

Core Elements in The Training of Upper Secondary School Dance Pupils in Norway

Anette Sture Iversen

ABSTRACT

In Norway's upper secondary schools, pupils can choose dance as their main subject of study in a programme designed to prepare them for higher education in general and, more specifically, higher education in dance. A committee selected by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training was appointed in autumn of 2015 and given a mandate to evaluate the structure of the programme and suggest changes that would increase its relevance. A reference group was selected to respond to the committee's first draft in December 2015, before the draft was open to comments from the rest of the dance environment (spring 2016). The author took part in the reference group. In this process, several individuals representing the fields of education and professional dance argued that the traditional hegemony of the three scenic dance forms (classical ballet, jazz and contemporary dance) needs to be challenged as it no longer sufficiently prepares pupils for a career in dance. One could argue that new dance forms, personal expression, performative and collaborative skills are more in demand today. In her own teaching of contemporary dance in upper secondary school, the author has found it relevant to focus on what she sees as core elements in the training of today's performers in addition to, and sometimes instead of, (traditional) technical exercises, especially early on in pupils' dance education. She proposes that it would be beneficial to pupils to replace some of the technical training in the scenic dance forms with these core elements in a restructuring of the dance programmes in upper secondary education.

SAMMENDRAG

I videregående skole i Norge kan elever velge programområdet dans som er laget for å forberede eleven både for høyere utdanning generelt og for høyere utdanning i dans spesielt. En komité ble høsten 2015 nedsatt av Utdanningsdirektoratet og gitt mandat til å evaluere programområdet musikk-dans-drama og foreslå endringer for å styrke dets relevans. En referansegruppe ble satt ned for å komme med innspill til komiteens førsteutkast i desember 2015, før utkastet ble gjort tilgjengelig for resten av fagmiljøet våren 2016. Forfatteren deltok i referansegruppen. I denne prosessen argumenterte representanter for utdanningsfeltet og det profesjonelle dansefeltet for at det tradisjonelle hegemoniet med tre sceniske danseformer (klassisk ballett, jazzballett og moderne/samtidsdans) må utfordres ettersom det ikke lenger forereder eleven godt nok for en karriere i dans. I dag kan man hevde at nye danseformer, personlig uttrykk, performative og relasjonelle ferdigheter er mer etterspurt. I dette perspektivet har forfatteren i sin egen undervisning i moderne/samtidsdans i videregående skole, funnet det relevant å fokusere på det hun ser på som kjerneelementer i treningen av en kommende utøver i dag, i tillegg til og noen ganger istedenfor (tradisjonelle) tekniske øvelser, særlig tidlig i elevenes dansetrening. Og hun spør om det kunne vært en fordel for elevene å erstatte noe av den tekniske treningen i sceniske danseformer med disse kjerneelementene i en omstrukturering av programområdet dans i videregående utdanning.

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Introduction

In Norway's educational system, pupils can choose dance as their main subject of study in upper secondary school. Twenty-five schools across the country offer this option as a three-year course that prepares pupils for higher education in general and, more specifically, for higher education in dance. In addition to many of the regular academic subjects, these programmes contain subjects like classical ballet, jazz, modern and contemporary dance, composition, dance history and more. Many of the pupils in these programmes continue on to higher education in dance, so it is important that the content is relevant for both higher education and a professional career in dance. The teachers in these programmes all have higher education in dance and dance pedagogy, and many have considerable professional experience as performers and/or choreographers. This implies that the quality of these programmes is good and that the programmes have clear goals. The current national curriculum, *Kunnskapsløftet (The Knowledge Promotion Curriculum)*, was implemented in 2006. The structure of the dance programme in this curriculum is currently being evaluated by a committee selected by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. In December 2015, before the committee's draft was open for comments from the dance environment (scheduled for spring 2016), a reference group was selected to respond to the committee's first draft. I was invited to take part in the reference group due to my positions as an upper secondary school teacher and an advisor in the organisation Dans i Skolen.

Time to challenge traditions?

