

Keep Listening, Keep Talking

22 January 2021

Key speaker and provocateur: Carla Trim-Vamben

Senior lecturer in Urban Dance Practices at Uni of East London

The session began with a talk by Carla, followed by some reflections. Then the group formed break-out groups to have more intimate discussion on 3 key provocations, before coming back to share some emerging thinking.

The following notes were generated by Jamieson Dryburgh and reflect only part of what was discussed.

The fear of being free

Carla discussed issues that she experienced arising from the process of learning in the studio with her students. She acknowledged how some learners were afraid to 'freestyle' because they might get it wrong. She stated that Hip Hop has a direct relationship with the music and dancers were encouraged to 'show the music in the body'. She wants learners to be able to make mistakes. However, when learners were invited to 'freestyle' at a point that felt like 'a natural progression' they displayed anxiety about potential exposure.

The same anxiety was not as evident when learners were asked to improvise in a contemporary style. While these two practices are aligned the terminology 'freestyle' and 'improvise' instigated different responses.

Another question that was raised was about 'giving a nod' to the old. Carla suggested that if technique styles were not able to be reinvented then 'the future of dance is held to ransom'. Authenticity is problematic when it is restrictive. There is pressure of reaching an expertise that could be let go. However, if we just teach the steps then this is only the shell of the movement. Change is needed and Carla reflected on whether she was too close to see what that change might be. She asked, 'How do I make sure I don't perpetuate the thing I'm trying to avoid'.

Carla opened to consideration of how we assess learning and whether it is well aligned with what we are trying to enable. For example, what happens in institutions can be divorced from 'real life' settings. What might be missed out by shifting the dance practice (usually in clubs) into the studio? In clubs dance happens in and among, a flow of vision and not perceived exactness. At the same time, students can use intimidation and bullying among peers such that technique becomes a tool/weapon.

3 questions were set up to facilitate discussion:

1. Are we actually seeing the students in front of us?
2. How might we navigate lineage of technique style?
3. Many students are white – what are we doing/ not doing that creates this?

These questions stimulated discussion across the group. One idea was about what conditions you need to feel curiosity rather than anxiety. It was stated that to navigate difference it is necessary to leave space for something to unravel and that there are social features of 'holding spaces' when we dance together. The teacher's judgment needs to be informed by what is experienced.

Additional notes on the discussions generated by Heni Hale.

The following questions and ideas emerged within the group discussion. This is also a partial reflection and some other important thinking may be omitted.

- i) **Lineages:** An interesting difference was highlighted in response to Carla wanting to let go of the sense of lineages and authenticity to the elders in urban/hip hop forms: in teaching for somatic, improvisational forms it feels more important to trace the lineages further back than the common, 1960s 70s well-known names, and to acknowledge that embodied practices, mostly from non-western cultures, and often spiritual, traditional practices are at the root of most of the forms we work with and where possible we should name the lesser known contributors, usually people of colour, women etc.
- ii) **Masters:** The discussion highlighted notions of mastery, mastery of a particular style/technique – the idea of teachers being ‘masters’ - the word already generates a sense of fear of authority.....and the idea that in order to create freely an ‘unmastering’ might need to occur at the same time.
- iii) Do we need to think about how we offer students the **Tools** to navigate across different lineages - To make choices about where they challenge histories or pursue historical practices, perhaps with all techniques, styles, lineages it might be more important to learn about how to filter what you want to keep and what you could let go of, rather than getting it all ‘right’
- iv) **Relationally:**

Someone brought up the term **Code switching**

People of colour/queer people/people from traditionally underrepresented communities, might switch the way that they present and speak depending on which communities they are speaking with - one way with family or one community and another way within another institutional setting.

This is a learnt skill that some people develop as a life skill.

Could it also be a skill that students could learn as a way to move between different forms of embodiment and their histories and value ideals

Things they’ve been taught to value they find out in a different community and cultural context are not valued.

It’s really helpful when students can recognise what they might chose to challenge

- v) **Space and time:**

The importance of the curriculum having spaces for questioning, being in conflict – for navigating different ways of being

Acknowledges that students are going through processes

Carla questions ‘Do we need all of this content? – let’s just take some stuff out so we can hold spaces’

‘Things can be unveiled if I let go of expectations of what I need to do for my job’