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Dimensions of Embodiment in Novice Dance Teachers Reflections

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Abstract

This article presents how guided core reflection can be used in tertiary dance education, and how this approach may support the professional development of novice dance teachers. During the final stages of their studies, a three-stage procedure of guided core reflection developed for this study with an emphasis on embodiment was conducted with dance teacher trainees. The first stage was video recording of the dance class taught by the student, the second stage was watching the recorded dance class, followed by a stimulated recall interview and a reflective discussion. The third stage was written reflection. Qualitative content analysis was used for data analysis, and the meaning units were categorized following a framework of six dimensions of embodiment (Svendler Nielsen 2015). The social body and the sensing body were identified as key components of students' reflections suggesting that this three-stage reflection model allows for the embodied nature of dance teachers' professions to be taken into account as part of reflective work. Furthermore, this study illustrates how the reflection process can be used and supported in educating future dance teachers.

Keywords: reflection, guidance, dimensions of embodiment, dance (tertiary) education

Introduction

The ability to employ various reflection strategies may be one key element in improving the quality of dance education and in meeting the future challenges that dance teachers face. Thus, it may be seen that reflective skills, including a knowledge of various methods of reflection and practical experience of using them, should be a part of dance teachers' professional education. The authors of this article propose that existing tools for reflection need to be refined in order to better support dance educators' work.

Further, they propose that embodied knowledge needs to be taken into account when developing reflection tools for dance education. This article focuses on reflection in the context of dance education where embodied activities, experiences, and sensations are prominent. More specifically, this article aims to investigate how the dimensions of embodiment (Svendler Nielsen 2015) appear in novice dance teachers' verbal and written reflections. In the following, they will present some concepts and research fields – embodiment, embodied cognition, and reflection – in order to understand how embodied knowledge may be taken into account in reflective work in the context of dance education.

Embodiment

Embodiment is a highly complex concept that has varied meanings in different fields. In humans, references to the notion of embodiment always include the notion of mind; it cannot be separated from either the notion of mind or that of self (Varela 1988a).

Although in the context of the present study the notion of embodiment is used pertaining to the field of human sciences, the term has a much wider usage, ranging from small scale life forms (cells, bacteria) to complex systems and ecologies that consist of living and non-living elements and their relationships (e.g. robots).

Embodiment is also a central concept in understanding how inanimate objects come alive in children's play and arts (Anttila 2015, 372).

Based on recent literature in the field of dance pedagogy, as well as the authors' own experiences in dance education, various approaches that aim at body-mind integration have become more prominent. The main idea of such approaches, often referred to as somatic¹ approaches, is to lead students to listen to their bodies and become aware of

¹ The field of *somatics* has developed over the last century through a process of inquiry into how consciousness inhabits the living body. The term is derived from the word 'somatic' (Greek

their inner, bodily experiences and even subtle sensations. Such practices often employ reflective work in connection to bodily practice. Body-mind integration develops through personal perception of, e.g., kinetic chains and inner connectivity (Sööt and Viskus 2014). Increased attention to body-mind integration leads to the need to understand how bodily (pre-reflective) experiences can be reflected verbally, that is, brought to the level of reflective consciousness (e.g. Anttila 2007).

Embodied cognition

The notion of embodied cognition provides a theoretical basis for understanding how bodily processes and actions influence our thinking and learning. The intellectual roots of embodied cognition date back to the early 20th century philosophers Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Dewey, and have only been studied empirically in the last few decades (McNerney 2011). Lakoff & Johnson (1999) argue that the mind is inherently embodied, cognition is grounded in bodily experience, and that abstract concepts are largely metaphorical. From this point of view, cognition is dependent upon experiences that occur *through* having a body with particular perceptual and motor capacities. In this sense, thought and the body are inseparably linked. A key question is, how can the notion of embodied cognition support the aims of somatic approaches and enhance reflective work in the context of dance education?

