

## Thinking through the Body:

### Layering meaning through reflective practice in the dance class

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#### Introduction

For years I was told to leave behind everything of the world at the threshold of my dance class, and enter without any baggage, into the bubble of the class. Very often, as classical Indian dancers, we perform and make work in a space isolated from the realities of the world that we live in. Frequently I found myself at odds with the character that I was depicting on stage; but I was expected to play the 'role', irrespective of my beliefs and opinions. In time, as a student, performer and especially as a teacher, I realised that it was impossible to drop the 'baggage'. I understood that exceptional artists not only acknowledge their baggage, they illuminate and reshape it through their art.

For me, the dance class became a space for reflection rather than reproduction of culture; an embodied pathway to find connections with the world rather than a means to shut out the world. The dance curriculum became a means

for generating experiences of making, performing and viewing dance in a way that brought the student in conscious engagement with the world with a heightened understanding of the self and the other. Hence, while a dance class would include lessons on movement, processes and principles of a dance form, students also learn here about authority, relationships and their own bodies (Stinson 2016, 55). Why should dance not be about, as Maxine Green puts it, "living deliberately" in awareness of contradictions and conscious of the complexity of my being? (Stinson 2016).

This paper illustrates my experiments with teaching undergraduate students who have no training and experience in dance, to think through their bodies. Most students participating in the class firmly believe that they are not dancers. Yet this class is based upon the premise that sensory understanding is critical to how we understand ourselves and relate to others; that the body is the mediator of experience and knowledge is subjective (Shapiro 1999, 6).

This paper explores the Heideggerian idea that 'knowing' is related to how we construct reality or experience. This reality is a sum total of our memories and we make sense of today based upon what we believe we know. In other words, "...the human condition is based on our ability, not to reject history, but to understand that human beings carry within them their history into the present." (Shapiro 1999, 5). This paper explores the role and frameworks of reflective practice in an undergraduate dance class to position the process of critical reflection as the basis for making our learning visible through movement.

## **Who We Are and What We Did...**

It was twenty students; and I, within an undergraduate liberal arts programme. It was also a classical dancer working with engineering majors who felt they were 'not cut out' for dancing. And there was the baggage of our contexts, understandings, assumptions, experiences and prejudices (even towards each other) strapped to our bodies.

Consciously placing the class within these concentric circles, I approached the class with two primary teaching aims.

The first aim was to create an aesthetic attitude to movement. "In this aesthetic dimension, the locus of the individual's realization shifts from the domain of the performance principle...to that of the inner resources of the human being; passions, imagination and the conscience," (Marcuse in Stinton 2016, 9). The agenda of the class was not to create dancers or dance pieces but to value the process of creation and to reflect upon what our movement choices said about our social constructs.

In the class, personal response and personal meaning illuminated the internal relationships between movement and the performer as well as the relationship of the movement with the observer. Kinesthetic empathy enabled teaching and learning to happen in the encounter between the performer and the observer. This relationship enabled the creation of a safe space for exploration and built a community within the class where every student was responsible for the other. Merce Cunningham elaborates on this relationship:

It does not mean the need to display oneself but rather the need to be moving, and to feel the movement and to think the movement. It does not mean that one always has to be moving but rather that one feels another's motion almost as if one were also moving.



(Cunningham and Brockway in Stinton 2016, 81)

I hope to push the boundaries of the observer to those who are reading this paper and therefore the large number of photographs invite the reader to participate in the class in a way that the written text may not be able to. The photographs of the class are to be seen as an integral and important part of the text and not just as a mere illustration.



Second, the class aimed to make students value their individual differences and yet be conscious of their interconnectedness with others. And as Stinton says: “consciousness is more about complexity than clarity” (2016, 56). Awareness is a movement beyond black and white, right and wrong, yes and no. While many of us in dance education believe that the lessons learnt in the class transfer to other aspects of our lives, the place of dance in Indian academia is so limited that I needed to provide evidence for this transference. This evidence was needed not just by the university but also by students and other faculty so that dance would not be relegated to the extra-curricular zone or to a collection of ‘relaxing’ courses amongst



other ‘serious’ academic courses.

Evidence of learning was drawn from reflective journals written by the students and myself throughout the class. These journals reflected not just the thinking that happened in class but



also the thinking that happened in between and after the class. When the need to write a reflective journal was first introduced in class, most students were puzzled as to what they should write. Since this was dance class and they would be dancing, what was there to think about? Student reflections are also drawn from conversations both during and after class. This paper uses these reflective excerpts

to make visible the thinking that layers all forms of movement making; overlaps that most participants, including I, were unaware of.

