

Learning Difficulties in Practical Dance Study

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Final Project Report – July 2004

Background

This is the final report of a PALATINE-funded project to enable Colin Bourne to work with students and teachers of contemporary dance technique in higher education to identify appropriate learning and teaching strategies for use with students with specific learning difficulties in a practical dance context.

The project aims:

- to raise awareness among HE dance teachers and students of the nature and extent of specific learning difficulties among HE dance students.
- to support HE dance technique teachers in the development of learning and teaching methodologies which support students with specific learning difficulties in achieving and applying the learning outcomes of their programme of study
- to help reduce feelings of isolation and anxiety amongst those members of the HE dance student community who have specific learning difficulties
- to enable HE dance students to sustain their programme of study and to maximise their potential for success

Introduction

The research project which began in May 2003 has so far been through the following stages which were outlined in the interim project report (December 2003):

- Nationwide survey of University Dance Departments and Dance Conservatoires.
- Literature search and textual research
- Interviews dance students with specific learning difficulties
- Interviews with technique staff
- Preparation of training materials for use with technique staff

The second part of the project involved working with contemporary dance technique teachers to identify actual learning and teaching strategies for use with students with specific learning difficulties. This took place through the following stages:

- Awareness-raising session
- Project planning session
- Practical workshops
- Feedback interviews
- Preparation of further training materials

Awareness-raising session

Teachers of contemporary dance technique were invited to a presentation/discussion on the nature of specific learning difficulties and the impact of such difficulties on the learning needs of dance technique students. A Powerpoint presentation was used as a starting point for discussions and this outlined the main areas of specific learning difficulty, how these might manifest themselves in student learning behaviour and how they might impact on the individual and group learning experience. The types of specific learning difficulties discussed were:

- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Dysgraphia
- Dysorthographia
- Dyscalculia
- Verbal dyspraxia
- Attention deficit disorder

Many of the technique teachers recognised how these difficulties might manifest themselves in the class room but were unaware of the extent of their existence in the studio. The discussion then turned to kinaesthetic and spatial awareness difficulties such as motor planning deficit, agnosia (proprioceptive deficit) and low tone (hypotonia) and although the terms used to describe these difficulties were unfamiliar to many technique teachers it was soon discovered that their various manifestations in dance students were not. The session also examined other areas of learning difficulty such as problems with visual and auditory perception, expressive and receptive language difficulties and organisational and behavioural issues.

As each of the many aspects of these learning difficulties was highlighted, technique teachers were asked to reflect on the challenges they might pose for the dance student so that profiles of student learning behaviour could be identified. However it was soon realised that there was no such thing as a “typical” student with specific learning difficulties as the number of variations on each difficulty and the resulting possible combinations of these variations was seemingly endless, as was the potential “severity” of each difficulty within an individual student. This confirmed what the earlier interviews with teachers and students had highlighted: that learning and teaching strategies devised to meet the learning needs of students with specific learning difficulties would have to be “tailor-made” as each student’s experience of their difficulties was unique.

Project planning session

The technique teachers who agreed to participate in the project met to plan the best way to research possible learning and teaching strategies to deal with students with specific learning difficulties. It was decided that weekly meetings of the teachers involved to discuss and practically explore the issues involved would be the most appropriate and effective approach. Outside of these meetings it was decided that each teacher should allocate time to exploring these issues individually. The teachers agreed on the following aims:

- to explore personal pedagogic approaches to teaching technique in the context of students with specific learning difficulties
- to reflect on current teaching techniques in terms of their inclusiveness and their ability to respond to differing student learning needs
- to identify and explore possible learning and teaching strategies to address the needs of students with specific learning difficulties
- to identify and explore possible assessment strategies to address the needs of students with specific learning difficulties

It was also agreed that the teachers would use their sessions with undergraduate students to explore and “test out” the strategies they were devising. All teachers have been issued with a list of undergraduate students who have disclosed their learning difficulty and who have agreed to their inclusion on this list.

Practical workshops

These took place on a weekly basis over a ten week period where teachers could share their thoughts and ideas about potential learning and teaching methods with their colleagues and use the ensuing discussions and practical explorations to further shape and inform their strategies. The workshops also had wider benefits as they provided an opportunity for the teachers to reflect on and develop their personal approaches to technique teaching in a general as well as a specific context, in addition the time spent sharing strategies led to an agreed approach to learning, teaching and assessment methods which would lead to a more coherent student learning experience.