Reflection

The importance of reflection in the context of teacher training and professional development was already emphasized by the American educational philosopher John

‘somatikos’, *soma*: ‘living, aware, bodily person’) which means pertaining to the body, experienced and regulated from within. According to Thomas Hanna, who first coined the phrase, ‘somatics’ is the study of self from the perspective of one’s lived experience, encompassing the dimensions of body, psyche, and spirit (ISMETA 2015).

Dewey and has remained a focus of scholarly attention (Boud et al. 1985; Korthagen and Vasalos 2005; Moon 2004; Leijen et al. 2012). The systematic reflection of one's own professional practice is becoming more important also for dance educators. This development is also reflected in a recent special issue of *Journal of Dance Education* (2017). It contains five articles which all spotlight the importance of reflection in the context of dance education. In his article, Doug Risner observes his personal experience as a dancer, choreographer, educator and researcher from the reflective perspective (91-98). Other authors discuss reflective mindset while teaching ballet (Zeller 99-105), and reflexive dance educator's experiences in Indian Residential School (Kay 106-114). Moreover, Brooks Mata and Kasra's discuss their the impact on their pedagogical approaches to dance and digital media design (115-123), and Sarah M. Barry relates dance education to communal needs and creates a reflective framework to make the dance students' learning process deeper (124-130).

Approaches to reflection in general education are often grounded in the philosophical traditions of pragmatism (e.g. Dewey 1933; Korthagen 1985; Schön 1983) and critical social theory (e.g. van Manen 1995; Mezirow 1991). Dewey (1933) defined reflection as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (9). According to Rodgers (2002), reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience to the next with a better understanding of his relationships with and connections to other (people's) experiences and ideas. Reflection may proceed through phases, like the following: spontaneous interpretation of an experience; naming the problem(s) and question(s) that arise out of the experience; generating possible explanations for the problem(s) posed; developing and testing the explanations; and efforts to sort out, or live with the

problem(s) posed (Rodgers 2002). Fred Korthagen (1985) suggests that the process of reflection consists of five phases: 1) Action, 2) Looking back on the action, 3) Becoming aware of the essential aspects, 4) Creating alternative methods of action, 5) Trial. This ALACT-model does not specify the focus of reflection. The so-called onion-model created by Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) then, identifies six activity levels to focus on, proceeding from outside in: *environment*, a person's *behavior*, the different *competencies* of a person, the different *beliefs* of a person, *identity*, and *mission*. When reflection extends to the two deepest levels, it is referred to as core reflection. For reflection to move between all six levels, guidance of reflection plays an important role. According to Husu et al (2009) guided reflection refers to cumulative usage of stimulated recall interviews, reflective discussions and written recordings. Reflection can also be guided to a specific focus.

In our view, an aspect that dance teachers should focus on is body-mind integration that is emphasized in somatic approaches. However, the existing models may not sufficiently take into account the nature of dance as an embodied practice. Thus, it seems necessary to refine the tools for supporting novice dance teachers' reflective work, and to investigate how the embodied experiences and bodily processes are present in their reflections.

Dimensions of embodiment

Charlotte Svendler Nielsen (2015), a Danish dance researcher and practitioner, has distinguished six different dimensions of embodiment while being physically involved in a variety of movement exercises. These are: the social body – relational dimension; the sensing body – kinesthetic dimension; the creating body – creative dimension; the cultural body – symbolic dimension; the moving body – physical dimension; the expressive body – artistic dimension. Svendler Nielsen clarifies that “Everyone's

embodiment holds all dimensions, but some have developed some of the dimensions more than others through their former experiences and thus they are ‘bodies’ in different ways.” (Svendler Nielsen 2015). These dimensions of embodiment comprise the analysis framework of this study, aiming to identify these dimensions in the reflections of novice dance teachers. The dimensions of embodiment in the teaching process have not previously been studied through guided core reflection. Based on the previous research and theoretical frameworks related to Svendler Nielsen (2015), the first author completed the model of guided core reflection proceeding from the focus of body-mind, and posed the following research question: *Which dimensions of embodiment appear in novice dance teachers oral and written reflections generated after having experienced a guided core reflection procedure?*

