THE ROLE OF TOUCH AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING TOOL IN DANCE

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Introduction

Touch is the chronological and psychological mother of the senses. (Juhan, 2003, p. 29)

The dance is the mother of the arts. (Sachs, 1963, p.3)

Touch and hands as feedback in particular have occupied an important position in dance education for a long time; however, their use has been questioned over the last few decades, perhaps owing to continual social and cultural changes within western society as a whole. As Bolstad states in relation to ballet, "It seems a given that touch is an important part of ballet class, but more cautious attitudes have shaped the way teachers and students interact" (Marshall, 2009, p.83). Traditionally, hands on feedback in dance includes adjustments of position and physical corrections of alignment, but as western society has become more aware of touch and its possible negative implications, dance educators are more wary of its use (Marshall, 2009, p.8).

Despite various contributions to a more sensitive use of touch and hands on feedback in dance from the somatic disciplines (Eddy 2009, p.5), the subject remains understudied and is only directly discussed within the contemporary

dance field. Therefore, more research is needed to further explore this important element of dance education. This paper will explore research on the topic of touch within various disciplines including child development, dance therapy, somatics, and psychiatry with the intention of linking these findings to possible uses in teaching and learning dance. The paper will also discuss the current use of touch and hands on feedback in dance education and outline the positive and negative aspects of its application through discussions of published work, as well as through my personal experience as a dancer and teacher.

Rationale

Touch is a prominent element in the teaching and learning of dance. From Balanchine slapping dancers on the shoulders to help them balance in their classical ballet pirouettes (Mazo, 1976, p.39), to Balinese dancing clowns in training being moved into shapes by their teacher (Gartner, 1993, p.227), touch and 'hands on feedback' is noted in dance as playing a vital role in the teaching and learning process. Unfortunately, it still lacks the research backing and guidelines received by other educational strategies in dance. For example, imagery in dance performance enhancement is explored by the Franklin method and the Skinner releasing technique (Franklin, 1996) among others. However, there is no equivalent framework for the study of touch and hands on feedback in dance.

Touch has special qualities that can be useful in teaching dance, namely, cutaneous sense and kinesthesis. Cutaneous sense provides awareness of stimulation of the outer surface of the body by means of receptors within the skin

and the associated nervous system while kinesthesis allows a perception of our body in space (Loomis & Lederman J, 1984, p.1). Working in tandem these qualities greatly enhance our understanding of movement through hands on feedback and allow a better sense of one's own body and the space around it. Alternately, these same properties of touch can be distracting and even disturbing, as is the case with sexual or violent touch in any movement instruction (Barret, 2003, p.103). This two-sided nature of touch and the lack of clear guidelines for the use of hands on feedback in dance education warrant further research in this field.

Discussion

Modes of touch

It is important to understand the different types of touch if we are to have a clear idea of its effects on any teaching practice. Loomis and Lederman (1984) expand on J.J. Gibson's components of touch that comprise *passive touch* and *active touch* where "passive touch [...] is perception based solely upon stimulation of the cutaneous sense of an immobile observer" while "active touch on the other hand means purposive exploration of the stimulus field" (p.1). Furthermore, the authors speak about the *afferent kinesthesis* (a sense of one's own position in space) available to the observer experiencing passive touch and both *afferent and efferent kinesthesis* (a sense of one's own position in space as well as the position of the object being touched) available to the observer experiencing active touch. The divisions of active or passive touch are therefore further divided into their kinesthetic input/output with the active 'toucher' having

an advantage of efferent kinesthetic perception. However, studies from the same paper demonstrate how cutaneous sense is actually more attuned during passive touch when examining different textures. Therefore, the passive 'toucher' in contrast, is better at feeling his inner tactile sensations.

In dancing, instructors mainly use active touch when teaching while the student can be a passive 'toucher' if his/her body parts are probed or placed on surfaces and an active 'toucher' when reacting to the teacher's manipulations. Teachers use efferent and afferent kinesthesis to touch and move the student and the student uses afferent kinesthesis while absorbing this sensory information as well as efferent kinesthesis when responding to it. These processes are all interrelated and by no means exclusive of each other much of the time. One can go back and forth continuously during a dance training session. However, these distinctions will clarify and inform some of the further discussions in this essay.