The journal entries that I use in this paper illustrate two very important ideas that Maurice Merleau-Ponty advocates in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. He talks of leakage and ambiguity as important cognitive tools. To give importance to something like leakage and ambiguity is to challenge the traditional ideals of certainty, of truth as something with unrivalled clarity, and knowledge as non-contingent and unambiguous.

So deeply entrenched are our assumptions about mind's ideality and rightful governance over things vaguely sensed, felt, or intuited (and indeed over things done or enacted) that the suggestion that ambiguity may be more important to humankind than certainty probably strikes most of us as nonsense.

(Bowman 2004, 30).



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Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's view, this class was a small experiment in beginning to challenge popular ontological and epistemological convictions about the nature of knowledge and to project ambiguity and leakage as potent cognitive assets in the university space.

### **Impulsive Moving**

First class. Students walk into class and arrange themselves neatly in a couple of rows in front of me. Some have a notepad in their hands. The absence of chairs is a problem. They cannot sit down and cannot start thinking about movement.

Student: When I first walked into class, I did not know what to do with myself. There was no designated spot for me to sit. How were we supposed to do learn if we did



not 'settle down'?



Settling down implied that unless they shut down their body, confined it in a chair, limited it to the act of taking notes in order to remember, students could not produce work that was 'thought through'. Encultured into denying the role of relational and experiential knowing for years in school and then in other academic spaces, these students struggled with the idea of 'non-settling'. Illustrating the dominant rationalist paradigm of the duality of mind and body, these students embodied a separation between being and thinking.

Student: I like this class because it feels free. I am free to smile in between class. I cannot imagine how I will manage in other classes now.

Student: It was very difficult to accept that there is no wrong answer, or rather a wrong movement. I am normally so focused on getting the right answer that it's strangely weird to be free of that compulsion.

Through a series of movement exercises students begin to unpack their movement tendencies. There is no right and no wrong movement; the class was a safe space to explore the patterns in which our understanding of the world moves us. A favourite exercise involved passing on an imaginary object around a circle, and as it was passed on, the receiver changed the nature of that object. The 'reality' of the object got constructed in the way that we moved and there were impulsive bodily responses of brows wrinkled in disgust, a



sharp intake of breath even amongst those who were watching. This exercise did not reveal something about the 'object' that was being passed around; instead it revealed something about ourselves. It raised questions about who was doing the looking, what was chosen to be looked at and what 'stories' got constructed in the viewer's mind to make sense of the movement. The relationship between the subject and the object revealed something about the human condition. The movements were not important in and of themselves. They were significant because,

The investigation is not to find the correctness of an idea or the knowledge of things. It is rather one that is concerned with seeing something in its presence as constituted by both what has been and the possibilities of what can be. Meaning then is found in this process through a relocating of truth in being-in-the-world and through the unification of being and thinking in an existential hermeneutic.

(Shapiro 1999, 41)



Ambiguity as suggested by Merleau-Ponty can be understood as polysemy, multivalence or simultaneous multiplicity of meaning (Bowman 2004, 30). Polysemic situations are vivid, rich and potent, encompassing a range of relative possibilities. Relational understandings of the world are made visible through patterns of knowledge grounded in bodily existence. These patterns are always interpretative and partial to a socio-historical context.

Elaborating on these patterns, Bowman says,

Partiality, multiplicity and complexity are its inherent phenomenological conditions, but fluency at navigating such rough ground is precisely at the heart of human genius (30).

The teaching aim for this class was to make students aware of this multiplicity of meanings that exist and the way these become evident in the way we move. One example of an exercise we did in class was to look at a painting by Kandinsky and create movement from it. Students were required to pick a shape from the picture, create a movement from it and layer it with their name. This was used as an icebreaker initially and later as a warm-up exercise. Reflecting upon their choice of movements and the shapes that the students chose showed that everyone had interpreted their own name in one way or another. Some chose shapes that represented the meaning of their names, others chose shapes and movements that reflected the character of their names. Very often the same shapes were chosen to represent a multiplicity of meanings. Every student in the class had constructed multiple meanings for the same set of shapes. As students realised this they began to experience the amazement and confusion that accompanies a new discovery.

Student: It was hard to accept that the shape I had chosen could have such a different meaning! And while I could see the logic in what the other person was trying to say, what I felt inside was different! No matter how many times we do the exercise I am never going to get used to this feeling.