Methods

Participants of the study

The research was conducted among nine novice dance teachers of the final year (IV) of the Dance Arts study programme at a small liberal arts university. As part of their studies, they taught dance lessons both in comprehensive schools as well as in extracurricular dance schools. The novice dance teachers taught one to three weekly classes lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Their students varied between 4 and 26 years of age. Novice dance teachers did not receive any prior tasks to analyze their practices from the point of view of body-mind integration. Neither did they receive any instructions or explanations regarding the conceptualization or definition of embodiment, or its different dimensions.

Data collection and procedure

Data collection followed the guided core reflection 3-stage procedure. This was based on a guided core reflection methodical instruction by Sööt and Leijen (2012) that in turn was developed based on the notions of core reflection (Korthagen and Vasalos 2005) and guided reflection (Husu et al. 2009).

I stage

- i. The novice dance teacher conducted a dance lesson in a real teaching environment and recorded it.

II stage

- i. On an agreed time, the entire recording was watched together with the researcher; the goal of this activity was to give the novice dance teacher an opportunity to observe their activity from a bystanders' point of view.
- ii. A stimulated recall interview and a reflective discussion, which was based on the meaningful situation chosen and verbalized by the novice dance teacher based on the lesson under observation.

Questions for II stage – The questions that focus on body-mind are bold font.

Stimulated recall interview:

- *What was the subject of the lesson?*
- *What were the meaningful situations for you (from your point of view)?*
- *What happened in these situations?*
- *Which situation would you like to analyze further?*

Reflective discussion:

- *What did you do, think and feel?*
- *What did the students do, think or feel?*

- *What would be the ideal solution that you would like to reach?*
- *What are the limitations in reaching such an ideal solution?*
- *What are the strong assets characteristic to you that would help you to cope better in difficult situations?*
- *What is/what does body-mind unity mean for you?*
- *To what extent does the awareness of the body-mind unity help you find your true wishes as a teacher?*
- *How does the condition of your body-mind influence your teaching and the susceptibility of the students?*
- *Do your facial expressions, gestures, position of the body express the condition of your body-mind? In which way?*
- *Can your expressions, gestures, position of the body influence the students in accepting the material and participating in class activities? In which way?*
- *What supports you in the teaching process?*
- *Do you pay attention the unity/condition of body-mind before teaching and during it?*
- *How much attention do you pay?*
- *Does the acknowledgement of your strengths (body-mind condition) help you to behave more confidently as a teacher?*
- *Do you consciously pay attention to the unity of the students' body-mind? How?*
- *Do you teach the students to proceed from that? How?*
- *Does the condition of students' body-mind affect their capability and ability to cooperate in class?*

- *What kind of new knowledge about yourself (somatics) and about your students (social) did you acquire from this teaching experience?*
- *What would you do differently next time, from your perspective?*
- *What would you do differently next time, from the perspective of the students?*

III stage

- A written reflection that was based on the subtopics of the previous stage (reflective discussion) was submitted by the novice dance teacher approx. one week after stage II by e-mail.

The empirical data of the guided core reflection procedure were collected through stimulated recall interviews, reflective discussions and written reflections. The interviews lasted from 14 to 25 min per participant and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. At the end of each interview, student teachers were provided with guidelines for written reflection. The participants sent written reflections by e-mail one week after the interview.

Data analysis

The analysis of the transcribed interviews and written reflections started with distribution into idea units – smaller units with independent meaning from the aspect of reflection stages. This procedure is based on Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) approach to qualitative content analysis. They define it as a method of study that is used for subjective interpretation of the content by way of a systematic appropriation, and coding process and determining of topics and patterns. The first author of the article coded the transcripts thought by thought, one idea unit being one integral thought or idea having a separate and understandable meaning. Connectives, units of no semantic meaning that stood separately from the thought were not coded. The total number of units coded was 419. Of these, 265 codes were assigned to interview material, and 154 to written

reflections. Following the initial coding, the researcher coded all 419 units of analysis into categories based on Svendler Nielsen's (2015) dimensions of embodiment. In order to practice this coding system, the dimensions of embodiment were coded twice to the full extent. In addition, an independent expert with 20 years of experience in tertiary dance education coded 10% of randomly selected data. Any disagreements between the researcher and the expert were discussed until a consensus was reached.

