Dance Technique and Power Dynamics in Higher Education: A Literature Review

Irene Velten Rothmund

ABSTRACT

Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a heightened emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, with an urge to reform the relationship between teachers and students. During this same period, a growing body of research has been conducted on unequal power dynamics in the teaching of dance technique. In this study, I am doing a literature review of 20 articles published between 1998 and 2020, which especially addressed dance technique and power dynamics in the context of higher education. I am particularly exploring strategies proposed in the literature to challenge unequal power dynamics within dance technique training in higher education. Through a thematic analysis of the articles, I have identified three clusters of strategies in the material: *reflexivity of traditions in dance, activity*, and *embodiment*. The research shows that there is a rather high interest in continuing and reforming the teaching of dance technique, and that there are several examples of empirical research related to heightening the students' activity in their learning process. However, there is still a need for more research on this topic, especially concerning the connection between embodiment and empowerment.

SAMMENDRAG

Det har siden årtusenskiftet vært et økt fokus på kvalitet på undervisning og læring i høyere utdanning, med særlig vekt på endringer i forholdet mellom lærer og student. I den samme perioden har det blitt publisert gradvis flere artikler som setter lys på ujevne maktrelasjoner i undervisning av danseteknikk. I denne artikkelen gjør jeg en litteraturstudie av 20 artikler som har fokus på danseteknikk og maktrelasjoner i høyere utdanning. Artiklene er skrevet mellom 1998 og 2020. Jeg undersøker hvilke strategier som forfatterne foreslår for å utfordre ujevne maktstrukturer i danseteknikk i høyere utdanning. Etter en tematisk analyse av artiklene har jeg identifisert tre hovedstrategier i materialet: *Bevissthet om tradisjoner i dans, aktivitet* og *kroppsliggjøring*. Resultatet av analysen viser at det er en relativt høy interesse for både å opprettholde og videreutvikle undervisning av danseteknikk. Det er spesielt mange eksempler på empirisk forskning i tilknytning til å øke studentenes aktivitet i læreprosessen. I artikkelen argumenterer jeg for at det fremdeles er behov for mer forskning på temaet, spesielt i forbindelse med sammenheng mellom kropp og myndiggjøring.

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Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a heightened emphasis on the quality of teaching and incdearning in higher education (Biggs and Tang 2011, 3), with an urge to reform the relationship between teachers and students (Barr and Tagg 1995, 17), thus empowering students in the learning situation. The question of power dynamics is highly relevant in the field of dance, in the context of both learning dance technique and rehearsing choreography, as teachers or choreographers can easily take on, or even be given, the role of an authority in the situation. Lepecki has referred to choreography as a *system of command*: "Indeed, as a system of command, the choreographic scoring reveals the formation of obedient, disciplined, and (pre) formatted bodies – technically and subjectively fit to produce and (more importantly perhaps) to reproduce certain staged images conveyed by an authoritarian will" (2016, 16).

Dance technique has been, and to a large extent still is, an important part of the formation of the dancer to be *fit to produce or reproduce choreography*. Just as Lepecki connects choreographic scoring to an *authoritarian will*, dance technique has been criticized for authoritarian tendencies and unequal power dynamics in the teaching situation. For instance, Dragon describes how the training of dance performance artists in higher education has traditionally been rather teacher-centred and often authoritarian. However, since the turn of the millennium, there has been increasing interest in merging holistic, process-oriented, and student-centred work, such as somatics, into dance technique (2015, 28–29).

Moreover, a growing body of research has been investigating unequal power dynamics in the teaching of dance technique for the last two decades. I consider this as an important question, not least in connection with the education of professional dancers. In this study, I will do a literature review of research articles from this period, which especially address dance technique and power dynamics in the context of higher education. My aim has been to get an overview of how central this topic has been in the period and, more specifically, to investigate the strategies proposed in the literature to address this problem. My research question is:

What strategies are suggested by dance researchers to challenge unequal power dynamics within dance technique training in higher education?

Materials and Methods

This review belongs methodically to what Sutton et al. (2019) describe as the *qualitative review family*. They have classified the types and families of literature reviews and stressed the importance of being systematic and explicit with the methods used (2019, 203).

To select the relevant articles, I conducted a literature search in Oria, the Norwegian university library database, using the search words *dance technique, power dynamics*, and *higher education*. The search was delimited to articles that were accessible electronically and written in English. Supplementary search methods were also applied by browsing through journals for dance education, such as *Research in Dance Education* and *Journal of*

Dance Education, and by checking reference lists. Through this reference checking, two book chapters were included. I did not intend to find all existing articles but to select the ones that especially addressed the research question of this study. Thus, my approach was interpretative rather than aggregative (Sutton et al. 2019, 212).