Leading and following

Katz has observed that "descriptions of perceptual experience are expressed largely in terms of tactile sensations when objects are impressed upon the skin of a passive observer; whereas, the descriptions are expressed in terms of objects when the observer actively explores them" (as cited in Loomis and Lederman, 1984, p. 2). This shows us different expressions of perceptions on the parts of the active and passive observers in touch. In relation to dance, this applies in a teacher student relationship as described above and also in dance partnerships where lead and follow elements are used. While it would be difficult

to quantify the exact types and amounts of touch used in partnering, its use and perception differs for leaders and followers. For example, while both the leader and follower in partner dancing use active touch, albeit in different capacities, the follower has more opportunities to experience passive touch and would therefore be more attuned to the tactile sensations involved in it; the leader on the other hand would be more proficient in active touch initiation. Such differences in perception are important for dance pedagogy because during a dance lesson the teacher will often partner the students both as a leader and as a follower.

This raises further questions, such as does a teacher who spent most of his training as a leader have the capacity to give sensory information to the student from a follower position? Or vice versa for a teacher trained as a follower? Renta reports that among the most proficient studio-salsa dancers, men and women interchange the leader and follower roles. If this is standardized practice, it can probably give both a better understanding of the opposite role for their subsequent teaching situations (as cited in Borland, 2009, p. 477). Similarly, in ballroom dancing, when passing professional exams, teachers must learn the steps of both leader and follower. These are good strategies, but I do not think they completely compensate for many years training in one role. Currently, the most common solution in partner dancing is to have lessons with both leaders and followers unless students are taught both roles from the beginning of their training, which to my knowledge has only been done consistently in the gay community (Lanyi, 2007, pp. 32-35; Noel & Mayer 2006). Perhaps this is a viable framework for future teaching strategies?

Touch and gender differences

We must also take into consideration that there might be gender differences in the perceptions of touch. As Nguyen, Heslin, & Nguyen (1975) state, "types of touch and body locations touched are associated with the same meanings by men and women, but feelings differ" (p. 92). These researchers conducted a study, in which male and female unmarried undergraduates evaluated the meanings and the feelings associated with the different locations and modes of touch when it is performed by a close friend of the opposite sex. They discovered that men relate to touch as meaning – pleasantness, sexual desire, warmth/ love – while excluding friendship/ fellowship from that group. Meanwhile for women the more touch was associated with sexual desire the less it was considered to mean – playfulness, warmth/ love, friendship/ fellowship, or pleasantness (Nguyen, Heslin, & Nguyen, 1975).

There is a difference in the context of college students as participants, compared with dance students and teachers. Nevertheless, we must consider how differently touch might be interpreted by a male student versus a female student and subsequently, how do male and female teachers differ in their use of touch in class? This is an area that has not been sufficiently studied in dance, as those studies that do speak of touch do not usually differentiate its use between genders. One reason for this is the prevalence of such studies in contemporary dance, which generally tends to minimize gender roles in its training and performance (Allen, 2009; Brodie & Lobel, 2004). It might be particularly interesting to study the effects of touch and hands on feedback for male versus

female students in dance fields with clear gender divisions. In her feminist study of the Salsa community in New Jersey, Borland states that the woman must "receive, respond to, and return the pressure of *his* touch" and suggests that "an increased focus on technique attenuates the strict reiteration of gender relations" (2009, p.477). Considering these descriptions, Salsa would make an excellent example of a dance form suitable for such a study.

Touch, lights, and partner dancing

In another experiment on college students, it was demonstrated that with lights off they were much more likely to touch each other and hug than with lights on (Fields, 2001, p.61). Similarly, when the lights are low in a dance club, people usually feel more at ease with moving and touching since they do not feel so much 'in the spotlight'. People are also more likely to accept an invitation to dance when they are touched during the process of the invitation (Gueguen, 2007, p.81). Therefore, low lighting in social contexts seems to facilitate touch and touch seems to facilitate one's initiation into dance. This could potentially be quite a useful finding for certain contexts of dance training.

Similar methods are already used by some dance styles as a heritage from their social roots, and help newcomers feel more at ease during early training. For example, in partner dancing such as Salsa or Argentine tango, students often attend practice evenings where they need to initiate physical contact with one another in order to dance (Borland, 2009, p.477). To facilitate this transition the teacher usually sets an example by inviting his students to dance and by partnering them. During this process, the student gets accustomed

to inviting touch and the dancing hold throughout the teaching process. Having experienced this type of touch and hands on feedback during group and private lessons, students are then more comfortable with touch from other dance partners during the practice evenings.