Feedback interviews

Interviews were conducted with each of the technique teachers involved and the progress of the development of learning and teaching strategies for use with students with specific learning difficulties was recorded. As would be expected from teachers who have encountered different professional artistic and training contexts themselves and who have gone on to develop individual pedagogies as a result, each experienced the workshops differently and subsequently developed their own personal approach to working with students with specific learning difficulties. However many common themes emerged which could potentially be of great help to both teachers and students alike. It was agreed that three major areas had to be addressed in order to maximise the learning experience of students with specific learning difficulties:

- Awareness of the nature and impact of specific learning difficulties has to be raised amongst the dance in higher education learning community (teachers and learners)
- Strategies have to be devised to support all the varying needs of learners in the dance studio, not just those with specific learning difficulties
- Studio based strategies will only work if there is an adequate learner support system in place outside of the studio

The second bullet point above proved to be the most challenging for if it is acknowledged that all learners in a studio have individual learning needs ranging from the stated dyslexic with severe movement memory problems and a visual-spatial deficit to the student who simply confuses left and right occasionally (and everyone else somewhere in between) then how do you devise truly inclusive learning, teaching and assessment strategies?

The following represents a list of some, but not all, of the main issues identified during the feedback interviews which will be more fully explored in the subsequently devised training materials:

- Mental imagery to replace anatomical references
- Music as a memory tool
- Synaesthesia (the production of mental sense impressions by stimulation of another sense)
- Juggling and balance exercises
- Staged instruction delivery
- Repetition and checking of assimilation of information
- Multi-sensory communication strategies
- Video recording and playback to aid movement memory
- Somatic approaches to technique training
- Relaxation and visualisation techniques as part of the warm up
- The use of the cool down to reflect and review learning
- Effective use of mirrors
- The use of a shared mental “studio map”
- An awareness of multiple intelligences, in particular emotional intelligence

The importance of on-going outside support for students with specific learning difficulties was recognised as crucial to the success of the studio-based learning and teaching strategies. Screening of students was thought to be useful so that specific learning needs can be identified. It was also felt that specialist help would be needed with issues surrounding anxiety, confidence and self-esteem and with some of the more severe learning difficulties which may respond to neuro developmental therapies.

It was also highlighted that there should be an emphasis on the student to actively contribute to the learning process through:

- Taking ownership of the learning by having their own “outcome” within the learning outcomes of a session as set by the teacher
- Self-assessing their learning needs and finding their own path through the learning process
- Pairing/grouping with others who learn differently
- Devising their own strategies for dealing with poor organisational abilities and memory skills (such as mnemonics)

Preparation of further training materials

The issues outlined above form the basis for a new Powerpoint presentation/discussion which builds on the content of the first one. The first presentation aimed at raising the awareness amongst technique teachers of the variety of learning difficulties which exist and their implications for the learner/teacher and it ended by asking the question: what learning and teaching strategies will effectively address these issues in the dance studio? The new presentation will facilitate a discussion on the strategies so far identified and allow participants to explore them, develop them further (or even discount them as unfeasible) and suggest ways forward to devise and implement new strategies.

The dissemination of the project findings

It is planned that the presentation outlined above and facilitated by Colin Bourne and Genevieve Grady (Graham Technique teacher) will be delivered as part of a suitable PALATINE workshop in 2004-2005. It will also be offered to higher education institutions as a staff development event and other potentially interested organisations such as the Arts Dyslexia Trust. It will also be submitted as a paper for presentation at relevant educational conferences or other events. The findings of the project may also be of use in written format rather than as a presentation for organisations such as the Dyslexia Foundation, the British Dyslexia Institute and the Adult Dyslexia Organisation, for publication or inclusion on websites.

Project evaluation

The dissemination of the project's findings will be followed by an evaluation exercise where views will be sought on the usefulness or otherwise of the content and format of the information presented.

Project evaluation has so far taken place through the receipt of participant feedback at various points during the research process. Feedback has been positive regarding both the focus of the project and its methodology. Both teachers and learners have highlighted how valuable the project has been in raising awareness of specific learning difficulties in the dance in higher education community. It has been agreed by participants in the project that this is a complex area and that the findings of the project do not guarantee that all the challenges faced by learners and teachers have yet been fully met.

However the project does represent a move towards a better understanding of the learning needs of dance students with specific learning difficulties and the opening up of a dialogue aimed at helping technique teachers to meet those needs.

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