Independent Dance
Higher Education Round Table 201
8 September 2017

We Are the Institution

Attendees:

Adesola Akinleye	Middlesex University
Amanda Gough	Trinity Laban
Angela Woodhouse	Middlesex University
Ariadne Mikou	University of Roehampton
Clare Baker	Trinity Laban
Clare Lovett	Independent consultant
Cristina Rosa	University of Roehampton
Deveril	London Studio Centre
Efrosini Protopapa	University of Roehampton
Erica Stanton	University of Roehampton
Frances Clarke	University of Wolverhampton
Frank Bock	DOCH, School of Dance and Circus (Uniarts)
Geneviève Beth Grady	Trinity Laban & others
Heike Salzer	University of Roehampton
J Lalitaraja	University of Roehampton
Jamieson Dryburgh	Trinity Laban
Jane Munro	Central School of Speech and Drama
Janet Smith	Northern School of Contemporary Dance
Jo Breslin	De Montford University
Lauren Wright	Siobhan Davies Dance
Marina Collard	Trinity Laban
Sara Reed	Coventry University
Sarah Louise Spies	University of Chester
Sonia Rafferty	Trinity Laban
Stephanie Schober	Trinity Laban

For ID

Kirsty Alexander, Gitta Wigro (co-directors), Jon Lui (ID student placement, via Surrey University)

Introduction (Kirsty Alexander)

This year, as financial pressures, Brexit and a neo-liberal agenda intensify the pressures on the idea and practice of arts education, we want to create a space to identify the opportunities for change and resistance we do have, and ask questions of the systems in which we play a part. A participant in last year's round table put it like this: "We talk about academia and the institution as if they were something separate from us; yet we are the institution. We need to recognise that, and use it."

We live and teach in a hyper performative, hyper individualistic context and are sometimes faced with the choice of creatively fitting our work into that dominant discourse or taking the risk of resisting it. For instance, the language in the leaked Brexit document referring to the condition that immigrants add benefit to the lives of those already resident begs the question: do we make the argument that dance is useful and adds benefit to people's lives, or to does that just instrumentalise

our practice and perpetuate a discourse of "exchange" which constrains artistic practice, and reduces education to consumerism? The same could be said about cuts to education in the arts and humanities.

This tension plays out in how we design our courses, and what and how we teach as well. For example there can be a certain, quite pleasurable, creativity of writing learning outcomes and criteria for assessment for courses that were really about process, and which perhaps, philosophically, and practically even, resist the idea of a universal outcome that is predetermined before you start. Yet does doing this just perpetuate the idea that every kind of experience can be reduced to a predetermined outcome – which I would argue makes it 'uneducational'. It not only dulls the potential of "open" processes, but also dulls the specificity of deliberately and usefully scientist ones. On the one hand positioning something as a core, assessed subject can give it "value" in the eyes of the student, but on the other hand does it change the relationship of their investment in it. (➲ Sam Ladkin Crossing Borders Talk 2016: *Against value in arts and education*)

The discourse I have been describing (hyper performative, hyper individualistic, consumerist, shaped by a means-end dynamic) is very much a legacy of Cartesian Rationalism, and is therefore part of a discourse that perpetuates hierarchies of mind over body, man over nature, self over world, man over woman, global north over global south etc.. Education is still intimately linked to the Cartesian ideal of the autonomous rational subject; it is just that both rationality and autonomy have become highly tensile. On the one hand, ever more domains of experience are subjected to "rational" control – in other words they have to be under our control, useful and efficient. From 'emotional intelligence' to measuring happiness, from the fad of the body beautiful to the functional ease of somatic practices the discourse of efficiency demands that our bodies have got to do better; and they must also *feel* better. On the other hand, while rationality extends its reach into ever more domains, the notion of "autonomy" seems to have been reduced to students "getting what they want" and education becomes reduced to the "means" by which each individual student secure an ever-extending succession of (individualised) achievement "ends". What is more, this hyper individualism demands that the "effectiveness" of the means and the "worth" of the ends need to be constantly monitored, measured and evaluated; further fuelling the dynamic of consumerism – and in practical terms driving the student to request ever more feedback! Why this matters is that this dynamic of consumerism shifts education from being a public good – something all in society have a stake in – to being a private good – orienting each individual to what they can get out of it.

Dance programmes, with studio based practice that demands high contact hours and small class numbers, will never be efficient compared with degrees that can deliver on-line or in lecture theatres of 100, so we will always be vulnerable within this discourse.

So what I am trying to say is that, whether at the level of what we choose to assess and how, or at the level of meta theory, there is a question of where we see our practice either fitting into or being at odds with the policy context of hyper individualism and hyper performativity that we find ourselves working within.

Breakout discussions – Session 1

Attendees chose to join one of four discussion topics to debate. Each group was also asked to identify and propose a further question or provocation arising from their discussion for the second breakout session.

Group 1: *When we encourage students to take risks or to engage in an open-ended process, how and why do we choose to assess or not to assess? And what does that do to the process?*

- The group explored questions of autonomy – what do we mean by autonomy? Confidence, responsibility, a shift in student perception?
- Caring and overcaring, discussion about what care is
- Not to lose sight of the practice and place it at the centre
- How *we* perceive education right now
- In order to address risk taking we need to inculcate that at the beginning - but how do we create that situation?
- **Proposed question:** To what extent can we empower students to embrace uncertainty and develop creative autonomy given the constraints of the corporate university and other social and cultural expectations?

Group 2: *Vocational training to university – conflicts or opportunities? Sometimes there are dual demands, sometimes it is complementary (e.g. with M-level performance programmes: is this about being in a company or about getting an MA?)*

- Students critically engaging in practice, critical thinking in writing activity, seminars rather than lectures, creative practice, social learning theory
- Need for rigour and discipline within teaching
- We have witnessed the staff of both types of institution coming together more often
- There is another type emerging, a third stream in universities which emulate aspects vocational training but different from conservatoires
- **Proposed question:** How to access and maintain a critical dialogue within "excellent" practice?

