

Ethical Agility in Dance

Rethinking Technique in British
Contemporary Dance

Edited by Noyale Colin, Catherine Seago,
and Kathryn Stamp

First published 2024

ISBN: 9780367628673 (hbk)

ISBN: 9780367628635 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003111146 (ebk)

Chapter 2.3

**Fostering attentional awareness
for connectedness, with agility and
empathy as core values**

Catherine Seago

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The chapter DOI: 10.4324/9781003111146-11

Funded by the University of Winchester

2.3 Fostering attentional awareness for connectedness, with agility and empathy as core values

Catherine Seago

Introduction

This book seeks to reflect upon what dance technique might mean today in response to the myriad changes of the past half century since dance became widespread in arts and physical education. During this time, massive evolutionary change across the dance field has been motivated by a growing diversity of styles and purposes, expanded approaches that are more inclusive and interdisciplinary, and influences rooted in technology and digital media. Shifting perceptions and expectations of what dance ‘is’ have impacted on dance training practices. Attitudes and methods of dance training and education today are more varied than ever before and young people encounter a wide range of approaches. It is with an interest in this broad context that my dance teaching practice has been driven to understand how young people use their attention in dance classes, and if awareness of making different attentional choices in various scenarios can lead to owning a deeper embodied understanding of dance, through finding interconnections within the lived experience. In my practice and research, I have explored the ways in which developing an agile use of attention as part of dance technique practice can facilitate discoveries of interconnectedness amongst dance’s varied principles, styles and ideologies, as well as with others.

This chapter proposes that attentional techniques should be foregrounded as part of dance training. I argue that greater awareness of how we attend in practicing physical agility together can help dancers to develop an ethical agility – by encouraging sensitivity to connections with others and developing empathetic skills. This argument contributes to a concern shared with others in this volume for considering the ways that dance techniques can be used to help young people build life-long habits through the values and ethics embedded in dance’s various outcomes and purposes. I propose that developing an ethos of practicing attention together in dance classes can cultivate greater interconnectedness, by fostering an agile and empathetic point of view. The discussion below is rooted in my recent action research project which explored how dance students perceive and use attention in dance classes (Seago 2020). Its outcomes indicated that nurturing an agile

use of attention in dance technique practice fostered a mindful state through letting go of fixed ideas and being present and encouraged a greater facility for empathy through multisensory alertness to all that is happening. Building on these findings, I will discuss the ways in which interconnectedness can be cultivated through an agile use of attention and the implicit value of realising connections within and beyond dance skills development, for well-being, care, health and education.

How is attention currently viewed in the technique class?

Attention, first and foremost, allows us to make sense of the world, actively and effectively processing particular information while at the same time withdrawing from other stimuli in our environment. Commonly, expectations of dance and music training for young people have been about improving the brain's executive attention networks (Posner and Patoiné 2009). Cognitive science research has evidenced the usefulness of these in building coordination, concentration and efficiency, often through repetitions. However, as one withdraws from other stimuli to concentrate on recreating one single fixed thing, it can be damaging to the process of learning deeply. Brown, Ryan and Creswell (2007: 213) claim that 'concentration entails a restriction of attention to a single interoceptive or exteroceptive object, leading to a withdrawal of sensory and other inputs'. They explore the distinction between concentration and mindfulness (Engler 1986). In dance classes, repetitions can indeed seem narrowing and in my research project assumptions about the value of fixing, controlling and restraining concentration on a single end goal was initially shown to be common amongst participants. The rather out-of-date interpretation that practices, including attention, should be disciplined to enable the performance of an ideal which is fixed, targeted, automatic and second nature might be unhelpful in our current, pedagogically informed, dance training landscape. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has proposed that a 'flow experience' is helpful for deeper engagement and is often evident in being thoroughly absorbed in an activity. He proposes that flow is achieved, in part, through attentionalities which involve balancing, merging and responding. While many of the participants in my project reported that allowing such fluidity in their attention use was disorienting and distracted them from focusing on task at hand, others found a renewed sense of agency through the flexibility they experienced. Indeed, cognitive scientist and educational psychologist Guy Claxton has illustrated that a gliding attention is an important aspect of a learning process by allowing variation in its intensity, direction and social-ness throughout. He imagines a 'three dimension attentional 'crate' of creativity (2006: 67) which contains a 'glide space' (2006: 66). Through this he offers to help us perceive how different mindsets enable us to work in different and flexible ways as we direct our attention inwards or outwards toward others, operate from solitary or social positions and zoom in and zone out various stimuli. Claxton's diagrammatic