The literature search was conducted several times between April and October 2022. After reading through the collected articles, I selected 20 articles that addressed the question of power dynamics in the teaching of dance technique in higher education. To get an overview of the articles, I first briefly categorized them contextually based on the details of the authors and the research methodology. Then, I did a thematic analysis of the content of the articles to identify common themes across the articles. These methods were similar to two review types within the *qualitative review family*. As in the *qualitative systematic review*, I am comparing themes across individual studies (Sutton et al. 2019, 207), and as in the *qualitative meta-synthesis*, I am identifying "a specific research question and then search for, select, appraise, summarise, and combine qualitative evidence to address the research question" (Sutton et al. 2019, 208).

Contextual Overview of the Articles

The articles were written between 1998 and 2020. Of these 20 articles, 13 were written in the last ten years, thus showing an increasing recent interest in this topic. I did not specify the kind of dance technique in the search; however, half of the articles addressed modern or contemporary dance – ten explicitly and one implicitly. Furthermore, eight investigated Western concert dance in general (including modern or contemporary dance) and one performed a study about ballet. All the articles were written by authors affiliated with institutions in English-speaking countries: ten in the USA, six in the UK, two in Canada, one in New Zealand, and one in Australia. In all of the articles, at least one of the authors was a dance teacher; thus, this academic research had a strong base and closeness to the practice of dance and dance teaching. Only one of these teacher-researchers was male, and the rest were female.

This brief quantitative overview shows that this topic has had an especially high interest among female dance teacher-researchers in the field of modern and contemporary dance in the USA and the UK. If the search had included other languages, I might have found a more geographic diversity. However, as English is a common language for academics in many countries, this might not be the main reason. This may rather indicate that the USA and the UK have a leading role in research on dance and dance education and that this topic has a special high interest among dance teacher-researchers in those countries.

The majority of the articles have a theoretical foundation in pedagogical theory, either within the framework of critical and feminist pedagogy or relating to theories of student-centred learning in higher education. Several of them use a combination of the two, and Alterowitz (2014) shows how feminist pedagogy and principles of student-centred learning are interconnected. In addition, a few articles use perspectives from sociology or theory about embodiment. Regarding research methods, three of the articles are theoretical, with historical overviews and discussions on paradigms within dance technique and dance education (Dyer 2009; Dragon 2015; Barr and Oliver 2016). The others are empirical. Seven are seen from the teacher's point of view, either the researchers themselves or other teachers (Fortin 1998; Smith 1998; Lakes 2005; Burnidge 2012; Rimmer 2013; Fitzgerald 2017; Richmond and Bird 2020). Ten discuss students' experiences with different pedagogical methods

(Green 1999; Råman 2009; Dyer 2010; Harbonnier-Topin and Barbier 2012; Alterowitz 2014; Dryburg and Jackson 2016; Akinleye and Payne 2016; Rimmer 2017; Huddy 2017; Dryburgh 2019).

Most of the articles refer to other research relevant to their themes, and some have especially many cross-references between the articles: Fortin (1998), Lakes (2005), Dyer (2010), Råman (2009), Burnidge (2012), and Alterowitz (2014). This shows that there is a growing research field gradually developing more knowledge concerning dance technique and power dynamics. One of the articles, Barr and Oliver (2016), makes a more thorough literature review, with feminist pedagogy as a theoretical lens. My article makes a supplementary contribution to this, with an emphasis on unpacking the concrete strategies made in the articles.

Thematic Analysis of the Articles

Common to all the articles is an urge to change unequal power dynamics in the learning situation. In this analysis, I have searched for the practical strategies the researchers suggest to make this change happen. One solution, or maybe even a trend, has been to abandon dance technique or the teaching of set movement material altogether and replace it with improvisation and different kinds of exploration or somatic practices. "A number of writers in the field of dance research have in fact questioned the process of learning through imitation, considering it to be superficial and alienating" (Harbonnier-Topin and Barbier 2012, 301). However, the authors of the 20 articles are not content with that solution; instead, they suggest other strategies to overcome the problems with authoritarian teaching approaches within dance technique training.

Through a thematic analysis of these articles, I have identified the following three clusters of strategies that are common in the material:

1) reflexivity of traditions in dance,
2) activity, and
3) embodiment.