Early in the process, in meetings between the reference group and the committee, it became evident that the evaluation and renewal of dance education in Norway's upper secondary schools called for a rethinking of the traditional hierarchy of scenic or theatrical dance forms within education. Representatives from the professional dance field and various areas of the educational field, such as teacher education, argued that the traditional hierarchy in dance education ought to be challenged. They argued that traditional dance education – where classical ballet, contemporary dance and jazz dance are considered the most important dance forms – no longer sufficiently prepares pupils for a career in a field where new genres like street dance play an important part and where artistic collaborations often take the form of collective team projects. The content of the current programme does not appear to correspond with the professional work the pupils are preparing for. In addition, the pupils applying to the upper secondary dance programmes have varied backgrounds and previous training experiences. Today more than ever, pupils' preferences may deviate from the traditional scenic dance forms. It is no longer evident that a street dancer needs skills in classical ballet to proceed to higher education or succeed as a professional performer, yet the curriculum insists on a hierarchy of dance forms in which classical ballet is still on top. Over the last couple of years, some secondary schools have met this challenge by including urban dance forms in their curriculum, but they have done so without altering the position and status of ballet, jazz and contemporary dance. This results in other, more

practical dilemmas, like subject density: crammed timetables with numerous subjects fighting each other for attention, time and value. Within the same limited timeframe, today's pupils have to master more dance genres than ever before.

In the reference group, questions like the following were asked: Do all dance students have to study all dance techniques, regardless of talent and interest?

Professional relevance

Keeping in mind that one of the responsibilities of the dance programmes in upper secondary school is to prepare pupils for higher education first and, ultimately, for a career in dance, I think it is pertinent to include some perspective on the position of the professional dancer in Norway today. Over the last decade in the professional field of theatre dance, performers have changed from being specialized in one technique to being more versatile. Choreographers often expect dancers to be “all-rounders” and to contribute more to the creative process. In order to meet this demand, improvisation became compulsory in the lion's share of dance subjects in upper secondary school, from the curriculum Kunnskapsløftet 2006 and onwards. At the same time, some choreographers prefer to use actors instead of dancers in their pieces; they argue that dancers cannot free themselves from the dancer's way of moving or the specific technique or form they are trained in. Other choreographers replace the contemporary dancer with jazz dancers and break dancers due to the latter's assumed superiority in speed, strength or acrobatic ability. Simply put, our upper secondary dance programmes continue to educate pupils in a traditional direction – where the three scenic dance forms are seen as separate and static systems with eternal relevance – whereas today's choreographers are looking for numerous and various skills in a performer.

Norway's national company for contemporary

dance, Carte Blanche, has gone through a transformation in aesthetic expression since Hooman Sharifi took over as director in the autumn of 2014. Many of the traditionally skilled dancers (often trained in classical ballet and modern/contemporary dance) have been replaced by a more mixed group, and improvisation has become more present in the company's stage performances.

In an interview with Hanne Nordvåg at www.scenekunst.no, Hooman Sharifi discussed why he has changed the company's aesthetic expression and how he employs the traditionally technical dancers differently (my translation):

I don't mind technique. On the contrary, I think it's nice. But I mean we need to spend more time discussing how to use it in different ways, and less time learning it.

(...)

Yes, it is about understanding basic principles. There are a lot of dancers today that do exactly that, but regarding education there are two different ways to see school: One: to feed what already is. Two: to shape the future, how we want it to look.

(...)

What we require of a dancer is a lot more today – one has to master several expressions, create one's own workplace – that is a lot more than steps.

Sbarifi adds that a dancer needs to know how to communicate with the whole being: physical, intellectual, historical and private or personal.

With this backdrop, my suggestion is that a dance pupil might benefit more from learning and practicing dance based on core principles rather than learning

forms and steps from a specific system or tradition. Specific techniques or styles would be considered secondary to core elements in training a dancer in upper secondary school in order to prepare her for further education in dance and a possible career as a performing artist.

In addition to discussing the value of learning and adapting specific movement systems, the members of the reference group emphasized the importance of pupils gaining collaborative skills. In Norway, and I believe in most other countries today, the work opportunities for dance artists are found primarily outside of institutions. Many initiatives are coming from artistic collectives: creative artists teaming up and joining forces in various non-hierarchical constellations.

