

Investigating inclusive teaching practice

Introduction

Through the work with CandoCo Dance Company, Stine Nilsen and Charlotte Darbyshire have independently developed their ideas and wish to share their experience with dance leaders, who are eager to make their classes accessible to disabled students. Trained at Northern School of Contemporary Dance, Charlotte was a member of CandoCo from 1992 to 1999 developing the education program at the forefront of integrated dance development. Stine (trained at Laban) joined CandoCo in 2000, continuing the CandoCo teaching methodology; facilitating excellence for all participants by encouraging responsibility for own body, challenging one self and making individual decisions. The underlying ethos is about providing an inspiring creative dance experience where everyone achieves their physical and creative potential. In the last few years there has been an increase in interest regarding inclusive dance technique classes, which both Charlotte and Stine have delivered for Independent Dance and Greenwich Dance Agency, and Charlotte regularly teaches at Laban.

This paper is a response to the Delving Deeper Integrated Dance Weekend, initiated by Independent Dance and led by Stine Nilsen and Charlotte Darbyshire, where many interested participants indicated a need for guidelines. This paper presents and discusses class format and teaching methodologies based on our experience in inclusive practice. We also believe that inclusion is a process and that this paper is most useful in conjunction with a practical session on teaching inclusive technique class. In this instance, 'technique' refers to all classes that make use of set material/forms as opposed to choreographic workshop teaching that may pursue different training and educational aims. Inclusion refers to the practice in education where services includes all marginalised groups, and where teaching aims to relate to each individual student's learning needs, *see note 1 at end of paper*.

In accordance with current legislation, the last phase of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of 1995 all public services need to make reasonable adjustments to provide for all, disabled and non-disabled users. Our understanding of the responsibility the teacher has for making his/her class accessible for all is based on our belief in the social model of disability, *see note 2 at end of paper*, where it is society that dis-ables a person from accessing services. This is exactly what the DDA addresses, and what we are researching in a practical way through our approach to teaching.

With our particular focus on the provision of dance education and training our aim is to provide a framework, which dance technique teachers can use for their own teaching and class structures. In the short term we hope to support and encourage many practitioners in a process allowing them to approach inclusive teaching practice with confidence and clarity. In the long run we hope that this paper will lead to an exchange of ideas and questions that will further our investigations

Getting started

Based on our experiences of teaching within CandoCo, in creative workshops and open professional technique classes, inclusive practice may differ according to context, ex. an integrated dance company may have an even number of non-disabled and disabled dancers, a specialist dance course may have only disabled students all with different disabilities, an open professional class might have twenty non-disabled and one disabled dancer.

The teacher may never have met any of the participants before, or they may meet every week on a yearlong course. The students might all be beginners, professional level or a mix. The context and educational aims will influence the ways in which to make use of the following generic guidelines, as any teaching situation will be specific to the people involved. **We believe that an inclusive approach to teaching is based on an individual, body-centred methodology, involving problem solving and dialogue.** This method could be applied to any technique and any group, but the context would inform the preparation, aims, movement material and teaching strategies. We have made our classes work for a diverse mix of abilities and different physicalities, but recognise that the majority of our examples are gathered from particular experiences of working with manual wheelchair users, visually and hearing impaired dancers.

We have found that the process of ensuring that our classes are fully inclusive shares much with what is commonly looked at as good teaching practice. Working on inclusive practice continues to provide us with the opportunity to reflect on the quality of our teaching. This includes preparation, aims, movement material and methodologies.

