

6 September 2013

Independent Dance Graduate Lab 2013

HE Round Table: What is it to teach choreography?



“What is it to teach choreography?

What is the specific process of transforming an idea into an artwork that we call choreography, specifically given the diversity of choreographic outcomes that dance artists produce, which may or may not include ‘dancing’ or movement patterning in a traditional sense of the word?

What is specific about a movement training that affects how ideas are generated and realised?”

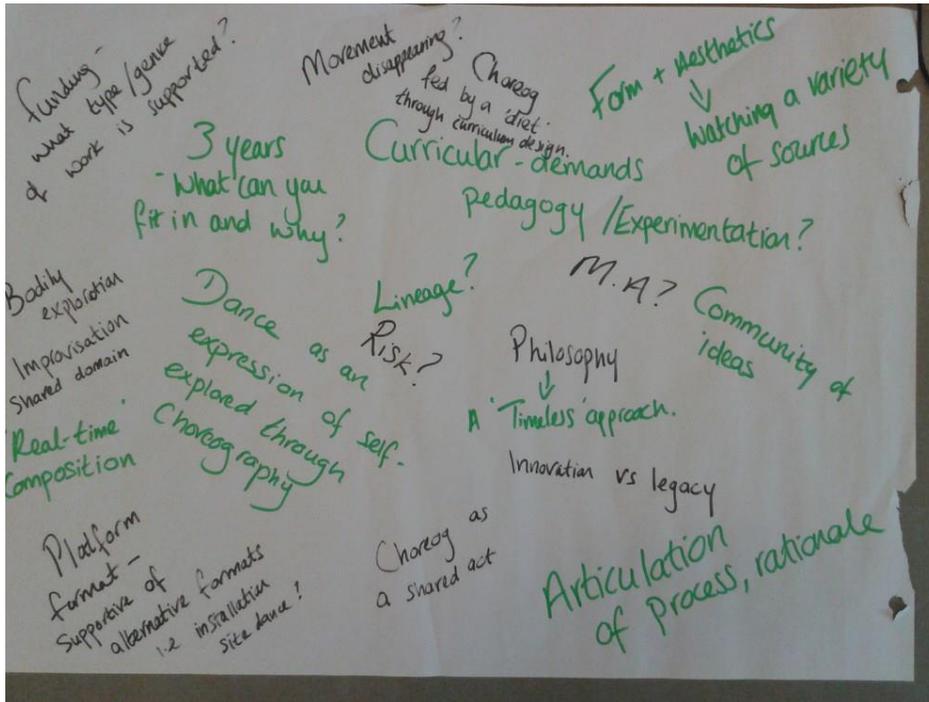
Agenda

- 2:00pm Kirsty Alexander introduction – the ideas behind the HE Round Table
- 2:20pm Breakout groups
- 2:55pm Feedback from group discussions
- 3:15pm Tea & coffee
- 3:45pm Breakout groups
- 4:00pm Feedback from group discussions
- 5:00pm Informal networking

Attendees

- Abi Mortimer, University of Chichester
- Angela Woodhouse, Middlesex University
- Anna Williams, London Contemporary Dance School
- April Brown, Middlesex University
- Efrosini Protopapa, Roehampton University
- Emilyn Claid, Roehampton University
- Erica Stanton, Roehampton University
- Fiona Millward, Independent Dance
- Frank Bock, Independent Dance / London Contemporary Dance School
- Gitta Wigro, Independent Dance
- Helen Kindred, Middlesex University
- Katy Coe, Coventry University
- Kirsty Alexander, Independent Dance / Trinity Laban
- Lise Uytterhoeven, London Studio Centre
- Louise Kelsey, Middlesex University
- Marisa Zanotti, University of Chichester
- Martin Hargreaves, Trinity Laban

Michelle Elliott, Bath Spa University
Dr Natalie Garrett Brown, Coventry University
Dr Renate Bräuninger, University of Northampton
Sally O'Donnell, De Montfort University
Simon Ellis, Roehampton University
Stephanie Schober, University Campus Suffolk
Sue MacLennan London, Contemporary Dance School
Theresa Beattie, guest
Tony Thatcher, Trinity Laban
Vicky Hunter, University of Chichester



Notes

Kirsty introduced the event, saying that the aim was not to answer the questions posed in the invitation, but to facilitate a space for discussion.

"As 'chair' I am and Insider/outsider in that I have supervised and assessed a lot of work at a UG, PG and research level in a number of different institutions in a number of different roles, but I am not someone whose main focus of teaching has been in the slot on the timetable marked choreography.