crate models the interconnected dimensions of attention throughout a learning process and the mutual impacts on the whole. Claxton's crate for attentional flow shares similarities with Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow in its focus on articulating the productivity of mindsets that are present to all that is happening and responsive to changing conditions to allow for an individual's creative success or, as Csikszentmihalyi's theory indicates, a way to achieve happiness.

An agile attention, flowing easily amongst internal and external targets via oral, visual, tactile and kinaesthetic modes, can promote a sense of fluid interconnectedness. Robert Sawyer (2006) has investigated Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory, which focuses on a state of consciousness for achieving individual flow, to examine how flow operates in relation with others – specifically in collaborative, emergent creative practices. Sawyer's 'group flow' (2006) shares the conditions which produce easy enjoyment and success in the process of doing something but proposes additionally a state of 'interactional synchrony' (2006: 157) in successful group working. This state sees an entire group feeling strongly connected and 'in sync' as they flow *together*. In group flow, the inter-relational attention can enable anticipation of what fellow performers will do even before they do it (Sawyer 2006: 158) in addition to propelling individuals beyond themselves. Lucznik, May and Redding's research showed a group of improvising dance students experienced a state of 'becoming one with the group' (2021: 199), describing an 'effortless attention' (204) as they practiced together. My study is not concerned with being in sync with others in emergent practices but finds similarities with the expression of a feeling of being one with others in flow – through developing an ethos of practicing agile attention together. Group flow produces a strong sense of connectedness to others who we are 'in sync' with, it is owned by the whole group and happens as a result of their interaction. Sawyer (2006: 158) quotes Jazz bassist Chuck Israels who articulates, 'If it's working, it brings you very close. It's a kind of emotional empathy that you develop very quickly. The relationship is very intimate' (as quoted in Berliner, 1994: 349–350). In listening and sensing others in parallel with our own attentional practice in dancing an intimate and empathetic sense of mutuality can arise, provoking awareness of the impact we have upon each other. As Sawyer says, 'you can't relax your attention or you will fall behind' (2006: 159). Practicing attention *together* in dance class can help to develop alertness to and with others and, in a common flow experience, a sense of being connected with them. It can encourage not only dancing together but being present in our attention together.

As dancers attend with other dancers by observing and translating particular visual forms into a kinaesthetic sense they go further in their connectedness, with the production of a 'felt' response to the movement of others. This is kinaesthetic empathy – widely documented since the discovery of the mirror neuron system (MNS) in the early 1990s. As the MNS fires it recreates what is seen by and in the seer, involving a precise physical change

and inviting a particularly intimate sense of being connected by physically experiencing a sense of ‘putting myself in your shoes’. This intimate process has been explored in relation to studio practice by Shantel Ehrenberg (2012) who has examined, from a practitioner’s perspective, how a dancer tries to imagine ways to feel and do the movement that one sees performed by another. The interconnectedness of our sensory system is apparent as we attend to seeing (in the mirror or on video) and feeling ourselves while moving ourselves as well as imagining our appearance to others and trying to feel the way that another looks in dance class. When dancing amongst others our fundamentally empathetic responses are foregrounded in this process. As attention flows amongst your, my and our experience as we dance together, we anticipate moments and feelings of connectedness.