Preparation

- Thorough and thoughtful planning
- Consideration of context
- Awareness of health and safety issues
- Appropriate and accessible studio space

Aims

- Transparent definition of aims (aims thought through for teacher)
- Clear terminology and sensitive use of language
- Establishing and maintaining open communication through dialogue and willingness to listen to individual needs

Movement material

- Clear demonstration
- Creative and exploratory approaches to technique
- Suggesting adaptations and possibly re-working them in collaboration with student

Teaching methodologies

- Provide a variety of teaching approaches and styles – physical, visual, oral
- Facilitation of students' personal investigation. Encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning
- Awareness of matching teaching aims to learning needs
- Providing specific correction and diverse forms of feedback –hands-on, verbal, physical

1. Preparation ; movement material, aims, communication /language and class format

Preparation for class would involve being clear about the overall aims of the class as well as the aim of each exercise. Starting from what you want to teach, consider the context and needs of the group. Is the class preparing for a rehearsal, another class, the only class that day/week?

To teach the exercises with the intention of maintaining dialogue and potentially finding individual versions often requires more time than initially thought and must be considered when planning the class.

In order to make an exercise work for an individual student, it is important to understand the build up and levels of the exercise. The same movement pattern can serve various teaching aims E.g. plie can be a.) Preparation for jumps, b.) Weigh-transfers in and out of the floor, c.) Warm up d.) Challenge the student's ability to pick up and remember material e.) Keep a safe alignment and develop control. In a mixed level group you might pursue several of these aims at once, some more and some less relevant to the individual student.

Communication /language An awareness of language demands careful planning at first but soon becomes common sense. Keeping communication flowing is essential to the teaching and learning environment.

Language in connection with disability can be a minefield and the correct and appropriate terms change regularly and differ from group to group. However, sensitive use of language and a willingness to listen create a supportive environment. For example, when working with students with diverse physical range and mobility (wheelchair and walker users etc., we might say; 'find a neutral starting place' rather than 'stand in parallel', OR 'move across the room' rather than 'run'. This might be more appropriate and signal an openness to various possibilities within a specific instruction. Overall, it is important to encourage dialogue.

All terminology can be alienating. Some dancers may not be familiar with specific ballet or anatomical terms. A teacher must be prepared to deconstruct or clarify their language, but most importantly to clearly identify their aims. Naming what you are doing, ex. actions, quality, can provide 'memory-pegs' and aid common understanding of verbal instructions. It could be also important to find out the naming and labelling practice of a particular student or group of students you are working with.

It is advisable to have a chat before class to establish communication and identify any specific physical needs that may affect an individual or the group. As the teacher it is then your responsibility to remember and act on the specific needs to the best of your ability. (See further notes under 'Teaching the class')

Class format;

As mentioned earlier, time in class need to be allocated for when planning, as in our experience time might be needed during class for;

- Getting on and off the floor with or without assistance
- Allowing for sign interpreter to relay information
- Teaching variations of same exercise
- Dialogue – questions/answers and suggestions of changes
- Personal exploration

Each teacher must develop their own strategies for maintaining the energy and pace of the class, some of the ways we have found are

- Informing about whether class starts on the floor or standing, to allow time to get out of the wheelchair
- Leading standing students through impromptu stretches/articulations of legs while wheelchair users make their way back into chairs, in order to start next exercise all together
- Partner-work and peer feedback. This frees the teacher to give individual attention.
- Teaching in team or with assistant teacher, allowing time for guided personal exploration or one-to-one feedback. This may not always be available as an option (hence making use of partner-work and peer feedback), but has been very useful in our experience of teaching.
- Smaller group sizes; dividing the class up in smaller groups that can work on specific aims or variations of the exercise might help differentiate learning and provide challenges for all level within a mixed group.

2. Teaching the class: delivery of communication /language, adaptations and delivery of demonstrations

As mentioned earlier, it is advisable to have a chat before class to establish communication needs with individuals and group. This may effect your own preparation time, but must be allowed for. By referring back to the aims or purpose of an exercise, rather than to particular body parts/pathways, language can avoid being exclusive and help produce clear feedback.

- Be sure talk to the student directly, rather than to the interpreter/personal assistant.
- Ask for **information** that is **relevant to class** and find out how you as the teacher best can deliver your information.
- Establish; the use of the interpreter; whether time or assistance is needed to transfer in and out of the chair; the need for audio-description.
- Have the confidence to be direct and if you are uncertain about anything, ask. E.g. “Can you get out of your chair?” “Can you take weight on your legs?”

