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The pedagogic significance of 20th Century modern dance training on the 21st Century dancing body, with reference to Doris Humphrey's dance technique and movement philosophy.

Lesley Main

Abstract

What are the critical issues in dance education and training? A primary issue is ensuring that the 'trained body' is equipped for the range of activity today's dance practitioner will encounter. The paper will consider both the relevance and impact that 'traditional' modern dance training can have on today's dancer. Issues addressed will include: what our students are using technique for; why they need technique; the progression from 'training body' to 'trained body' and how this is achieved; what a codified dance technique offers; appropriate pedagogic approaches. A dance technique could be defined as a set of movement vocabulary/sequences that progress; that are designed to train or develop the body or parts of the body to perform specific action/s; usually sequenced in a particular order. Humphrey and Graham techniques both come within this definition, as could others within the modern dance genre such as Cunningham, Limon, Hawkins and Horton. The original purpose of these techniques remains relevant within a repertory context today but their practice and potential is unexploited within an educational/training context. I would argue that these techniques offer the 21st Century dancer a depth of knowledge and experience that should not be ignored – a danger in our ephemeral ever-evolving field. Engagement with these dance traditions involves a physical articulation underpinned by a distinctive movement philosophy. The 'training body', therefore, is exposed to a breadth of knowledge on numerous and inter-related levels encompassing the physical, physiological, artistic, historical, musical and analytical. The scholarship entailed in this form of engagement is no less substantive than any other form of study although the outcomes may have a more ephemeral existence. Formal modern dance techniques, therefore, are not simply historical but have the potential to make a significant contribution to the technical and artistic training of today's dancer.

When I began properly considering and researching the questions outlined in the proposal for this paper, I came across a much better question posed by Susan Stinson in her essay ‘Reflections on Educating Dance Educators’. My central enquiry related to what our students are using technique for. Stinson’s question has broader parameters, asking, “what is worth knowing in dance, and why?” (Stinson, 2005: 220). Having tussled for some time with the title of this paper, to ensure I was not simply writing a defensive polemic, Stinson’s question provided a way forward. The idea neatly encapsulates the relationship between artistic practice and the pedagogic approaches that facilitate this practice through the medium of the dance technique class. I believe profoundly in the dance tradition I have worked within for over two decades. I also believe that it is important for future dance practitioners to experience something that has substance, which is grounded in principles that have been considered and explored in great detail, and has existed long enough to be thoroughly tested and challenged.

Through this paper, I would like to offer some insight into the merits of modernist tradition and to illustrate that these forms are not as fixed in the past as might be imagined. In the broader context of dance training within Higher Education, at university level, I believe that our students should know where they have come from, not simply in historical scholarly terms but through kinaesthetic and dynamic exposure to the modernist movement philosophies. Without such exposure, how do they know where to go next, what the boundaries are they can push? Engagement with a modern dance tradition gives that connection. The significance is not so much about connecting with the past, but connecting with roots, the foundations from which subsequent dance styles have emerged, either through organic evolution as with Limon or in the

more reactive responses of Cunningham and Taylor, and then on to the Judson practitioners and beyond. In their recent, and very useful, publication, *The Body Eclectic* (2008), Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettle-Fiol present a series of ‘training stories’ from US-based dance artists that give an illuminating overview of current trends at professional level. Of particular note was that the vast majority of these artists had experienced modern dance during their initial training. Most had subsequently moved on, but very few expressed regret at their exposure to modernist traditions.