During these events, the lights are usually dimmed and students are encouraged to experience polite and appropriate physical contact to facilitate learning. Having participated in some of these events myself, I have found these factors to be quite helpful and would encourage more research on this topic within different dance training situations, for example using low stage lighting and supportive touch to encourage development of skills through contact in theatrical dance forms such as ballet.

Touch and hands on feedback in contact dance styles

In certain dance styles touch is a core element of the dance itself. For example, this is the case in contact improvisation and ballroom dancing. In her article, Stephanie Cohen (2010) describes her experience of touch with eyes closed during an authentic movement session incorporating contact improvisation, " a soft, yielding quality of touch against my legs and the sound of another mover's gentle humming transport me instantly to a particular and very different time and place" (108). Touch in these forms of dance is not just an aid for the presentation of form but a tool by which people communicate and express themselves. Cohen (2010) argues that "both Contact improvisation and Authentic movement facilitate a deep kind of investigation, touching people on kinesthetic,

cognitive, emotional, imagistic and spiritual levels" (p.110) expressing the various modes of learning that can take place through touch in her dance style.

My personal experience has also illustrated that much of the ballroom and Latin dancing material would be impossible to teach or perform correctly without a deep level of understanding of touch and hands on feedback, which facilitates the learning process. For example, in the instructional videos from *Essentially Dance* (2009) which are used to teach ballroom and Latin dancing in British secondary schools, the students are constantly asked to 'take hold', 'move together', and 'use the connection with the partner' throughout the entire series. Teaching and learning in ballroom and Latin dancing as well as in contact improvisation seems by its very nature dependent on touch and hands on feedback. The strategies used in these disciplines can serve as examples for incorporation of these elements in the pedagogy of other dance forms.

Touch and anxiety in children and young adults

In child development we can see a clear picture from experiments on primary school children, and even juvenile convicts, where increased touching and affectionate behavior has led to decreases in anxiety and stress (Fields, 2001, pp.60-61). In turn, within dance, controlling levels of anxiety and stress are associated with better performance (Walker & Nordin-Bates, 2010, p.1). Even though these are quite different environments, perhaps more touching in the form of hands on feedback or simply as encouragement gestures in a dance class situation could lead to similar results, especially with children and young adults. As Daniels states when discussing the use of hands on feedback and supportive

touch in dance class, "It's such a wonderful thing to be able to touch somebody in your classroom, and help them feel something, to put your hand on their shoulder when you can tell they are having difficulty with something" (Marshall 2009, p.82).

Research also shows how the use of somatic techniques including touch in dance training can increase confidence enjoyment and relaxation in teenage dance students (Weber, 2009, p.246)¹. Lack of touch in children on the other hand is associated with sleep disturbances and potential for violent behavior in adulthood, while its sufficient presence can improve their immune system and promote growth (Fields, 2001, p.63-67). I would not go so far as to say children will not grow or become violent due to the lack of touch in a dance class but there may be repercussions, as Schwartz observes, "If you cut touch out of the equation, you are cutting a huge portion of your ability to actively train students. It gives students a direct experience of themselves" (Marshall, 2009, p.83).

Touch within Dance therapy and its relation to dance instruction

There also seems to be some controversy about touch in dance related disciplines. In dance movement therapy there seems to be "a lack of support within professional guidelines for the way touch is used in practice" (Popa and Best, 2010, p.31). This was the impetus for Popa to write her article in which she analyzes different experiences of touch that she experienced during her training in dance movement therapy and the apparent absence of guidance for their use in her professional field.

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¹ See further discussion of this study in 'somatic touch within dance training' section of this paper.