By referring back to the aims or purpose of an exercise, rather than to particular body parts/pathways, language can avoid being exclusive and help produce clear feedback.

- Clarity of intention rather than prescriptive instruction about shape or form will allow for the aims to be accessible.
- It can be useful to identify where a movement is initiated rather than what the outcome should look like. Clear initiation may lead to sequential movement, which may help dancers manage parts of the body that do not necessarily move by themselves.
- Do not be afraid to mention the parts of the body that may have little or no feeling or movement. Somatic approaches to movement encourages visualisation as an important way of fine-tuning the body, and sports science research has shown that a dancer with an injury finds that visualising the healthy functioning of the body part is a catalyst for recovery. Here are some positive examples regarding disability; for a dancer with spinal injury to visualise the whole spine can create detailed and minute shifts of posture, and increase a sense of connection through the limbs. For a dancer with a limb missing to visualise the missing limb may provide a sense of balance or anchoring through that side of the body.
- Keep communication flowing throughout class and invite feedback after class

Adaptation of set material

There is no set formula to successful adaptation, but we have found that the question to ask yourself is; **what are the core principles of the exercise?**

This process informs your aims. Once these are identified, there are endless ways in which to explore, adapt and develop an exercise. A creative process begins of deconstructing and rebuilding, in dialogue with the individual student. This circumnavigates the risk of becoming preoccupied with a particular form and making simplistic adaptations as a result. I.e., it is often not of use to a disabled student to try to imitate what an exercise looks like. (The same could be argued for a non-disabled person!)

It is also important to remember that this is how we all first learn. As a teacher you can start with teaching the material you have prepared and that you know works for your own body or the students you prepared it for. Then the process of shaping the material can unfold in the same way as it would necessarily do in any class where the teacher responds to how the students pick up the material. The process might be described as creating material with a teaching aim in mind, observe the execution of it and assess it for its effectiveness and aesthetic value for the student and the class. Working with happy accidents may just give you the variation that challenges the student the most!

- By making transparent your aims, you empower the student, sharing the responsibility of making sense of an exercise on their own body.
- This methodology allows for different physical outcomes and therefore is not restricted to specific body types and abilities. Hence, it is important that the teacher develops the confidence and observation skills to read the success of the outcome and give appropriate feedback.
- Don't make assumptions on a common starting point; make sure everyone has this information so there is no confusion before making own adaptations, ex; blind dancer not receiving info about leg position before starting movement, wheelchair user making adaptation of starting on one leg.
- There may be times when it is appropriate to translate a movement directly onto another body part, but this must be done in relation to clearly defined aims. For instance; simply translating a tendue exercise onto the arms of a wheel-chair user, not only could over-work certain muscles, but also feel a waste of time to the student unless they understand the purpose of a tendue. This understood, the student could suggest more effective ways to explore that principle - especially as individual students often know their body best! To use their thigh or the floor could provide the necessary resistance to lengthen their fingers away from centre and identify the relevant muscle groups/function. Again, this is only one suggestion satisfying only one purpose of the tendue, but the teacher must be prepared to choose which element the student should focus on.
- Likewise, a similar physical manifestation may actually result in different movement aims being achieved. When there are multiple skills involved in an exercise, i.e.; plie/bending while gesturing, turning while gesturing, etc., the teacher must choose which of these they want to make the common aim and which they allow to be different. For instance; you may decide that you want everybody to use the same rhythmic pattern or time frame. This will look different on different bodies and may mean that a particular line or quality may need to be allowed to change or be adjusted in order to meet other requirements, ex. a twisting swing of torso and arms has a different natural rhythm in a dancer sitting in a wheelchair compared to one standing, due to dealing with balancing as well as range of twist. Conversely, you may want the form or line to be as similar as possible (for a particular choreography). This may mean that the 'route' to that result will differ; take longer; make use of different muscles or weight placement.
- Having different aims for different students can be challenging for the teacher, when trying to maintain the pace of class while meeting individual student needs.
- If variations become too different in time or space, the feeling of belonging to the same class can be lost. Although different physical manifestations needs to be reinforced as positive exploration, it is also important to balance this with exercises that allows all students to share time, or space or shape.