As for the background to today's discussion, for several years – since 2007 – ID has run a Graduate Fortnight, which used to be in June. We have now divided it into a Graduate Lab with a week in June and a week in September, to fit with conservatoire and university schedules.

In the past this Graduate Lab / Fortnight has culminated in a Graduate Platform: an opportunity for choreography departments to select one work to be performed in the platform. There were several ideas behind this; an awareness of how much work goes into final projects and the opportunity to show again, a chance for students to see their work in the context of work from other institutions, to place it in a wider context, to get feedback from HE staff in attendance, and -we had hoped - a chance for their work to be seen by and to network with people who produce, programme and promote work and to get feedback from them on where their work sits. This last one did not seem to materialise in the way we had hoped; few producers were able to come and I am aware how few of those who programme work professionally are able to make it to student shows.

In many ways the education / professional divisions are artificial, many of us who teach are making and performing in a professional context, yet at the same time I know some feel that the most interesting work coming out of choreography departments does not necessarily have a platform in mainstream dance venues.

And this leads me to the first point of discussion which is to what extent is what it is to teach choreography today a case of teaching what choreography is and to what extent is it a finding out of what it might be. (In some ways this is the question of all education – socialisation, or the emergence of something unforeseen.)

Do we see ourselves as supporting a form or developing it, and what guides us in relation to where on that spectrum we fall – e.g. the level of students we are teaching, the context of the rest of the curriculum and overall vision of the programme or institution, the landscape of the professional field? I think this might give us a way of talking to each other about what we do and why.”

Feedback from first discussion round

- Form and aesthetics in combination with curriculum design and learning outcomes
- Teaching formal choreographic devices, crafting, which might lead to a particular aesthetic which then might constrain risk; and what ways there might be around that
- Assessment also introduces a feeling of risk for the students
- Theory as or in or with choreography; not teaching dance, not necessarily the feeling of choreography
- Being an artist and teaching choreography, and where their own voice as an artist is best placed in the relationship with the student
- What students have experienced in further education or A-level plays a role, which might make them resistant, having learnt a formula
- Students come into training without necessarily having seen a lot of work
- Students might see themselves as quite separate from the making when they enter their course
- Courses push students quite early on to make a decision whether they're a performer or a maker; is that even a divide that reflects today's working reality?

- Example of a course linking choreography with philosophy modules, where the working out of the question becomes an integral part of the process, and in turn the process with the audience. It's about expressing things through questions – what question are you asking the audience?
- Example of a module which marks the students on the process not the outcome
- We're designing the learning outcomes – so if they're inhibiting us, we have an opportunity to influence them
- Delaying the point of 'knowing', staying in the place of not defining criteria etc for as long as possible

Following the break, KA invited everyone to consider the following points from the feedback in the second round of breakout conversations:

- The process of introducing students to an idea; and particularly the concept that choreography is research; choreography is a mode of researching, rather than just putting movement together
What questions are you asking the audience?
- There are various expectations that come with teaching choreography; how do we work with these; questions of risk-taking and process
- Kirsty offered another theme: the morning-afternoon divide. Whether students are working on dancing or making – what they are taught in other segments of the curriculum influences the work you do in your time with the students
- Kirsty also posited a question that's particularly relevant to Independent Dance: what support students need when they come out to sustain their practice; what role does and can ID play to support a culture

Feedback from second discussion round

- Assessments are an issue for both students and staff; often a point where research stops, and how to negotiate the anxiety about assessments
- Making the criteria part of the teaching; that they are a shared 'problem' between teacher and students, and students using it in their peer feedback; using the criteria to establish research culture by using this as a framework.
- Example - three simple criteria which become part of the language that students use (which are: concept and ability to realise that, composition with respect to concept and medium, and production in terms of presentation)
- How your judgement develops in spite of any criteria that are given to you
- Students are often convinced that teachers mark according to their taste; and in the effort to make decision making transparent to get towards erasing the judgement of the assessor
How can our expertise be in the room, how does the student access your knowledge of having seen a lot of work over the years?
- People wanting to be dancers, and choreography being the thing that they're doing when they're not that good at dancing; adopting an art school mentality – if you're here, you are an artist

- The politics of calling yourself different things – an ‘artist’ can win the Turner Prize, which you won’t if you call yourself a choreographer
- The choreographer not in charge of, but part of a system that involves dancers and choreography
- The context of the bigger structure the students are experiencing – modules, morning classes... what would a course look like where everything was movement research, with a different focus for different areas of dance creating
- Teaching choreography in a course or module that isn’t ‘called’ choreography – the way that shapes students’ perception of what they are doing in that course

Meeting closed at 5.30pm





06 September 2013