A similar situation is present in dance education. As Marshall (2009) states, "most universities and conservatories now have sexual harassment clauses in their human resources policies. Many dance schools do as well, although few contain wording specifically aimed at touch during dance classes" (p.82). There are various reasons for this avoidance of the subject of touch, one of them being a cultural one, as Popa and Best (2010) point out, "in western society [...] certain kinds of touch have been marginalized for centuries as morally dubious" (p.32). Contrastingly, in Japan people "are accustomed to touch and easily share space with others" (Sakiyama & Koch, 2003, p.81). This approach has produced a more open discussion of touch in the ethical code of practice for the Japan Dance Therapy Association (Sakiyama & Koch, 2003), which states:

Body contacts between therapists and clients or sometimes clients and clients occur in dance therapy from its methodological features. Dance therapists have to be always conscious of the importance of touching behaviors. We must pay attention to how clients feel about touch in order to help them feel comfortable and maintain their boundaries so that they don't feel invaded. (p.89)

This kind of discussion of touch within the official code of practice and the general open approach of the Japanese people to touch is something that can be adopted in western dance education. Some efforts, although mainly within modern and contemporary dance fields, have been made in dance education in order to integrate touch in the teacher's code of practice and the classroom itself.

These efforts were largely inspired by somatic practices that have made their way into dance over the last few decades.

Somatic practices and dance

The development of somatic disciplines over the last century and their gradual adoption into dance in the last 40 years has shaped the use of touch and hands on feedback in dance education (Eddy, 2009, p.5). Since many of the second generation leaders in somatic education had a dancing background it was only a matter of time before 'somatic touch' made its way into dance class (Eddy 2009, p.16). 'Somatic education', a term coined by Thomas Hanna in 1985, combines the methods of Gerda, F.M. Alexander, Feldenkrais, Gindler, Laban, Mensendieck, Middendorf, Mezieres, Rolf, Todd, Trager, as well as their students Bartenieff, Rosen, Selver, Speads, and Sweigard. Within these disciplines the participants are invited to focus on listening to the body, breathing, and "experiencing increased responsiveness as they received skilled touch and/or verbal input as 'fresh stimuli' from a somatic practitioner" (Eddy 2009, pp.6-7). This 'skilled touch' was often developed through specialized training. The use of the 'empty hands' in Alexander's technique is one such example, as Palmer (2000) states:

Spending three years improving the use of hands means that when the teacher finally comes to work on a pupil and to put his or her hands onto someone else's body, the act of touching that person is no longer an issue. (p.18)

The entry of these practices into dance was facilitated by dance and movement practitioners such as Martha Myers who "was seminal in crossfertilizing somatics within 'the dance world' by sponsoring body therapy workshops at the American Dance Festival" (Eddy, 2009, p.9) and the relationship of modern dance and somatic movements that appeared around the same time and for similar reasons, rooted in the search for innovative bodily techniques (Eddy, 2009). Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen was a part of this movement. As a dance teacher and an occupational therapist she developed a system of movement based on dance and somatic principles called Body Mind Centering. She states that through touch "attention is given to discovering the primary tissues through which the clients express themselves and those which are usually in shadow, so that the supporting tissues can be given voice and the articulating ones be allowed to recuperate" (B.B. Cohen, 1993, p.6). This statement echoes the role that somatic touch can play in dance training and one that has been used in much contemporary dance education. As this knowledge spread into modern and subsequently contemporary dance, studies have emerged looking at the use of somatic practices in contemporary dance class.

Research on somatic touch in dance class

Since these developments several studies have attempted to examine and promote the use of somatic principles and their use of touch in dance training.

Brodie and Lobel (2004) proposed a model for the integration of fundamental principles underlying somatic practices into dance technique class, somatic touch being one of them. They constructed a plan where somatic principles of breath,

sensing the environment, connectivity of the body into the ground, and initiation, are used within the dance class setting so as not to disrupt the actual flow of the class. During the 'sensing the environment' section of the proposed model, the students are encouraged to move through the environment and shift their awareness to touch, think about what they are touching, what is touching them, as well using the awareness of touch to meet and greet others in their environment (p.82). This model was a foundation on which further studies were built.

Weber (2009) conducted a practical study integrating semi-structured somatic practices and contemporary dance technique training. Besides conducting a background study on somatics within dance training, she led an experiment on first year college dance students that consisted of them participating in somatically informed, contemporary dance technique classes. A group of 8 students, aged 16-37², with various dance backgrounds took part in six sessions of contemporary technique classes with integrated somatic elements. They were taught by Weber herself with the regular teacher present, and the classes formed a part of their course module (p.242). These classes included an introduction to somatics and fluid systems of: cerebrospinal, synovial, lymphatic, and blood structures, as well as their use in contemporary dance.