Feeling connected with others is a familiar and richly rewarding aspect of dancing. It is most often foregrounded by improvisational practices and ensemble composition as well as in dance company working. My interest is in how attentional use in dance technique classes can help to build up values of connectedness through agile and empathetic responsiveness. Discovering emotional and physical connections is helpful in building up a sense of community. Psychological theories (Deci and Ryan 1985, Maslow 1954) have shown the importance of social connection in growth, development and motivation. Making connections is vital for versatility, creativity, criticality and synthesising new ideas. Feeling connected is important for physical and emotional health and well-being. It is widely recognised that a sense of connectedness can lead to people becoming more trusting and cooperative as well as greater self-esteem and empathy rooted in lower levels of anxiety and depression (Seppala 2014). Developing an ethos of practicing attention together in dance classes can help in recognising the value of connectedness for versatility, creativity, growth and cooperation within and beyond dance skills. Recent research has examined how universities could foster a sense of connectedness to better support student mental health (Di Malta et al. 2022). Moreover, social prescribing has been adopted as part of National Health Service (NHS) care in England in recognition of the ‘interconnections between activity levels, social connectivity, and mental health’ (Husk et al. 2019). Foregrounding attentional use in dance technique practice to develop an agile and empathetic point of view can help students to build life-long habits for valuing connectedness – an ethos which can be carried into a range of contexts.

Exploring attention and connectedness with students

An initial aim of my research and practice has been to explore ways to encourage dancers to be more available to potential connectedness within an often bricolage-style approach to their dance training. Bricolage-style approaches have replaced the singular approaches to training dancers proposed by modern dance and the subsequent notion of training of dancers

for more varied roles, or 'for hire' which Susan Foster articulated in 1997. Bales and Nettle (2008) adopted the term *bricolage* to characterise the 'self-styled' training approach amongst practitioner teachers which emerged from the dialectics and *bricolage* of post modernism. A *bricolage*-based approach to dance training for students can promote a more inclusive curriculum, offer unique juxtapositions and produce new insights into ways of knowing and applying dance. However, discerning, synthesising and making connections amongst often dialectical concepts, approaches, values and languages in each's own dancing body is its own challenge. While having a 'go at everything' (Rafferty in Rafferty and Stanton 2017: 197) provides a rich terrain for individual discovery, Rafferty has suggested that as teachers we might seek to connect our broad yet 'kindered' principles to assist our students in finding and making connections for themselves. With this in mind, a main aim underpinning my research project was to facilitate greater agency for uncovering intra and inter-relational connectedness amongst dance experiences. Attention techniques can enable a greater awareness of habit, choice and potentialities, encouraging agency to identify available connections as dancers move amongst different experiences, demands and ideas.

My research project sought to investigate students' lived experience of the different modes, manners, targets and values of attention through contemporary dance. The research was underpinned by two principles. First, that particular uses of attention are embedded within different approaches and styles of dance training. Second, that it is beneficial to dancers to utilise reflexively a range of modes and values in order to have consistent framework for attentional practice. Rather than comparing the principles of techniques and the attentional values they foreground, I was motivated by Kirsty Alexander's call for a 'consistent framework of values' which, she suggested, might be found in kinaesthetic experiences, to underscore a 'continuum of somatic and traditional practices' (2008 in Reed 2015: 214). My intentions were to raise awareness of perceptual choice, encouraging students to use their reflections to enable connections amongst their lived experiences and to allow their attention to flow between modes and targets as they dance. I hoped to help students to build up a sense of agency in testing and fine-tuning their attention, in order to discover potential connections amongst approaches and embodiments.

The questions driving my action research project were: to what extent are dancers aware of their uses and choices of attention in training classes; what is the impact of expectations about distinct dance practices on attention use; how can free-flowing attention rather than fixed (concentration) benefit dancers and how can a greater sense of agency result from awareness of uses and choices? To explore my questions, I worked with 16 final-year undergraduate dance students in regular physical skills classes. Second-person participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury 2008) enabled me to assess the students' active engagement with concepts of attention and gather