Student: Why does everything have to be relative! I was very happy when I was certain about what everything meant. Now when I can see and sometimes reluctantly accept the different points of view, I am a little less unsure of the validity of my opinions.

Student: I do not like the way she (teacher) messes with us. Everything that I took for granted I now challenge...in my own head. It is like having a constant argument with yourself. Very confusing!



However, these movements and other such movements generated in class, are neither immanent nor arbitrary. They represent a dynamics of movement memory mediated by the need to communicate through movement and negotiation of cultural contexts via movement. An example of this is another exercise based on Edward Casy's distinction between body memory and memory of the body. "The first would be called remembering and the second recollecting," (Sklar 2008, 88).

Students were given words like crowd, stress, accident, beautiful etc. They were then asked to represent this word through a set of movements. Unpacking the work that they produced students realised that they accessed the meaning of these



words from the memories that they had of them. Some represented the crowd as being pushed around in the local metro, others as jumping in a rock concert and there were some who performed the smell of the crowd. Working through this exercise, students were asked to take different positions vis-a-vis the word; they were either in the accident or getting late for an exam due to a traffic jam caused by the accident or reading about it in the newspapers. This change of position altered the meaning that the word had for them and how they moved. Reflecting on this 'change' students became aware of what Csordas refers to as the somatic modes of attention that are "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Sklar 2008, 92).

### **Of the stories we make**

Our understanding of the world is an amalgamation of who we are and what we know. This understanding is filtered through the set of values and assumptions that we hold to be true. One way to become aware of our assumptions is to look at the stories we tell.





Stories that we create are also an important means to question beliefs and recognize their limitations and possibilities. The class focuses on making stories in a state of consciousness; moving with concentration and awareness of what moves us 'within'. Building upon psychologist Daniel Stern's assertion that the human capacity to transfer perceptual experience from one sensory modality to another is innate and that the haptic schema (what something feels like) and visual schema (what something looks like) are developed simultaneously (Sklar 2008, 93), students create 'stories' not from a linear narrative but rather from a process of structuring experience into culturally recognizable patterns. Through these stories the performers make visible memories in and of the body (Sklar 2008, 88), enabling the viewers to experience the movement somatically.



Somatics, as described by Thomas Hanna, is “a way of perceiving oneself from the inside out, where one is aware of feelings, movements and intentions, rather than looking objectively from the outside in” (Stinson 2016, 81). Bowman rephrases Merleau-Ponty’s idea of leakage as that of cross-modal transfer (2004,



30) where students use their felt experiences to create movement. Movement in this

case does not come from a learnt 'technique', but rather from the unique human capacity of inter-modal transfer of schemata from one experiential domain to the other. In the case of the class, from the realm of perceptual experience to that of dynamic motor patterns.

Although most students in class do not know any dance form, the class builds upon the human impulse to move, to move rhythmically and meaningfully, to be moved by other moving bodies and to give form and order to these perceptions and experiences. To enable students to move from the inside, the class presents them with certain frameworks for thinking that not only pushes them, but also gives students a place to start making a story. Dance improvisation exercises like mirroring, sculpting and pathways of impulse are used to help students create movement phrases.

Students, working with partners, began to explore the ways in which mirroring works





through their bodies. They worked with free-flowing movements to gain familiarity and to create a connection with their partners. Then, as the exercise continued, other realizations of the way they moved surfaced. One important thing that kept surfacing was an embodied understanding of masculine and feminine movements and how men and women moved differently. By working closely with their partners (and most students worked with partners of the opposite sex), students became aware of not just how each of them was 'taught' to move differently but also how they assumed and constructed the ways in which their partner would move. Men consciously tried to make their movements 'graceful' and the women attempted to do 'bigger' movements to mirror their partner. While this is a banal observation for most dancers, for these students who had no prior dance vocabulary, to have actually felt this was an amazing discovery.

We then layered these movements with imagination of what and who the mirror can be. In order to do this, we turned to an experience of the mirror we had in Snow White's story. Philosopher Mark Johnson conceptualises imagination as a pre-linguistic cognitive capacity to organise perceptions into recognisable configurations. In other words, it is an extrapolation, abstraction and synthesis of cross-modal extrapolations.

Imagination then is not merely a mental operation that works reproductively to duplicate or reflect experience; it is a perceptual/ cognitive process that works productively and creatively to configure experience.

(Stern in Sklar 2008, 94).

Working from Snow White's 'mirror, mirror on the wall', students worked collaboratively on the nature of their mirror. Who is the mirror? What can it do? What

does it want? How does it see the world? The challenge here was to let go of the notion of the mirror as a fixed entity with fixed, pre-determined qualities.