Results

The dimensions of embodiment appeared in students' reflections in varying quantities. The most frequent was *the social body – relational dimension* (31%), followed by *the sensing body – kinaesthetic dimension* (25%) and thirdly *the creating body – creative dimension* (23%). Fourth was *the moving body – physical dimension* (11%), after that *the cultural body – symbolic dimension* (8%) and *the expressive body – artistic dimension* appeared only in few units (2%). Each of these dimensions will be presented in turn.

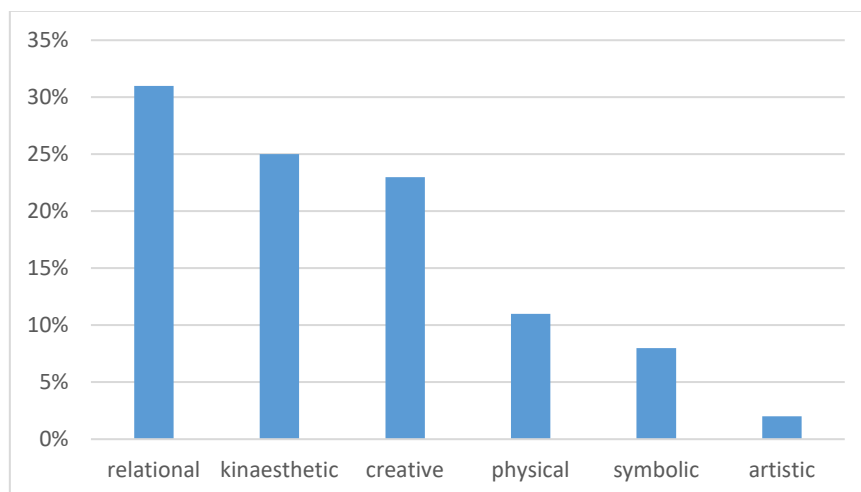


Figure 1. Total occurrence of dimensions of embodiment both in the interviews and written reflections.

The social body - relational dimension code was applied to everything relating to connections novice dance teachers made with other people (pupils, colleagues, fellow students) and interaction between people. In this dimension of embodiment, relations between the self and others were described, including pupil's relations with one another. Both functional and dysfunctional relations, and reflections upon how to improve them, were addressed. Most prevalent were discussions of one's own behaviour while working with others. Questions as to how participants' verbal and non-verbal expressions as teachers affect their pupils, and how these expressions can be understood or interpreted, were raised. Also, topics where novice dance teachers tried to understand themselves through interaction with others were discussed. Solutions for better interaction and communication through body language were elicited, for example one novice dance teacher noted:

I like being on the same level in the same room with students, and similar body language helps to achieve a more unified result (i.e. subconscious reflecting) (U3).

The issues of trust in the teacher and the material taught were mentioned several times. For a novice dance teacher it is important to see how pupils respond to teacher's pedagogical choices, if the content seems to interest them. Novice dance teachers at this stage lack dependable teaching strategies. They trial, explore, and search for their own methods, and reflect on how they might develop their teaching:

I felt that the students trusted me and went along with everything and I am sure it was a change to their usual typical warm up (U9).

I learned that the trust that I put into the young people is justified, they did not take advantage of it and tried hard in the class also during independent work (U1).

The reflection concerning the relational dimension expressed the novice dance teachers' attempt to understand others and to achieve agreement. As one participant claimed,

Yes, I think that a good teacher is a good role model and then the pupils will eventually reflect that good back (U3).