data about their practices and understanding through teaching observations, multi-mode journals, anonymous questionnaires and focus group with semi-structured questions. Potential ethical issues linked to scale, the complexity of my joint position as teacher and researcher and perceptions of assessment and conformity were considered and addressed through discussion and consent to data use. The aim was to create an environment in which the distinct demands and experiences of attention in dancing could intermingle so the methodology featured a combination of formal exercises and open-ended movement tasks, peer observation, annotating movement and written, diagrammatic and discursive reflections. Bricolage-styled sessions enabled participants to explore various values and modes of attention. In my sessions, technique exercises focused on embodying fragmentation and micro-rhythmic patterning to enable coordination, drawing on Cunningham-based technique practices. Improvisation tasks encouraged present-ness, spontaneity and external/ensemble relations. Yogic directions reinforced flow in the dimensions and directions of movement, whole-ness and new-ness in repetitions. Choreological concepts such as were used to articulate the nature of changes taking place within movement structures and virtual spatial forms. To encourage reflective strategies and individual feedback loops, the group were introduced to concepts, uses and values of attention, for example sensory modes of attending kinaesthetically, visually and aurally, verbally, musically and spatially; internal and external targets; the qualities, multiples and intensities of attention; and allowing, placing, tracing and fixing it. Examining established attentional values was encouraged, for example the introspective values of inward listening and soft sensational attention are championed by somatic practices and the historically visually dominated attentional use of codified forms. Further, adopting a wider field of attention is often cultivated by associative, generative practices. We used a growing knowledge and experience to build up techniques for noticing, triggering and shifting attention, for example, using mapping techniques to represent when, how, what and why particular attentionalities dominate what is being practiced and to experiment with interchangeable aspects and opportunities.

Interpreting experiences of attention

The research findings showed initially limited, but consequently increased, awareness of attention use in my study group. The two-way engagement of this pedagogic action research, as Gibbs et al. (2017: 10) has summarised, encouraged deeper learning and, for some, resulted in higher achievement. For most, Stanton's lab-style (2011) mixed-mode approach enabled exploration of attention in new and productive ways. As Rachel Rimmer-Piekarczyk argues in this volume, dance training approaches can struggle to shift the 'doxa' – the established unspoken understanding of the way of things. During my project, dependency on the teacher as owner of dance knowledge lessened because a focus on their own attention use encouraged personal reflection

and reflexive practice. Noticing, shifting and letting go of attentional targets and modes provoked many to be present to what was happening, less fixed on the outcomes and more available to potential connections that they sensed, noticed and felt within the materials, the environment and with others – without an underlying resistance to being ‘distracted’ by these things. Some experienced agency in a new way, and others became more aware of the impact of others in the class. Some felt overwhelmed but, for most, a greater confidence to refine and shape the dance experience for themselves became apparent.

Knowing what different attentional strategies are, together with an awareness of how they impact on dance practice evidently benefited students involved in my project. Outcomes indicated that attention training benefited students in the following ways:

- 1 Engaging with attention use enabled recognition of habitual practices and reflections on the impact of attentional choices on the lived experience;
- 2 Being open to and present in how they attend enabled potential connections to appear;
- 3 Exploring strategies for negotiating multiple attention flows in an ever-shifting world encouraged flexibility in response to change and led to agility;
- 4 Making choices about attention by not focusing on fixed goals led to a deeper sense of agency;
- 5 Fostering a sense of the feeling of the movement of others encouraged empathy.

The outcomes of the action research highlighted particular attributes being drawn out from the dancer via knowledge and skills of attention. Attributes exhibiting particular values came to the fore such as recognising and owning behaviour, being mindful in approaching new challenges, resilience, agency and empathy. Bill Lucas proposes, in his report questioning ‘21st century skills’ that weaving together such knowledge and skills with attributes and values form the competencies that drive actions (Lucas 2019). In seeking ways to build life-long habits for an attentional awareness through being present for agile and empathetic connections to arise, both within and beyond dance class, attention training evidently has something to offer. However, in defining attention as ‘focused noticing’, dancer Peter Fraser (2016) captures the tension of balancing a singular deep investigation and a wider and more open awareness, illustrating Claxton’s polarities in practice. To develop an agile practice of attention requires building confidence to remain in the inevitable moments of uncertainty within the sudden shifts afforded by noticing, allowing, letting go and catching on to things, while at the same time to be committed to deep investigation of each fleeting awareness. To cultivate a quiet and focused commitment to exploring attentional shifts that can be fluid, sudden, light and surprising has an ethical aspect.

This approach is the antithesis of current UK education frameworks. It can be enormously challenging for the teacher (a) to foster the open heartedness of ‘allowing’ when our students so often crave definitive direction and (b) to invite an investigation of potential connectedness when students can often perceive their bodies and experiences in isolation, reiterated by digital environments in which they are often operating. Yet this is what an attention training can offer – a transformative pedagogy, facilitating an understanding of how mindful attention use can encourage an open, flexible and present point of view which can foster resilience through persistence in pursuing the ever-changing and unfixable connections within our lived experience.