Group 3: *Ways of garnering and responding to student feedback that might be transparent but meaningful – Feedback from students – making it meaningful – ways of garnering feedback – meets transparency demands and is useful; us feeding back to students about their learning vs their position in the course*

- The group explored what it means to receive feedback and give it
- The value of the grade and of ongoing feedback
- How power works within the hierarchy of student/teacher
- What feedback is to us when we receive it, the impact on us personally and in the context of the course/work
- Class size – different to engage personally and to build trust for an ongoing dialogue of feedback which is hard to do at the moment
- The subjectivity of a teacher's feedback, and how students sees this to be of value
- The value of hearing from each other and having an ongoing feedback process
- Talked about autonomy and resilience on the part of the student
- Feedback is paramount to us as artists and as a part of collaborative working, so it is important to develop students' ability to use feedback for development
- Professional dancers can be particular about working with feedback, working with it and bypassing the ego because it's in the service of the art, the larger piece – how to instil that
- **Proposed question:** How do we prepare students to value feedback as part of their later artistic practice and development and of being part of a highly collaborative practice?

Group 4: *Learner, student, scholar, teacher – why does it matter what we call our students, and ourselves?*

- The group discussed problematising the job description and titles to unpack the issues behind the terms
- Discussed the etymology of scholar – the greek *schole* meant empty time / leisure time / time free from external pressures
- Reclaiming the institution in what ways can make spaces for time "free" from external pressures / neoliberal agenda
- A commitment to teaching practice and work as not static –we need to respond to how our students are working and to what is happening in the room rather than "deliver" to them
- Private student = individual gain /student becomes a consumer
- Public good as a radical agenda; the necessity of the arts
- At what cost do we make ourselves useful
- Apprentice / practice models
- **Proposed question:** How can we think differently from neoliberalism/how do we resist neoliberalism through arts practice?

Breakout discussions: Session 2

Group 1: *To what extent can we empower students to embrace uncertainty and develop creative autonomy given the constraints of the corporate university and other social and cultural expectations?*

- Crucial to create diversity from a teaching perspective and inside the classroom
- Noticeably fewer international students makes for a much damper creative space as everyone has come through the same education process up to this point; so you really have to work to disrupt something and make them aware of the sameness that is occurring
- Learning different ways of approaching a particular subject, creating different points of view
- How to develop a curious practice: space to ask their own questions
- "safe soft gentle warm" or "harsh abrupt dismantling" experiences
- The freedom can be quite disabling for students – and restraints can be too. How do we help students to realise and define their own questions?
- Curiosity is crucial; and it is anathema to efficiency

Group 2: *How to access and maintain a critical dialogue within "excellent" practice?*

- Language: the hard nature of words like rigour, discipline, excellence, a remit of a hard education - propose to supplant these with awe, wonder, astonishment, curiosity
- Lifelong learning, integrated modes of practice, having the room, time, space for practice
- We are not filling up students we're inviting them
- How can we be excellent when we're *surviving* the system (the teachers and the students)
- The problems of resisting the system; modelling the notion of community, cross-fertilise with each other and with us in different ways, beyond the normal structures
- What is beyond excellent? How failure can be excellent, learning through failure! We want a module on failure. A criterion of failure…?
- Whose 'excellent' is it?

Group 3: *How do we prepare students to value feedback as part of their later artistic practice and development and of being part of a highly collaborative practice? And how do we instil resilience in working with feedback?*

- Making feedback a live, continual experience
- The gaze, the way of looking, the power of the gaze, the allure of the power, vs the person being observed, setting up an ethic of the observer as curious humane
- Not to be afraid to make what is happening – gaze, observation – explicit and named
- Making sure feedback is always situated, this is what this is producing for me, here, at this time
- Making a distinction between the person and the work (what you are doing with/in that work, vs. what you are)
- Level the sense of ownership and power with the dancer
- Feedback that doesn't come from being seen and observed, but from other things we gather? Conveying the textures of what is happening rather than what is seen
- Conversation in the round
- Feedback for the feedbacker; observing each other giving feedback
- Less to do with the end game but with the ongoing process of the individual
- Technique training asks for a level of conformity, which needs addressing
- ⮌ A Film about Feedback, commissioned by DasArts
- ⮌ Transactional Space: Feedback, critical thinking, and learning dance technique, article by Akinleye, Adesola & Rose Payne (2016), Journal of Dance Education, Vol.16 Iss: 4

Group 4: *How can we think differently from neoliberalism/how do we resist neoliberalism through arts practice?*

- Quoting Gill Clarke's notion that she was "not teaching dance but teaching values"
- The weight of the system can outweigh the individual endeavour to create or enable something in the classroom
- Personal practice and political values – how does your practice provide you with an example how to be
- Students want a toolbox – not about the grade but about being able to work in the world
- Recent appearance of more collectives in the world
- Rejection of the expert – do the students feel there is a point to learning from someone else
- What we tell students and when – not waiting for a particular moment to have a political conversation with the students, weaving it in, letting it arise
- The language of correction in dance (technique) class
- For teachers to find ways to bring the politics of their reality into the studio; live your politics within the studio
- Making the agenda we discussed conscious in the contextualising of our work and opening up students curiosity about that
- Artists making space for other artists – support that and point to that so the students see the new collaborations and democracies that are coming up
- Students having to pay, and also work, and so do not have the 'luxury' of time to think, reflect, contextualise
- ⮌ Manifesto from staff and students at the University of Aberdeen: Reclaiming Our University

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