1. Reflexivity of traditions in dance

All three theoretical-based articles, as well as some of the empirical-based, address how traditions in dance can be an obstacle to change. I have identified three specific strategies in the material: *to be aware of the impact of hidden traditions, to expose authoritarian behaviour,* and *to challenge the link between codified techniques and authoritarian practices*.

Dragon describes how more process-oriented work, such as somatics, has been merged into dance technique as a way to empower the students. However, she points out that teaching traditions are often silently embedded into dance classroom experiences, with the risk of perpetuating authoritarian teaching practices (2015, 25–26). Lakes also stresses that the teaching methods often pass uncritical from generation to generation and that there is a striking irony that "authoritarian teaching methods are often utilised as a means toward the end of anti-authoritarian concert dances" (Lakes 2005, 3). They both argue for the need to *be aware of the impact of hidden traditions* in dance. Dragon adds that reflexivity of traditions is important for both teachers and students, as many dance students enter higher education expecting to be "taught as they were taught." She suggests heightening the awareness of the educators' dance teacher identity, which comprises values, philosophies, and practices (2015, 26). "Through examining our teaching methods, situating them historically and contextually in a specific teaching and learning environment, and sharing our pedagogical choices, we (students and faculty) can be empowered to consciously create our teaching and learning cultures" (Dragon 2015, 31). The strategy of Lakes (2005), Richmond and Bird (2020), and Clyde Smith (1998) is to *expose*

authoritarian behaviour. Lakes describes numerous examples of authoritarian behaviour from both choreographers and teachers, and by that, she exposes what she calls the hidden curricula in the dance class. She urges teachers to re-examine their own inherited pedagogical heritage (2005, 16). Richmond and Bird similarly show examples of their own experiences with authoritarian teaching methods, arguing for a heightened reflexivity of values and pedagogical knowledge among dance teachers (2020, 6). Smith discusses the connection between authoritarian teacher behaviour and submissive student behaviour and the need to expose both (1998, 143).

The last strategy regarding reflexivity of traditions is *to challenge the link between codified techniques and authoritarian practices*. Dyer (2009) describes two different paradigms of teaching dance technique: one focusing on an aesthetic vocabulary and the other on sensing and understanding one's own body. The former paradigm has been criticized for using authoritarian teaching methods, while the latter is often associated with empowerment. However, Dyer argues that authoritarian pedagogical approaches need not be wed to the study of traditional dance technique aesthetics. She writes that the harm is not in the performance of codified movements itself but in the teaching framework it is presented in: "The technical vocabularies of specific dance techniques can be utilized in a variety of ways for personal meaningful discoveries and artistic experiences in dance without incorporating authoritarian teaching approaches" (Dyer 2009, 120). Burnidge (2012) agrees with Dyer and adds that it is not the content of the dance, but rather the methods used "that are of utmost importance in creating change toward a more democratic, more contemporary pedagogical environment in dance" (Burnidge 2012, 46).

2. Activity

All 10 articles based on empirical studies on students' experiences with various teaching methods, as well as some of those based on teachers' experiences, are, in different ways, concerned with students' activities in the dance class. One article analyses what kind of activity is already going on in a dance class (Harbonnier-Topin and Barbier 2012). Then, there are several other articles analysing the results from interventions with different methods for heightening the students' activity and the feeling of empowerment. I have identified six interconnected strategies in this material: *interaction, enquiry, feedback, collaboration, critical thinking*, and *community*. These strategies resonate with principles within both feminist pedagogy and student-centred learning (Alterowitz 2014, 9). In addition, there is one common challenge visible in the material regarding *the students' expectations*.

Harbonnier-Topin and Barbier show that the *interaction* between teachers and students is complex and diverse when learning through demonstration–reproduction (2012, 301). By doing an activity analysis of teachers and students in contemporary dance classes, they find that the students are doing with, doing after, seeing, questioning, performing alone, practicing alone, and working between autonomy and dependence. The authors conclude that this pedagogical method is far more complex than it is usually presumed to be and that learners always make some personal choices in their learning strategies (2012, 321). In several of the other articles, the main emphasis is to challenge the traditional interaction between teachers and students by shifting the role of teachers from experts to facilitators of learning (i.e. Råman 2009; Fitzgerald 2017). The strategies used are, for instance, to let the students shape goals, objectives, and content (Dyer 2010, 114) and involve the students in discussions, reflection, and collaboration (Fitzgerald 2017; Alterowitz 2014). Dryburgh (2019, 96) writes that it is important to

establish a safe environment of respect and care to enable emancipatory learning.