Agility as a core value of dance technique

Encouraging an agile attention for discovering connections rather than fixing attention on a single goal/approach varied in its impact. First to note is that some participants reported feeling overwhelmed at the notion. Many reported the need for familiar or slower paced materials during what might have been a disorienting experience of recognising attention flow. Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory highlights the need for a balance of established skill and challenge in an activity while both Claxton and Csikszentmihalyi’s concepts of flow foreground the importance of demarking clear progression. One student in my group reported that, when working towards an agile attention, potential connections appeared making ‘much more to develop’ apparent as a growing sense of ‘inquiry’ emerged, ‘rather than just getting it done’. She became deeply absorbed in a process of inquiry, through a flow experience. The importance of agile attention for deepening dance practice has been articulated by Danny Lepkoff (2011). He explains that in Contact Improvisation (CI) ‘[w]hen my attention stops moving, my interpretation of what is happening becomes fixed and my vision becomes conventionalized, and thus the questioning disappears’ (2011). He is talking about being available to external as well as internal stimuli in indeterminate dancing with others and indicating the excitement and inquiry of potential connections. Being absorbed and energised by the process of doing challenging but attainable things is part of Csikszentmihalyi’s state of flow. I found that during the familiar repetitive practices of, for example, Cunningham-based phrases, mobilising attention better enabled participants to access a similar experience of freedom from fixed visions and interpretations which Lepkoff identifies in CI. A number of participants became confident with a lively negotiation of attention during activities, phrases and exercises. One participant reported ‘it never occurred to me to choose what to focus on – it has completely changed my experience of dancing’.

Participants reflected on how they attended to the tone, dynamic and imagery of instructions; the effects of self-chat, ambition, preconception and deep remembering on their attentional choices; and on how the feeling states, tactility, kinaesthetic awareness as well as motor skills and physiological

responses impacted on their attention use. Second to note is that exploring attention helped participants to be more present to what was happening across this spectrum of targets and modes- a vital condition of Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow. Presence, Seigel (2007) says, is our capacity to be open to what is happening as it happens. It is a fundamental component of mindfulness which encourages letting go of outcomes to be present to what might be happening now. In practicing agile attention, something akin to a mindful state became apparent for participants in my project. Letting go of fixed ideas, goals and interpretations one said, 'I can relax more, being present to what is happening'. Being 'fully present in the moment' and perceiving by the 'whole body, not just my eyes' is, says American dance educator Stinson (2015: 2), a state of consciousness which she says is shared by mindfulness and dance. A holistic engagement is underpinned by present-ness to all our senses. Independent dance artist Gill Clarke encouraged being simply present to sense different possibilities in movement. These, she says, are available through 'tasting sensations' in the body rather than 'forming of movement' which has visual definition (in DeLahunta et al. 2012: 247). She highlights the value of clearing away the 'clutter' of the principles and complexities of codified movement vocabularies to explore different feelings of movement via looking/listening and sensing with a light touch. Clarke valued 'letting go' in order to focus the 'skills of attention' which she saw could help to develop 'discrimination and differentiation of fine nuance in the process of moving' (in DeLahunta et al. 2012: 248).

Jenny Roche (2015) reflects on Clarke's pedagogy for developing dancers as 'investigative artists' who can make things their own. She recognises the vitality of agency for the dancer for whom agile responsiveness is essential. Roche has characterised the current contemporary dance landscape as continually rupturing the 'stability of the familiar'. For choreographer William Forsythe, this rupture is a necessary element in seeking to 'detach ourselves from positions of certainty' (2011 in Roche 2015: 254). For the continual evolution of movement approaches and vocabularies, the field might be best served by a bricolage approach to training. Dancers are required to build an embodied understanding which is both consistent and agile. However, the question of deep or wide approaches to training, refuelled recently by the publicised concerns about the rigour of contemporary dance training in Britain by three international choreographers (Mackrell 2015), persists. A bricolage approach can be useful in building skills for making connections and for experiencing dance as an inclusive practice – a vital aspect of the dance training needed for working across dance today. Building up skills for seeking out new intra- and inter-relational connections amongst peers, styles, approaches and experiences can be a valuable outcome of honing an attentional practice as part of dance training, preparing dancers to bring a range of perspectives to their work. One student in my project specified that agile attention 'allows me to choose to work on particular things, and to deal with how I'm feeling that day'. Struck by her separation of a more personal

