. This means that they teach their students the meaning of movement in a phrase but also what the body does when making movements. The results of assessable elements showed that often assessed elements in both groups were assessing creative expression, and reflection.

Besides these differences between the two groups, there is a remarkable similarity considering how often an aspect is rated as being applied and how similar the aim is perceived by both technique and choreography teachers: applying reflection of learning process and assessing the personal reflection were both rated as often applied by both groups and there was no significant difference between applying these aspects in technique and choreography classes. This finding suggest to consider reflection as a widespread feature of practical dance classes and to pay more attention to issues related to its implementation and usage. This finding is also supported by the results of applying support materials for practical dance classes.

It must be mentioned that due to the essence of practical dance classes, the main support for students comes from the teachers. Teachers use support when they wish to enrich the aims or illustrate important features of the subject. It was indicated by teachers that the most often used other kind of support materials were video materials. Teachers also indicated that one aim of using video equipment is to help students to reflect on their learning process, and another to provide illustrations of the dance domain. Computers were the least used support in practical dance classes. One of the reasons is probably that teachers have not found computer applications which can be used to enrich and illustrate their teaching. On the other hand, teachers indicated their readiness to incorporate computers into their teaching and students' learning practice. The study also showed that applying reflection of the learning process is an essential part of practical dance classes. Teachers are using support for this aspect of the education and demonstrate a readiness to start using computers for their teaching practice. Therefore developing a computer

application to facilitate students' reflection should be considered as an option to enrich the practical dance classes. An example can be a digital portfolio, where students are able to keep a record of their reflection and share this with their teachers. However, further research is needed to discuss the features of the tool and its effectiveness for dance education.

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Appendix

Pre-structured questionnaire items, mean scores and standard deviations

		Item	Mean	SD
Aims	Personal features	To develop students' creativity	3.2	0.93
		To develop students' imagination	3.1	1.01
		To develop students' individuality	3.5	0.78
		To encourage students to use their personal feelings and intuition	3.1	1.1
	Knowledge	To acquire knowledge of how to create the form and structure of a dance	2.5	1.18
		To develop students' awareness and understanding of the social context	2.1	1.26
		To develop students' awareness and understanding of the historical context	2.0	1.29
		To develop students' awareness and understanding of the cultural context	2.4	1.32
		To develop students' critical thinking skills	2.8	1.1
		To learn the meanings associated with different movements	3.0	1.03
	Physicality	To train students' physical skills	3.4	1.16
		To learn general movement principles	3.0	1.07
		Learn a specific dance technique with a particular range of movements	2.8	1.61
	Reflection	To formulate personal reflections on their learning	3.3	1.08
	Pedagogical skills	To develop students' pedagogical skills	1.6	1.59
Methods		I use a direct teaching method	2.9	1.4
		I use an open-ended problem solving method	2.8	1.22
		I use the collaborative learning	2.6	1.07
		I use techniques of somatic education	2.1	1.63
		I ask students to carry out individual learning tasks	2.9	1.32
Assessment	Physicality	I assess students' physical skills	3.4	1.19
	Personal features	I assess students' use of creative expressions	3.4	0.97
	Knowledge	I assess students' knowledge of how to create the form and structure of a dance	2.3	1.33
		I assess students' understanding of the social dimensions of dance	1.7	1.33
		I assess students' understanding of the historical dimensions of dance	1.6	1.47
		I assess students' understanding of the cultural dimensions of dance	1.9	1.5
		I assess students' critical analysis of a dance performance	2.2	1.56
	Reflection	I assess students' reflections on their learning process	3.1	1.3
	Pedagogical skills	I assess students' pedagogical skills	1.8	1.83