Whereas the relational dimension represented communication, the *sensing body* – a *kinesthetic dimension* concerns understanding oneself from an inner perspective. This dimension involves becoming aware of yourself in the sense of embodiment, where there is no separation between body and mind. In the following account, a student teacher reflects on the desire to convey embodied knowledge to pupils in the context of a specific lesson as well as in everyday life:

Paying attention to the pupils' unity of body-mind is important, since due to that the ability to concentrate in the class increases and I am convinced that the ability to dispose the unity of body-mind will also be beneficial later in life. They might not use it consciously, but if they have the skills to do it, they would use it subconsciously in necessary situations (U7).

Another important aspect of this dimension of embodiment was increasing students' movement literacy through somatic principles. According to Chappell (2007) movement literacy is grounded in being able to 'sense' movement from within; to 'think physically' as part of a 'connected thinking body–mind'; and to move with 'whole self-awareness' (44). The novice dance teachers participating in this study emphasized that:

To convey the understanding that each body is different and unique. The creation of the sense of the unity of the body through imagination (U3).

This means that you will be able to explain yourself through your body, express your emotions and condition; they are together and not separate, that this is your spirit and emotion and your physical body, that they are together (U6).

Reflecting in the field of *the creating body* – a creative dimension referred to building something new, creating the lesson and creating oneself within the context of the lesson. Creativity is understood here broadly; not only as artistic self-expression and completion of creative tasks but rather as a thinking process. This dimension involves also recognizing one's strengths, as part of one's preparation for teaching. As one of the novice dance teachers explained,

I have not done it before lessons consciously, however, I have done it subconsciously, thus, I can infer that if I have dealt with the unity of body-mind, the lesson will go smoothly and in a regular manner. It is difficult to concentrate in an opposite situation and the lesson will constantly lose in consistency (U7).

The following restraint is also reflects:

It would have been ideal if I had thought through the assignment and the wished goal more properly. It would have been possible to think through also a few possible scenarios in case one turns out to be incomprehensible for the pupils (U5).

The moving body - physical dimension described a mere physical activity which might originate from the unity of body-mind, but is still expressed through physical

movement. This dimension concerns the ability to perform well, and is less focused on how movement is experienced from the point of view of body-mind unity. As one novice dance teacher expressed,

In the so-called technique lesson, the attention on body-mind unity is definitely weaker or it happens subconsciously. At the moment, I couldn't even say what the best way to activate the body-mind unity would be (U5).

In the *cultural body – symbolic dimension* the norms of culture in general as well as subcultural norms were seen as essential aspects in teaching and learning dance. These norms were seen to shape how our bodies express the patterns experienced in the past. In this way, participants explained that the cultural body – symbolic dimension addresses cultural differences:

There was a girl with African roots. We had a question whether she understands what I am saying to her, and at times she seemed to be very confused, but then I developed a closer contact with her and through body language and exercises ... a somehow different approach (U3).

Similarly, regarding cultural differences in a small community, the behavioral norms in the school environment were seen as necessary to take into account:

What was constraining for me was when there were so many adults in the room ... sometimes there were four adults in the room, giving the child a huge amount of information, so, who is the one to follow (U3).

This dimension also addresses how people understand or misunderstand the lesson content and verbal expressions used. Moreover, it involves external norms, obligations,

agreements and aspirations that inform and guide teaching and learning. Patterns of movement, signs and symbols that originate from the environment and community become embodied in pedagogical interaction. As such, these aspects also relate to the cultural body.

The expressive body – artistic dimension deals with artistic-expressive elements, that is, with activities that aim at artistic expression or achievement of artistic quality. Here the artistic expression is either the original impulse behind the activity or its outcome.

A couple of times I approached it this way that I had a certain topic for the lesson and it was towards the end of the process, especially when watching this choreography that I needed to work with the intention of the movement and exactly ... and then I devoted the entire lesson to how to convey a certain intent through movement and then different exercises to how ... to do it in a different way (U8).

The artistic dimension was raised particularly in situations that focused on stage expression or the ability to perform, either from the point of view of the novice dance teacher or that of the pupil.