'I' within her learning process, I was reminded of Roche's findings. Roche has investigated how a dancer's personal lived experience can shape their own movement and the valuable contribution this makes to new choreographies. Roche terms it a dancer's 'moving identity' (2011). I propose that an agile attentional practice can help ready dancers to identify with their own, vitally shifting 'moving identity' through building versatility and resilience for resisting certainty and finding unique new connections. Project findings indicating that fixed growth mindsets, interpretation and self-evaluation, which can cause a resistance to building agency, were reduced through an agile use of attention were promising – 'since being aware of my attention it has completely changed how I think when I'm dancing' reported a student on the project.

Empathy as a core value of dance technique

My research findings indicated that an intrinsic value of finding intra-relational connectedness in dance experiences might not only build up a sense of inquiry, presence and agency but also a more empathetic point of view. In my project, dancers attended not only to their own embodied experience but also to the attention of others as they practiced together. Many developed a greater awareness of the attention of others in reciprocal and shared ways, developing a sense of the feeling of movement of others while attending to their own attentional practice. New inter-relational connections were often seeded through exploring attention through improvisational and peer-to-peer work. An increased awareness of the intracconnectedness of their multisensory systems of perception and attention promoted greater fluidity in looking, listening and feeling. An exercise highlighted kinaesthetic empathy as dancers used touch as well as observation to trigger and modify movement in peer work. Welton (2010) articulates that touch is a metaphor for attentive listening in Rosemary Lee's *Common Dance* (2009), explaining that it is a 'mode of perception in which one is reciprocally giving as well as receiving'. Indeed, our intrinsically fluid sensory systems allow 'listening' attentively for movement intention and detail to involve touching, sensing and looking. In highlighting a full multisensory attention, participants reported that feelings of empathy for others emerged more strongly as they anticipated each other's listening through greater bodily awareness. In this volume, Lee, in conversation with Scilla Dyke, expresses her sense that the skill of being finely attentive in listening to others often does not currently appear highly valued, or visible in dance training and performance. Finding connections with others through practicing attention together has, for me, indicated a potential value of attention training as part of dance techniques. Nurturing attentive egalitarian sensibilities for listening to, for and with others most often appears as part of Contact Improvisation in dance training. Here tactility and softening promote sensitive listening in non-hierarchical relations. The mutual connectedness found in the reciprocity of contact work

echos the deep listening of group flow. We are reminded by Miranda Tufnell (2017) that in touching we are also touched – simultaneously giving and receiving. However, in training, there is often limited opportunity for the expansion of these vital multisensory, empathetic skills of attention into other areas of practice. Building up empathetic skills as an intrinsic part of refining the dancer's own physical abilities should be a fundamental aspect of dance training in the now expanded field of dance. Developing skills of cross-referencing the senses in different activities, to enable tuning into the feeling of others, could help prepare dance students for work in the caring and social professions as well as performative and collaborative work by fostering ethical human relations.

Practicing attention together in my project revealed characteristics of Sawyer's group flow. Listening, anticipating movement of and synchronicity with others led to strong empathetic relations in duet and group improvisational exercises and in set material. A sense of being one with the group emerged from building up a dance together although such connections happen more commonly in ensemble improvisation or improvisational composition where dancers depend upon the interactions and deep listening, to produce group flow in their practice. Practicing phrases of set 'technique' materials – solitary although synchronous – can produce a sense of shared attention in 'coming in' together or preparing for specific partner work such as the moment of a lift with cooperation and trust. Participants in my project also noted a sense of shared attention in anticipating external stimuli together – for example listening/sensing for indeterminate cues from 'within a dance'. Some found that the experience of being *one* with others was intensely moving as they anticipated together in different ways. These skills and experiences of non-hierarchical, cooperative and shared ways of being in relation are vital in developing socially engaged dancers. It calls for an ethos of practicing attention together to be developed as part of dance classes. As Claxton has invited us to see, fluidity amongst our modes of social and solitary attention, inner-outer resources and detailed and wide lenses can enable us to use our attention flexibly and responsively. An ethical attention might use this agility to dig deeper, wider, softer and find greater open-ness and inclusivity through being present and synchronous with each other as we dance.