An important pedagogic question is the purpose of technique for today’s dance student. There is a distinction between dance training for the student dancer and the professional dancer. Leaving aside the obvious correlation that one is the preparation for the other, an important distinction is body cognisance. The dance artists interviewed in Bales and Nettle-Fiol, for example, shared a commonality in their awareness of what each individual’s body required to maintain it at the appropriate level for performance. This level of perception is not going to be as present in the ‘training body’ because it is born out of experience. Training, therefore, needs to contain a breadth of markers and options to provide the student with a sufficient degree of bodily awareness. There is a consensus regarding the value of a broad training curriculum, and acknowledgment that the idea of training in one named technique as a preparation for joining a particular company has ceased to be the norm. In 2006, PALATINE, the Performing Arts Learning, Teaching and Innovation Network, published a report entitled ‘Re-thinking Dance Technique in Higher Education’ (Stevens, 2006). The report raised a number of issues, including a call for fewer ‘codified’ techniques and less emphasis on styles associated with American modernism. As a Humphrey exponent and teacher, I questioned these sentiments because I know

very well what the benefits are for the student dancer. The broader thrust of that discussion, which I did support, related to the notion of balanced provision, with post-modern techniques on a more even footing with traditional styles. Research coming out of leading dance organisations in the UK including Palatine, the Foundation for Community Dance, Dance UK and in publications such as the Dance Manifesto continues to acknowledge that the dance profession is diverse. There is a need, therefore, for that diversity to be reflected in provision across learning establishments, both in and outside the conservatoire sector.

The majority of dance graduates may not have full-time company-based performing careers but they will likely be engaged in some form of dance practice on a regular basis. It is important, therefore, that their dancing bodies are fully equipped. To sustain prolonged physical activity over a number of years, the body needs to be strong, flexible and balanced. Muscular power along with ingrained knowledge of postural alignment is a pre-requisite for a) sustaining one's own physical career, and b) being responsible for the physical activity of other less experienced bodies, as many dance graduates will go on to work in teaching or workshop settings. Repeated exposure to the codified vocabularies over a period of years prepares the body in this fundamental physiological context. Moreover, students leave their dance education establishment with the means to sustain and extend themselves because of the codified structure/s they have learnt and embodied. These sentiments relate to the traditional notion of technique in terms of physical development but there is more to be gained from engaging with a codified modern form.

Gay Morris highlighted the modernist goal of 'developing new forms for a new age' (Morris, 2006:18), a principle that can have more than one interpretation. In one context we have

Humphrey and Graham, then Taylor, Limon, Cunningham, consciously searching for new expressive means for their particular time. There is little difference when applying this precept to the post-Judson practitioners, because they were engaged in precisely the same thing. There is a second context, however. What happens if we apply this same principle to a single modern dance style? The consequence is that the style itself will develop a new form for a new age. I would suggest this has been happening for quite some time, based on my own experience within the Humphrey tradition and that of close colleagues working in the Graham/Cohan tradition. In our work within a university setting, we have had to engage in two discrete debates. The first relates to the advancement of student-centred learning as a desirable proposition and how this can be accommodated to best effect within the technique class framework. The second is more stylistically located and involves responding to the dancing/training body of today. These two aspects interlink through the changing nature of the engagement by the student, from the traditional passive role of being taught through demonstration and repetition to that of active contributor to the learning process.

In relation to the first aspect, recent discourse in HE in this country has shied away from the notion of training, with some good reason. Creating learning environments where students are empowered to take responsibility for their own learning has been an important step in the advancement of dance education. Antiquated practices needed to give way, particularly in relation to the autocratic teaching of dance technique. Many of us will have experienced such an approach at some juncture in our own training and subsequently rejected such methods in our respective teaching practices. That said, I don't think we should shy away from the idea of training students because the term itself rightly suggests that the body is being equipped with

necessary skills. Of more importance is the overall learning context for that training. Emphases on other influences such as active self-reflection and engaging in a dialogue provide students with a learning experience beyond that of simply mirroring. These influences are familiar in a post-modern pedagogic context but perhaps less associated with modernist traditions.