It is evident that the content of reflection is to be connected with the aim and nature of the activity. We can assume that the focus of our attention, the nature of the activity, our feelings and experiences, our intentions and values direct our perceptions and reflections. If physical performance is in our focus highly regarded as a value in our work, then this matter is also more discussed and reflected upon. If, on the other hand, body-mind unity is more important to us, this focus may be more prominent in our reflections. Reflective work, then, is not important only in documenting novice dance

teachers' learning, but also, it has a lot of potential in revealing the values that guide young dance educators' work, and supporting the development of these values.

Discussion

In general, reflection can be seen as a means for novice teachers to gain a more critical, indepth awareness of various aspects of personal and professional life. Through this, they might gain insight into issues that they want to understand better, or become aware of something that was previously unknown, obscure or inscrutable. However, reflection concerning inner experiences or bodily sensations seems to be more challenging than reflection concerning everyday actions. It is common to turn attention to bodily sensations and conditions only when they are unusual, new or somehow problematic (Cohen 1993, 115). In previous studies the first author has researched teacher activity (Sööt and Leijen 2012) and argumentation levels (Leijen and Sööt 2016) and found that guided reflection resulted in a larger number of reflection units than unguided reflection (Leijen and Sööt 2016). In this study the authors observed how guided reflection supports students' reflection and how the embodied aspect is present in their reflections. Since various dimensions of embodiment appear in students' reflections, it seems that the embodied aspect of reflection is highly relevant for future dance educators, and that accessing the body-mind level in reflective work may be an interesting area for further research in the context of other professions as well.

The participants of this study emphasized the social body and the sensing body in their reflections. The strong presence of these two dimensions illustrates that these novice dance teachers focus on communication and relations in their teaching. By using Svendler Nielsen's (2015) model it is possible to analyze the focus of dance teaching, and to address possible areas requiring more attention. In the case of these participants,

the relative lack of focus on the artistic dimension may be interpreted as a need to address this area in their further professional development.

Although the importance of reflection on the different levels of learning and teaching is increasingly recognized in the field dance education, there still seems to be little understanding of the importance of the methods and focus of reflection. The questions on how to carry out the process of reflection, and how to guide it consciously, have not been clearly brought out in theory or practice of dance education. Citing Doug Risner, “Although reflective methods and practices are widely incorporated in studio and academic teaching in dance and dance education today, a cogent body of knowledge remains uncharted” (2017, 89).

Dance scholar Sue Stinson brings out that developing future educators who will be able to engage in the kind of reflexivity will help move the field forward (2010). The arts, unlike the traditional academic areas, are an arena in which the body is central to the process of inquiry and constitutes a mode of knowing. This aspect makes dance, drama, music, and visual arts education particularly potential means for exploring the meaning of embodiment in education (Bresler 2004, 9). This study connects the reflection procedure and somatic point of view and thus, creates a guided core reflection procedure that was missing from the field so far.

Dance teachers as embodied reflective practitioners are in a constant posture of readiness to learn, know, evolve, and adapt themselves to their environment, and are able to develop holistic pedagogical approaches that reach beyond rigid teaching structures (Hawkins 2010). So, combining the notion of core reflection (Korhagen & Vasalos 2005), the model of guided reflection (Husu et al. 2009), and dimensions of embodiment Svendler Nielsen (2015) may be a way to develop a holistic approach for teachers’ reflective work. Moreover, in the context of dance education it is increasingly

common to emphasize body-mind unity in order to counterbalance the pursuit of excellence in terms of external performance. Educating future dance teachers towards a holistic approach to dance education may be one means to instil these values also to their pupils, the future generation of dancers.

We hope that this study enables future dance teachers to use reflection in their professional practice in an informed way - through the development of new models in academic studies or the use of reflective material in everyday teaching situations. The implications of this study may be useful in developing tertiary dance education programs through a more refined and conscious use of reflective tools that take into account the embodied aspects of the dance education profession.

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