Closing

So, what is the usefulness of practicing agile attention together and developing students' empathetic skills to build up a sense of connectedness?

Nurturing an awareness of our attentional habits, the ways in which we pay, give and receive attention and the way that these choices can colour our worlds is a useful practice for personal growth as well as for developing relevant skills for a diversifying British dance industry. A bricolage-style dance training is a fertile ground for seeding attentional awareness through enabling skills for multisensory engagement, letting go and being

present to difference and change. Actively seeking out connections within our lived experience builds up capacities for inquiry, creativity, empathy and cooperation, as well as versatility, resilience and agency. Attention training as part of dance education has the potential to promote an ethos of practice which is about awareness of attention with each other, and these attributes underpin the development of ethical human relations. Practicing attentional agility together can help us grow as socially engaged individuals who are more aware of the nature of our relations with others and the experience of others in relation to our own. Connecting with others in these ways can develop vital skills for working in a range of collaborative and developmental settings. Practicing being present, flexible and responsive to environmental demands and to each other can help to foster a greater sense of connectedness. Being connected with others can be said to be a twenty-first-century obsession. The Covid pandemic highlighted the importance of connectedness for many and saw a massive increase in the use of digital devices for social media, messaging applications and video platforms to stay connected. However, it has been shown that ‘coronavirus has atrophied the social skills of many individuals in the absence of peers’ (Apurvakumar and Pragya 2021). The reason for this is that people interact differently in digital environments. Our use of attentional modes is more limited and our capacity to be present with each other is reduced on screen. Connecting with the subtle nuances of social interaction and etiquette found in non-verbal interactions is not fully possible with virtual online communication. It is evident that for a greater sense of connection we need to practice being more attentive to each other in live, bodied contexts, particularly in an era where excessive digital use leads to increasing attention-deficit symptoms, impaired emotional and social intelligence, social isolation and mental illnesses such as depression [and] anxiety (Apurvakumar and Pragya 2021). Attending to each other’s attention in different ways can help us build courage to move amongst others sensitively as we share experience, space and time. As I have probed through a dance technique context, practicing attention together can help to build up an ethical agility in the dancer’s ability to be present with others.

Developing an ethos of practicing attention together in dance classes can cultivate values of connectedness by being present, alert and empathetic. An ethics of attention can be a way of being together which is present, alert to wide field of perspectives and possibilities and open to seeking connections. In reflecting on what dance technique might be today I have tried to convey the usefulness of practicing an interconnected physical, ethical and attentional agility, together, in ways that allow new connections to appear as we tune into our whole selves and to others with sensitivity and vitality.

References

- Apurvakumar, P., and Pragya, L. (2021) “Social Connectedness, Excessive Screen Time during COVID-19 and Mental Health: A Review of Current Evidence.” *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2021.684137>