Another strategy to lessen students' reliance on the teacher is the use of *enquiry*, for instance, by giving the students time for experimentation with particular steps to enable self-discovery (Alterowitz 2014, 12) or using improvisation to foster an empowering sense of individual artistry and ownership (Rimmer 2013, 145). In Rimmer (2017), the students are given different problem-solving tasks, such as improvisation, investigating principles alone and with a partner, and making their own phrases. The goal is to facilitate the students to become active agents of their learning (2017, 224–225).

The use and function of *feedback* are discussed in several articles, often in connection with *collaboration* and *critical thinking*. In dance technique, feedback is traditionally given as one-way corrections, and to activate the students more in the process, Akinleye and Payne (2016) suggest focusing more on the students' response to feedback by using collaboration and critical thinking. Huddy (2017) applies digital technology as a tool for students' self-assessment. By learning to evaluate their progress, the students assume more responsibility for their learning, they develop their learning capacity and ability for critical reflection, and the collaboration between the students is heightened (2017, 179–182). Råman (2009) uses collaboration in pairs, encouraging the students to provide feedback to one another and to evaluate their own learning as a way to promote critical thinking as well as to enhance the learning of technique. She states that this collaborative learning mode shifts the power structure of the class, and her role as a leader becomes less emphasized (2009, 81). Dryburg and Jackson (2016) similarly combine feedback, collaboration, and critical thinking. In a project using a flipchart as a tool for reflection in action and dialogical enquiry, the students are given time to write, discuss, and reflect during the classes. By getting such possibilities for enquiry in a dance class, "the student is empowered to define their own learning process; making choices, setting questions, finding their voice, identifying objectives, realising authenticity, and supporting each other" (2016, 142).

There are a few authors who suggest making connections between the dance classroom and the *community* at large. Dyer encourages students to reflect on pedagogical and socio-political processes and to consider how this "related to their larger social values, ideologies and actions outside of the classroom" (2010, 111). Burnidge emphasizes the need to build a safe and supportive environment rather than an atmosphere of competition and favoritism. "A community needs to be created where acceptance and respect of individual knowledge and cultural differences come from both the teacher-facilitator and from each participant" (2012, 44). Fitzgerald considers the dance class a politically complex environment and a place to foster responsible citizenship (2017, 1). She considers peer feedback, collaboration, and freedom of choice as socially engaged strategies. She argues that building mutual trust and support is a way to promote empowerment and social transformation. "Perhaps the cultivation of reciprocity in dance technique, which is essential in fostering growth of a democratic community, can contribute to our students' growth as responsible citizens who have a deep concern of the welfare of other individuals" (2017, 7).

These examples show that there has been a fair amount of empirical research regarding heightening the students' activity in the dance class and that there are many advantages with such a student-centred approach. However, as many as 11 of the articles report on one particular challenge with this approach, namely, *the students' expectations*. As mentioned earlier, because of the often-hidden traditions in dance, there is a tendency for students

to expect to be "taught as they were taught" (Dragon 2015, 26), which puts pressure on the teacher to live up to the students' expectations of how a dance class should be (Alterowitz 2014, 13; Fortin 1998, 54). This applies especially to fresh students entering higher education (Rimmer 2013, 143; Dryburgh and Jackson 2016, 134). It is also often mentioned in research working with alternative methods for feedback, as some students expect to be told exactly what to do (Barr and Oliver 2016, 102; Burnidge 2012, 46), preferring feedback delivered as right or wrong, and not as more reflective suggestions from the teacher (Dyer 2010, 128). Such a focus on getting the movement right or wrong positions the teacher as a figure of authority and judgement (Rimmer 2017, 221). For some students, the lack of authority is equated with the teacher not being able or proficient in the technique (Akinleye and Payne 2016, 146).

Several of the authors argue that there is a need to be aware of these challenges, as the requirement to learn in new ways can potentially inhibit a student's transition into a new learning environment (Dryburgh and Jackson 2016, 134). Rimmer comments on this problem as follows: "Altering one's perception of the teacher as the provider of technical dance knowledge to that of a facilitator of individual knowledge can be a radical shift for some students" (2017, 223). Dryburg writes that the active participation of students in learning, although intended to promote liberation, can be experienced as burdensome, irrelevant, or obstructive (2019, 92). Dyer emphasizes the need to find ways to "negotiate teaching and learning roles within a student-centred framework with students who do not desire to exceed agency in their learning or to play active roles in the classroom" (2010, 128). Similarly, Burnidge writes, "as an educator I need to continually question the theories and practices of my field while encouraging my students to do the same" (2012, 46).