This exercise requires the participants to break-up the process of thinking, making and feeling into small parts; working with one idea at a time and adding, then creating complexity layer by layer. When I designed this class, I was working on my intuition as an artist and as a performer. I knew that I was working with students who have never danced before and so I used the structures of layering meaning that I had been taught as a classical dancer, to help them create meaningful pieces. I was sceptical about its effectiveness, but as is evident from student feedback, they felt empowered by the process.

Student: I was initially afraid to do anything in class and I could see that others shared my hesitation too. But because the tasks were small, I had the courage to attempt something. Now, as we are beginning to put it all together I cannot believe that we have managed to layer so many things together! I never believed that I was capable of doing this!



Students reflected upon what emotions the movement phrases created so far evoked in them. Was there a contradiction in the way two people viewed the same

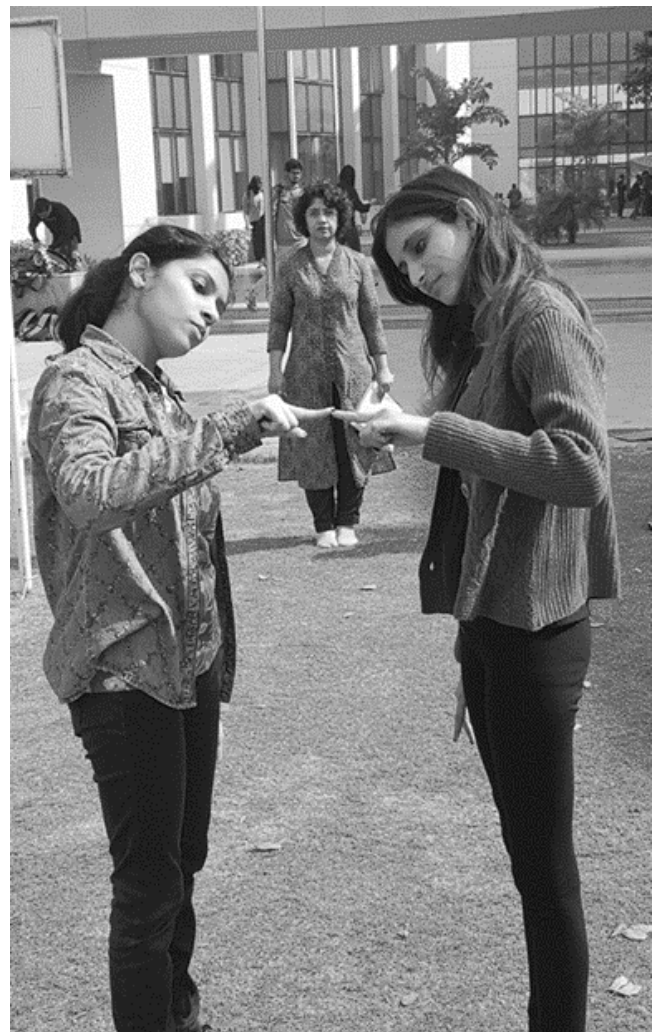
movement? How might this contradiction be negotiated? Was there a way in which these phrases could be reordered to tell a story? What was their connection with this story? These were some of the questions that underpinned the class. To quote from my own journal:

*I am often in awe of the kind of work these students produce. There isn't a person in class who is unaffected and unmoved by the artistry of the work we saw today. I sometimes wonder if it is because these students do not have an inscribed technique on their bodies that they are able to think freely with their bodies?*

### **On the problem of being the teacher in the class**

When I first offered this class, I was excited and felt good about myself because I was about to actually put into practice my belief that everybody can dance. This belief is especially close to my heart since as a classical dancer I have seen many students denied the joy of moving—either because they did not start early enough or because they were not good enough at technique. As a dance educator, I am committed to the idea that everyone should have equal opportunity to dance.

Having said that, the class threw up immense challenges to me as a teacher. It taught me many things about who I am, how I see the world and what I am capable of.



One of the most important lessons it taught me was to watch closely without judging. I often caught myself looking for ‘technique’ and had to fight the urge to make corrections. I had, during my studies, learnt about giving constructive feedback. This class gave me an embodied understanding of this term. Feedback for me became about being ‘present’, with my whole self, to what the students were trying to say, and to help them decipher all the possible meanings of the work they were producing.