- Bales, M., and Nettle, R. Eds. (2008) *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Berliner, P. (1994) *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, K., Ryan, R., and Creswell, D. (2007) "Mindfulness: Theoretical Foundations and Evidence for Its Salutary Effects." *Psychological Inquiry* 18 (4): 211–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400701598298>
- Claxton, G. (2006) "Creative Glide Space." In *Navigating the Unknown: The Creative Process in Contemporary Performing Arts*, edited by C. Bannerman, J. Sofaer, and J. Watt, 58–69. London: Middlesex University Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Deci, E.L., and Ryan, R.M. (1985) *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- DeLahunta, S., Clarke, G., and Barnard, P. (2012) "A Conversation about Choreographic Thinking Tools." *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* 3 (1+ 2): 243–259. https://doi.org/10.1386/jdsp.3.1-2.243_1
- Di Malta, G., Bond, J., Conroy, D., Smith, K., and Moller, N. (2022). "Distance Education Students' Mental Health, Connectedness and Academic Performance during COVID-19: A Mixed-Methods Study." *Distance Education* (Early Access). <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2022.2029352>
- Ehrenberg, S. (2012) "A Contemporary Dancer's Kinaesthetic Experiences with Dancing Self-images." In *Dance Spaces: Practices of Movement*, edited by S. Ravn and L. Rouhiainen, 193–213. Odense: University of Southern Denmark.
- Engler, J. (1986) "Therapeutic Aims in Psychotherapy and Meditation." In *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, edited by K. Wilber, J. Engler, and D.P. Brown, 17–51. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- Foster, S. (1997) "Dancing Bodies." In *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, edited by J. Desmond, 235–258. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Fraser, P. (2016) "Gaps in the Body: Attention and Improvisation." *Brolga* 40: 73–84.
- Gibbs, P., Cartney, P., Wilkinson, K., Parkinson, J., Cunningham, S., James-Reynolds, C., Zoubir, T., et al. (2017) "Literature Review on the Use of Action Research in Higher Education." *Educational Action Research* 25 (1): 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2015.1124046>
- Husk, K., Elston, J., Gradinger, F., Callaghan, L., and Asthana, S. (2019) "Social Prescribing: Where Is the Evidence?" *British Journal of General Practice* 69 (678): 6–7. <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X700325>
- Lepkoff, D. (2011) "Contact Improvisation: A Question." *Contact Quarterly* 36 (1): 38–40. Available at: <https://contactquarterly.com/cq/article-gallery/view/contact-improvisation-a-question#>
- Lucas, B. (2019) "Why We Need to Stop Talking about 21st Century Skills." *Melbourne Center for Strategic Education Seminar Series Paper #283* May 2019. Available at: www.expansiveeducation.net
- Lucznik, K., May, J., and Redding, E. (2021) "A Qualitative Investigation of Flow Experience in Group Creativity." *Research in Dance Education* 22 (2): 190–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2020.1746259>
- Mackrell, J. (2015) "Are British Dancers Really Outclassed on the World Stage?" *The Guardian dance blog* 13 April.
- Maslow, A.H. (1954) *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

- Posner, M., and Patoine, B. (2009) "How Arts Training Improves Attention and Cognition." *Cerebrum*, September 14.
- Rafferty, S., and Stanton, E. (2017) "I Am a Teacher and I Will Do What I Can: Some Speculations on the Future of Dance Technique Class and Its Possible Transformation." *Research in Dance Education* 18 (2): 190–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2017.1354841>
- Reason, P., and Bradbury, H. Eds. (2008) *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.
- Reed, S. (2015) "Attending to Movement." In *Attending to Movement. Somatic Perspectives on Living in This World*, edited by S. Whatley, N.G. Brown, and K. Alexander, 207–218. Axminster: Axminster Triarchy Press.
- Roche, J. (2011) "Embodying Multiplicity: The Independent Contemporary Dancer's Moving Identity." *Research in Dance Education* 12 (2): 105–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2011.575222>
- Roche, J. (2015) "Disorganising Principles." In *Attending to Movement. Somatic Perspectives on Living in This World*, edited by S. Whatley, N.G. Brown, and K. Alexander, 253–262. Axminster: Axminster Triarchy Press.
- Sawyer, R.K. (2006) "Group Creativity: Musical Performance and Collaboration." *Psychology of Music* 34 (2): 148–165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735606061850>
- Seago, C. (2020) "A Study of the Perception and Use of Attention in Undergraduate Dance Training Classes." *Research in Dance Education* 21 (3): 245–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2020.1757636>
- Seigel, D.J. (2007) *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being*. New York and London: W.W Norton.
- Seppala, E. (2014) "Connectedness & Health: The Science of Social Connection." *The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education*. Available at: www.ccare.stanford.edu
- Stanton, E. (2011) "Doing, Re-Doing and Undoing: Practice, Repetition and Critical Evaluation as Mechanisms for Learning in a Dance Technique Class 'Laboratory'." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 2 (1): 86–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2011.545253>
- Stinson, S. (2015) "Dance Education as the Practice of Living." <https://ausdance.org.au/uploads/content/publications/daCi-2015/education/Dance-Education-as-the-Practice-of-Living-Susan-Stinson.pdf>
- Tufnell, M. (2017) *When I Open My Eyes*. Dance Books Ltd.
- Welton, M. (2010) "Listening-As-Touch: Paying Attention to Rosemary Lee's Common Dance." *Performance Research* 15 (3): 47–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2010.527203>