3. Embodiment

A connection between embodiment and empowerment is mentioned in some of the empirical-based articles, especially in the articles addressing somatics and how somatics informs dance technique. I have identified two strategies in this material: *refuting the myth of the ideal body and facilitating embodied knowing and sensory authority*.

Both Green (1999) and Barr and Oliver (2016) argue that certain body ideals are also a part of tradition that tend to be passed on unnoticed, working as an authority on its own. "The perfect body becomes a standardized ideal that serves as a self-imposed assessment tool by and for students" (Barr and Oliver 2016, 101). The constant focus on an externalized view of the body, as reflected in the mirror, objectifies the dancers' body, and it also gives more power to the teacher in defining rights and wrongs (Green 1999, 81). The strategy suggested in both these articles is to expose these body ideals as just myths. A heightened reflexivity about this is a way to *refute the myth of the ideal body* (Barr and Oliver 2016, 109). In addition to such a general reflexivity, some authors suggest a shift in focus from an external image to internal experiences. Burnidge writes that dance often places the demands of external form over internal experiences and student needs, making the teacher the gatekeeper of the form with the power to externally judge students and their body (2012, 44). Green writes that somatic practices can be a tool to be aware of how the ideal body is a social construction (1999, 88). Similarly, Richmond and Bird argue that a somatic approach to dance can shift the focus from how the body looks to how it feels, from product to process, and this can encourage self-understanding and promote the empowerment of dancers (2020, 137).

This connection between focusing on the internal experiences of dancing and empowerment is further explored in some articles emphasizing the

need to *facilitate embodied knowing and sensory authority.* Fortin writes that the role of the teacher "is to facilitate students' process of becoming expert of their own bodies and lives by interrogating and analysing their own experience" (1998, 65). She ties bodily awareness to the development of personal authority, which provides leverage for empowerment (1998, 66). Other authors have similar arguments:

A heightened proprioceptive awareness is a way to reclaim ownership of the body (Green 1999, 81), and it enables the participants to have further control over their movement exploration and empowers them within their own bodies (Richmond and Bird 2020, 137). By this, the students are encouraged to rely on their own subjective experiences as a source of knowledge and the acknowledgement of a bodily level of meaning (Fortin 1998, 61). The connection between critical thinking and embodiment is emphasized by some authors: "When we see the dancer as embodied rather than made of body and mind, we can better realize the moving dancer is critically thinking and analysing as she or he moves" (Akinleye and Payne 2016, 147). Dryburgh and Jackson focus on cyclical learning through combining embodied experiences and reflection in practice. They use dialogic and investigative feedback as a way to envision embodied knowing (2016, 136). Burnidge writes, "Somatic study gives voice to the body and to movement as a way of knowing" (2012, 45). She explains the connection between embodiment and empowerment like this: Somatic practice brings awareness of inner sensations, movements, thoughts and feeling, and mind–body connections. Thus, "A somatic approach to dance seeks to facilitate an environment where students can be supported to discover self-agency and the inner empowerment that sensory authority can engender" (Burnidge 2012, 44).

Conclusion

The analysis of the articles has shown that there is a relatively high interest in both continuing and reforming the teaching of dance technique. There is a growing field of empirical research regarding power dynamics and student empowerment in higher education.

This provides an important base for further research regarding the further development of the teaching of dance technique. This article contributes to this field of research by providing an overview of existing research and by identifying the concrete strategies the articles suggest. I have identified three clusters of strategies in the material: *reflexivity of traditions in dance, activity*, and *embodiment*. *Reflexivity of traditions in dance* is an important starting point, as hidden traditions might otherwise easily be an obstacle to change. *Activity* is by far the biggest and most worked through, corresponding to a heightened emphasis on student-centred learning in higher education. This body of research provides many relevant suggestions for further empirical explorations. However, the challenge with students' expectations seems to be a common problem that needs to be addressed more. The question of *embodiment* is visible in the material, but it seems to be harder to grasp and it is less worked out in these mainly pedagogical-oriented articles. I will argue that there is a need for more research on the connection between embodiment and empowerment within dance education and that a more thorough use of theory about embodiment, such as phenomenology, could provide an even more in-depth understanding of the topic.

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