This class also made me re-examine my relationship with curriculum design and my process of planning for the class. Given the nature of the class, I could only plan for the frameworks of thinking that I might introduce in it. How the students manipulated it and what got produced in class was completely beyond my control. As I put it very succinctly in a journal entry of mine:



*What is scary about this class is that I can easily find myself in a situation where I do not know what to do next and what to say next. All my meticulous planning for the class, I realised, is based on an assumption of how students will react. I am constantly thrown by what emerges in the class and I have to pay really close attention to what is happening.*

As a dancer I was accustomed to teaching classes that were 'beautiful'; a class where all the planning of all the parts came together seamlessly to produce



performable work. This class made me approach the teaching and designing of my lesson plans as a form of art in the making, improvising and evaluating as I went along, putting into practice Elliot Eisner's idea of educational connoisseurship and criticism (Eisner) in curriculum making





This class made me realise that what is really important in art is often as messy as a young person's mind, often leaving substantial ends that are not neatly tied up into a harmonious whole. In spite of the affirmative and empowering nature of this class, for me and my students, there are two aspects to this class that are as yet unresolved for me. I hope that as I continue to teach this course, I shall find answers to my dilemmas.

Given my improvisational approach to curriculum delivery, I am still unsure about how to design the assessment for this course. I am convinced that assessment is important, particularly in courses like these. Improvising in class does not mean that anything goes; there are certain key learning objectives that drive the class. These learning objectives decide the frameworks that I introduce in class, the exercises I choose and the examples I give to create movement. I recognized the fact that sometimes what students learnt in class was different from, and sometimes the opposite of what my initial teaching aims were, often even going beyond them. This is a space of ongoing study and reflection for me as a teacher, to understand



what really matters in the dance curriculum and how best to make it visible without denying its heterogeneity and complexity.

My second dilemma arises from a conversation with a student. One student said that the class made her realise how she had been dominated by the idea of pleasing her parents all her life. She said that in the class she came to accept the pain it caused her but she felt powerless to do anything about it. The student felt that she was better off not acknowledging the pain rather than living with a sense of helplessness. Even as I work to highlight the importance of knowing the body, I sometimes wonder if knowing from the inside is useful, or if it leads to a feeling of helplessness only and nothing else. That was certainly not my teaching aim.

Expanding upon this I question if the idea of kinesthetic knowing is relevant only if

one's

basic

bodily

needs are

met?



While students respond to others' work with empathy, it's difficult to determine if the observers 'see' what the performer is trying to show. Since the aim of the class is to develop interconnectedness, students would often ask each other the meaning of their work. However, as a teacher, I know that even words might convey different meanings to different people and often there is a lot that we 'know' without being consciously aware of it. Stinton articulates my discomfort when she says,

How important is it that we start with ourselves but not end there? How important is it that we let the kinesthetic sense take us beyond our own sensations into the world, to recognize our connectedness with others and that we go beyond sensing the pain that we feel (our own or that of others) to acting upon it.

(Stinton 2016, 83)

## **Dancing in the university...**

I am often congratulated by my colleagues in the University for offering a course which provides an 'emotional outlet' to students. Even before I can protest that this is not a therapy class, I am assured of their fullest support to having Arts courses for undergraduate students. These well-meaning colleagues truly believe that the Arts are important for an 'all-round development' of the students. Yet it is these very colleagues who will deny students permission to be excused from classes to attend a dance performance. There have also been instances where students have been counselled to pay more attention to serious studies rather than wasting their time on Dance.

While I find these assumptions about dance extremely annoying, I do believe to some extent that this is a problem of our own making. Dance has always been positioned as an emotional, esoteric experience placed in opposition to rational thought. While dance creates a special kind of understanding, it is still viewed as an understanding of a secondary nature.



As I struggle to create an academic space for Dance in the university, I believe that to understand the educational value of dance we are attempting to apply notions of knowledge uncritically and understanding crafted in other domains of knowledge, whose efficacy in providing educational insights into dance are at best limited. Particularly in India, for many social, cultural and even religious reasons, “our most deeply revered justifications...of (art) education are built upon deeply flawed notions about the mind, cognition and intelligence” (Bowman 2004, 33). Dance extends cognitive dimensions and expression, but not through clarity and an absolute truth. Dance, I believe, affords a field of bodily action that weaves together the mind, body and cultural context, validating knowledge produced through ambiguity and leakage, as discussed earlier, produce an embodied human reality. Arguing for a place of Arts through a rationalist, cognitive model fails to account for the emotional aspect of human intelligence, for creativity and for the intuitive ingenuity that brings them together.

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