My pedagogical and technical foundation

I have taught various dance subjects in upper secondary school in Norway since 1999, and my specialty and primary field of interest is contemporary dance based on the principles of José Limón and contact improvisation. This naturally influences the way I look at and value movement and aesthetics, but it has also made me question if it is possible to find core elements relevant for a dance education today. This, I believe, is due to the journey that the subject of modern/contemporary dance has taken over the two last decades. I would argue that during this time we have seen a shift from modern dance techniques to contemporary dance techniques or movement philosophies that have generated change in both content and working methods. Today many pedagogues build their contemporary dance classes using a variation of movement principles, exercises inspired/taken from yoga, body-mind centring and contact improvisation or partnering, where the focus is something other than learning a specific or set movement vocabulary. To my knowledge, this

development has mainly taken place within the contemporary dance paradigm and not in jazz dance and classical ballet. Seeing the dance programme from this viewpoint, and the backgrounds/interests/skills of the pupils in relation to the crammed timetables and demands in the professional field, I have asked myself if it would be better to structure the dance programme differently. Would it be possible to concentrate efforts on studying certain core elements and focus less on learning specific steps and movements?

Core Elements – what and why?

The pupils in the dance programme in upper secondary school have varied backgrounds. Some have very little previous experience; some have a lot. Very often, they have skills in one specific technique. The students with newer skills in street dance have hardly any experience with classical ballet, jazz dance or contemporary dance. Looking at the first-year pupils in my contemporary dance classes, I have often observed that they can easily copy my movements and exercises because they are coordinated and have experience in picking up and memorizing movement combinations. But there is often something lacking – some essential qualities of a dancer that would deepen their expression and presence and give them clarity in movement. In my attempts to pinpoint what is lacking, I have identified it to be connected to breathing, dynamic posture/alignment/balance, awareness and presentation, relational work, improvisation and collaboration. In the following section, I will present these elements one by one and give examples of how I apply them in class.

Breath:

Breath and breathing is a core element that helps pupils vary dynamic qualities and musicality in their dance. One could also say that breath plays a key role in being present in both body and space. Exercises focusing on breath are known to release tension and

increase vitality, force and mindfulness, all relevant in developing a strong (stage) presence. I agree with dance researcher Leena Rouhiainen, who writes that “breathing is considered an embodied way of relating and addressed as a function that engages the full body or subjectivity of the individual” (2015: 9).

An exercise focusing on breathing can consist of simply lying or sitting down, listening and becoming aware of one’s own breath, or more dynamic exercises like sun salutation A and B from yoga, where each breath initiates a movement.

Dynamic posture and alignment:

Posture includes alignment and core (strength). It is connected to a healthy and tension-free carriage of the body that indicates both an aesthetic dimension and a suitable way of moving. Working on improving and being aware of one’s dynamic posture will most likely result in a faster progression. Posture is connected to balance and weight transfer (i.e. travelling). Core strength and posture are in a reciprocal relationship.

Exercises revolve around curving and extending the spine, alignment of joints, opposition and extension of limbs, balance and off-balance.

Awareness and presentation:

In my experience, when pupils consciously work on becoming aware of their own bodies and presence, it increases their movement quality. Movements appear more deeply felt or integrated in the physical body and more deeply connected to the pupils’ emotions. This awareness also increases alignment and spatial orientation. In addition to using repetition of specific movements as a method, I believe it is equally important to focus on how the movement is done and experienced in order to increase the movement quality. I find that this approach leads to a faster progression for the pupil when learning specific movements or steps. Because of this conviction, I have made more room in my classes over the years for exercises focusing

on body awareness, awakening the senses, listening, etc. In this work, breath is a key element. Exercises can focus on exploring walking, taking in the space, feeling the weight of the body or the weight of limbs, registering the present feeling in the body, noticing the weight transfer, and so on.

As a continuation of exercises focusing on awareness, I believe in developing pupils’ performance skills, which often requires a focus on awareness. Even when we are not playing a role or character on stage, we are not our private selves. The inexperienced pupil is often private, getting “out of character” in performance situations or simply being unaware of the fact that he is performing, so I find it helpful to work on this in class as part of professionalizing the pupil. The exercises can start off as above, with students walking around the room but focusing more externally on meeting others and really seeing them. Students can then apply one of several set meetings taken from contact improvisation, or they can practice instant composition in relation to the other(s) in the room. In my experience, exercises like these help pupils become aware of their presence in performance situations and train their performance skills.