- Be aware of avoiding movement challenges by always using the same adaptive strategies, both on the side of the student and for the teacher working with assumptions about student's abilities.

Delivery

Setting up a safe and supportive environment will allow for learning to prosper. This might just mean introducing yourself and inviting dialogue before starting the first exercise, or it could involve starting with an exercise that is based on 'what everyone can do'. This could serve several teaching aims; understand the concept of adaptation (which is valid and important for every student), understand the class etiquette (this is how we are working here in this studio) and setting the tone for the dialogue (which is part of the teaching methodologies etc.).

If you find that your planned first exercise does not work for everybody take the time now in the beginning to make it work, as that sets a precedent for further communication and learning, trust and responsibility.

Examples of approaches that have worked for us within a technique class;

- A phrase based on quick observation of commonalities, for example breathing, relaxation and visualisation.
- Hands-on work with partner. This can seem daunting at first, but quickly breaks down barriers
- An improvisation based on own physical response to teacher-led instruction

Demonstration;

A clear demonstration is always helpful as is showing alternative versions on the floor or sitting down. However, it must be understood that a non-disabled person in a chair will probably use different muscles, have a different balance and centre of gravity and so a demonstration will only provide a framework that the students must adapt further for themselves.

- Demonstrate as clearly as possible in your own body.
- Try to understand the way your student's body functions, to inform your choice of exercises and demonstrations. Trust your own teaching skills and knowledge of your body.

3. Health and Safety; selected methodologies for specific teaching situations.

It is important to remember that someone with a disability usually has a deep understanding of their body, and therefore does not present any more of a “liability” than the average student. Disabled people are not necessarily more fragile or prone to injuries than any other student you have in class. But non-disabled teachers often know more about the likely areas of injuries with people who have a similar body to their own, and are able to observe problem areas like ankles and knees etc.

That said, all students must be encouraged to take responsibility for themselves and voice any problems they may have. In the inclusive environment there is also a need to observe more and find out in conversations (before and/or after class) where areas of undue physical stress might lie. In our experience, asking questions and finding information from the individual student is initially more useful than reading up on medical knowledge of their condition.

As in any class, practical experience of an individual’s physicality enables a teacher to sensitively encourage their students beyond their comfort zone, and therefore to challenge all students without putting their health and safety at risk.

Be aware of over-using certain muscle-groups. For example; as arms are not designed for prolonged weight bearing, approaches to the use of the upper body need to be varied. Encouraging efficient use of pushing will save energy for wheelchair users and enable use of other body parts.

Understanding the mechanisms of a wheelchair or other mobility aids is useful before starting work. For example; understanding where/how the chair may tip/roll/move with certain movement of the body, or when it may be useful to use brakes, noting that chairs/mobility aids may differ.

Selected methodologies for specific teaching situations

Our main focus is on developing teaching methodologies that can be applied to the individual as you meet them. In the end it will be down to communicating efficiently with the individual student in order to provide the best inclusive teaching and learning experience. However, we have found it useful to keep in mind some practical notes that can inform our teaching.

Examples of practical exploration in technique class:

Dancers using wheelchairs or mobility aids;

- Be aware of physical differences in centre of gravity and centre of balance. This will influence dynamic, rhythm and actions (jumping, gesturing, locomotion while gesturing etc.)
- Establish where the centre of weight is and how this placement of weight affects balance and gesturing of the limbs.
- Explore spatial orientation/patterns. This provides a good opportunity to involve travelling, use of the chair and changes of directions.