The students signed consent and disclaimer forms regarding the use of touch and during the 2nd session were introduced to "the aspect of touch work to

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² 7 subjects were 16-19 years old and one was 37, this participant was an outlier both in age and in the fact of having some previous somatic experience.

bring and guide awareness with partners in the somatic explorations" (Weber, 2009, p.243). The results of the study gathered through verbal and written feedback as well as observation included improved "connection within/to the body, confidence, enjoyment and relaxation, creativity, implications of dance technique skills and the development of critical understanding" (Weber, 2009, p.246). These results demonstrated a successful application of touch and somatic work a contemporary dance studio environment.

As a product of a similar environment and training, Allen (2009) used a phenomenological approach to discuss her encounters with somatic practices in postgraduate dance training. She argues that if we use language as our means to teach dance "we privilege thought over the pre-reflective realm of sensation" and that "the body has an innate knowledge that is beyond cognition and can learn from touch and latently" (pp.218-219). Allen encourages the use of somatic practice and touch in dance because "most somatic practices place a greater emphasis on touch and sensation, recognizing the inherent intelligence of the body and the capacity for communication on a cellular, vibrational level" (p.219), therefore providing further incentive for the development of somatic practices in dance training.

These studies show the increasing development and interest in vocational use of touch and hands on feedback in dance education where somatics have provided a solid background of knowledge and experience on the topic. This type of research is very useful for dance pedagogy and hopefully in the future there will be such studies on other styles of dance as well.

Suggestions for future application

Dancers and dance teachers often use touch and hands on feedback during a lesson but there can be negative connotations associated with it for the students, as it usually signifies critique or a correction of some sort. With this in mind, it is not likely that one would benefit from the positive aspects of touch in learning. It is therefore important to investigate touch and consider it from as many angles as possible to be able to review and analyze its use in dance education. This would facilitate clear guidelines for the teachers regarding how, when, and where to touch as well as informing the students about its positive or negative effects. So far we have seen that touch is a very broad and sensitive topic in dance teaching and can do as much harm as good if not used with skill and caution.

Having examined several examples of the use of touch in various fields, it is clear that there are certain strategies that seem to work for other movement disciplines (e.g. Alexander technique's 'empty hands', or Body Mind Centering's hands on work) that can be used to enhance touch and hands on feedback abilities in dance teachers. Many dance instructors have already incorporated such techniques in their teaching, but those educators seem largely limited to contemporary dance. In other fields, more awareness is needed on the topic and a standardized training as well as a comprehensive policy for the use of touch in dance teaching seems due. As the awareness of touch becomes more common in the society at large, dance education must adapt and formalize its methods of

teaching that involve touch and hands on feedback. Hanh (2007) expresses this issue neatly:

Touch is an intriguing sense that I feel is often taken for granted, or relegated as taboo for its manipulative or sexual connotations. It is this very social arena of heightened awareness and connotations that is important to take into consideration when observing how touch is used to teach. (p.111)

Conclusion

Unfortunately such sensitivity is not always present in dance teaching, and neither is the proper use of hands on feedback or touching. Dance teachers generally do not get three years to improve their use of hands, and do not always have time or finances to integrate somatic practices within their classes (Brodie & Lobel, 2004, p.80). Their experience with touch is therefore very subjective and dependent on their personal dance/touch history, which could be perceived as inappropriate or even offensive by some students if we take all of the above factors involving touch and teaching into consideration.

Prior to the development of a framework for the use of touch in dance education, teachers can try to be more aware and cautious with their use of touch by using some basic principles within their class. Barret (2003) provides a basic example of such principles used for yoga teaching; he suggests teachers should feel grateful to their students, check their intentions when touching during teaching, be open to discussion with the students, and do their inner homework in order to be mentally committed to the class (p.106). This simple set of

personal rules should keep the teacher focused and put him or her in tune with the student allowing touching to happen (or not) organically and without too much effort. When one is aware of all the factors involved, external and internal, using the right touch can be a bit like making your way through the pedestrian traffic on a busy street, it seems complicated but most of us do it naturally. We must make our way around the invisible barriers of students' touch histories using our knowledge and intuition, attempting to get to our goal without disturbing them, and using touch as a helpful teaching and learning tool.

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