Relational work and contact:

Dancers are always in relation to each other in various ways. A dancer is also in relation to the floor, to time and space, to the music, to the overall theme and, last but not least, to the audience. Exercises on breath and performative presence improve students’ awareness of others. Traditionally, the interrelational aspect of dance is not addressed until a performance situation is approaching. My suggestion is therefore to include relational work more often. Exercises focusing on relation and touch are, in my experience, of great value in a regular technique class.

Improvisation:

I understand improvisation both as a skill and as a working method. Improvisation can be seen in relation to the process of (body) awareness and the development of personal expression. I use improvisation frequently as a tool for pupils to explore their movement potential and develop their personal expressions, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to explore and become familiar with the technical elements and principles we are working on. Using improvisation regularly as a working method, I have seen a faster progression in the profundity of many students' work as well as a higher awareness of dynamic variation and spatial orientation. Having pupils improvise with set exercises where they can choose the order of the elements, the timing, the direction, etc., makes them more aware of all of these (technical) elements and the many possibilities they have in performing them.

Collaborative skills:

As noted earlier, the professional dance field today is often organized collaboratively. Be it in training situations, choreographic processes or the organizing of performative events, collaborative skills are needed. The ability to collaborate and see oneself as connected to others, to a group, to a field, can also improve the performative and relational skills. Therefore, I often use collaborative tasks as a working method, both to explore movement potential and to work on individual technical elements. For instance, one can work on core technical elements like posture and alignment and, at the same time, build trust within a group by having the group lift or carry one pupil at a time or by using exercises that involve sharing weight, leaning and balancing.

Possible consequences for working methods in class situations

Focusing on certain core elements like those listed above – instead of, or in addition to, a specific

movement vocabulary – may have consequences for both content and form in the studio. In my own classes in contemporary dance, especially with first-year students, I have found it useful to take inspiration from and include principles or exercises from both yoga (breath) and contact improvisation (contact/relation, balance, and weight transfer). I have found it equally useful to assign collaborative tasks to pairs or larger groups (awareness, presence, relations, alignment and more) instead of exercises for the individual pupil in front of the mirror. I give a lot of attention to tasks focusing on both exploring movement and strengthening personal expression (through improvisation) and on developing performing skills. The latter includes how the pupils see and meet each other physically and emotionally. Even though this approach may be more common in contemporary dance classes, I believe it represents possibilities for training pupils in certain core skills that could be useful in whatever artistic direction they would like to go next.

Conclusion

The traditional hegemony of classical ballet, jazz dance and contemporary dance and its didactics are, little by little, being challenged in upper secondary dance education in Norway and in the field of professional dance. In a process of restructuring upper secondary dance programmes, the committee and the reference group discussed what changes should be made to better prepare pupils for the demands of higher education and today's professional dance field. By taking part in this process, I was inspired to look at and analyse my own teaching, both in content and working methods, and I have shared some core elements that I believe are more relevant for pupils today than training in traditional scenic dance techniques. I believe it would be beneficial to consider replacing some of the traditional scenic dance forms with core elements, both as a solution to crammed

timetables and to prepare students for faster learning when we start the more genre-specific training. We who teach in upper secondary dance programmes should investigate further whether dance training could consist of certain core elements previous to, or as part of, the training in specific dance forms, genres or styles as part of a process of making the programmes more relevant for students pursuing further education and a career in dance.

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BIOGRAPHY

Anette Sture Iversen is a dance artist, pedagogue and scholar. She holds a BA in theatre dance, an MA in theatre studies and a teaching degree from Oslo National Academy of the Arts. She has been a dancer and choreographer with her own company along with teaching contemporary dance, dance history and theory to dance students in upper secondary school and higher

education. Since 2008, she has also been employed by DiS as a dance consultant. Anette is editor of *På Spissen*, the members' magazine for the Norwegian Association for Dance Artists.

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