- Explore movement based on the anatomy of the body where the chair serves as support; working on the spot.
- Focus on the momentum of the body to move the chair, moving around and through the space.
- Work with the specific properties of the chair; spinning, tipping, brake on or off and when to change them, how this influences or translates into movement for non-disabled students.
- Be aware of time needed to flick breaks on or off

Visually impaired dancers;

- Hands-on directions and letting the visually impaired dancer feel the teacher's movement are immediate ways of giving more detailed information. Clear verbal instructions and sound cues are also helpful. These strategies must be negotiated with the dancer.
- When moving around stay in hearing range of the dancer.
- When taking responsibility for a student's safety, we have found it beneficial to join in the physical activity, ex. Moving together/shadowing, when suspending and travelling can be more efficient and safe than moving around over-protectively.

Hearing-impaired dancers;

- When setting an exercise, make sure the tempo is the same as what you want the students to do, or make clear the change in tempo.
- Clarify and/or recap the most important points of the exercise before the students start moving, as extra instructions while moving can be hard to pick up.
- Establish a clear visual signal for stop and start, ex. counting in the exercise using the hand.
- If using exercises that require listening with the eyes closed, find ways of communicating your instructions. For example, the teacher can give all the information to the hearing impaired student beforehand; agree on a stop sign (to avoid the dancer worrying about when to stop!) or agree on eyes open or find a contact cue for opening the eyes to receive more information, while continuing to move.
- When working with a signer, make sure the signer is close to you, so the hearing impaired dancer can see both you and the signer at the same time.
- Try to stay in the line of vision of the hearing impaired.
- Be aware of your position in the room, as teaching with the light/window behind you can throw you into silhouette and make it difficult to lip-read or see signer

Conclusion

- Set up a supportive learning environment that encourages flow of communication and acknowledgment of individual needs and capabilities.
- Relate feedback to already established movement aims of each exercise, as this allows all students to apply general notes to individual physicality.
- Use movement observation skills to read the successful application of aims in different physicalities and abilities.
- The teaching practice should allow for questions and answers, personal investigation and teacher-led exploration. This will allow exercises not only to accommodate different bodies, but also be challenging, empowering and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.
- It is your responsibility as the teacher to make reasonable adjustments, in order to make your class accessible to all students.

By being open to asking questions and finding solutions we believe that teaching an inclusive technique class will be an enjoyable learning experience both for teacher and student. Knowing the aims and intentions of your exercises will mean that they can be identified and applied to all students. How a student does this may vary. The teacher's task is to be clear about what is important to focus on, and to facilitate and challenge their development.

Everybody is capable of achieving excellence and when working towards individual goal-setting, excellence can be understood by both teacher and student.

The expertise lies not in knowing the 'answers' to all the questions, but knowing what questions could be useful to ask. By questioning, we can open up communication and start a dialogue. There is no easy formula. Like all rigorous practice, inclusive teaching requires curiosity, risk-taking and self-evaluation.

Notes

1) The term inclusion has been defined in education as;

‘...related services for each child’ www.ascd.org

‘...includes all marginalised groups, requires change of orientation...’ www.eenet.org.uk

It is now used instead of the term ‘integration’ because integration is seen as only making the student fit with the current status quo, rather than making reasonable adjustments to make sure the student’s learning needs are met.

This paper is specifically looking into teaching technique class in inclusive environments, using Adam Benjamin’s (2002) definition of the term ‘inclusive’;

“...to distinguish a group that have moved away from segregated dance structures and that is open to disabled and non-disabled practitioners.” (Benjamin 2002, p.13)

But we also propose to take this term further and include all students, regardless so disability or non-disability, and focus on the individual’s learning needs.

2) The use of the term ‘disabled’ in this paper is based on the social model of disability as opposed to the medical model. The medical model views disability through a medical lens and places the disabled person as the patient or recipient of treatment, whereas the social model identifies society as dis-abling the person by “...its organisation of society, its material construction and the attitudes of individuals within it...” (Benjamin, 2002, p.12), taken from Brisenden, 1998, p.23)

References;

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