In relation to the second aspect, responding to the dancing/training body of today, I dance in what would be termed a codified style with its roots in the 1930s. In bodily terms, however, it certainly doesn't feel like I'm engaging in historical, outdated experience. Nor am I giving outmoded skills and concepts to my students. Codified, as I would define the term, does not mean 'fixed'. I worry that the resistance to these forms derives from such a misconception. The exercises, sequences and movement ideas that I teach today are rooted in Humphrey's principles and vocabulary, but they do not replicate precisely what she did in 1930. There is a difference in what we as technique teachers are asking the 'training body' to do now in comparison with what we ourselves did in class, often blindly and without question. Since the first 'Healthier Dancer' conference in 1990, the dance field has become far more conscious of risk factors. There are certain types of movement, for example, that I no longer do with less experienced bodies or have developed new methods of preparing the body to deal with them.

Another key factor is that movement is not imposed on students' bodies in the way that it once was in those training establishments that fed companies with a particular choreographic style. The emphasis in my institution and others is on encouraging students to embody movement on their terms. Julia Buckroyd advocated some time ago models of teaching dance that developed the autonomy of the student without sacrificing the training (Buckroyd, 2002:12).

In the tradition I come from, the idea of such autonomy has been implicit from its beginnings. My own teacher, Ernestine Stodelle, would tell us how Humphrey emphasised the notion of ‘take it and make it your own’ when she set new class material for them in the 1930s. Humphrey did not want replicas of herself, in her class or in her dances. The training environment I experienced was impassioned, encouraging, nurturing, exacting and mirror-less. I have changed little in my own teaching practice except for the assumption that students will know by osmosis that it’s okay not to look like me or any other body in the studio. They still need this to be made explicit.

Stinson offers a four-step model for dance teaching that, in her example, she applies to a creative context but suggests that it would work as well for the technique class. Having considered how her ideas might apply to the traditional format of the technique class, I would agree because this cyclical model can embrace student-centred learning without losing valuable elements such as continuing motion. The four steps are “explore, form, perform, evaluate” (Stinson, 2005: 223). Applying active verbs of this nature in comparison with the ‘copy, repeat, execute’ of more traditional technique teaching allows the student to form a different relationship with the material and works particularly well at the level of the individual sequence.

‘Explore’ can be equated with the first time encounter with a new sequence, learning ‘what’ it is, working out how it’s done;

‘Form’ involves creating a coherent whole from disparate parts – linking the various actions, the phrase structure, rhythm, dynamic;

‘Perform’ is the assured artistic expression of the student’s learning;

‘Evaluate’ comprises reflective performance, having the ability to maintain and extend that artistic expression.

As the cycle begins again, 'exploration' can relate to more detailed analysis of the movement ideas, such as following a different impulse, searching for increased suspension or greater release. The remaining three steps will then become the on-going embodiment of this increased knowledge.

What, then, is Humphrey technique and why is it 'worth knowing'? It's about falling, breathing, off-balance, risk, danger, dynamic, lyricism, opposition, contrast, musicality. It is impulse-based, full-bodied, it's about dancing. It is not safe or comfortable. It is not spontaneous in a post-modern sense where the body can follow an idea at length but there is spontaneity involved in responding to the natural gravitational pull and the multitude of impulses generated by the fall and recovery experience. There are elements that are not easily attainable – the degree of off-balance, length of suspension, level of daring. One has to strive to locate the dynamic impulses and technical clarity within the body. There are points of identification to be made with technical control of the legs and lower body in ballet and Cunningham alongside emphases found in Release and Contact Improvisation including "capturing momentum, letting gravity do the work, harnessing circular energy" (Race in Bales and Nettle-Fiol, eds. 2008: 181).

Humphrey technique has an accessibility that allows any 'body' to have a fulfilling dance experience because of its basis in natural movement and the breath. The 'fall and recovery' philosophy remains constant across all levels. What changes as dancers become more knowledgeable is the physical and dynamic articulation of the movement vocabulary. The beginner can experience the physiological connection of the 'breath in' and 'breath out' in the acts of falling and recovering alongside the gravitational pulls through the pelvis. Bones and

muscles are let go to fall unhindered through space until the body's natural response kicks in to draw itself back up to a place of stability and equilibrium. The trained body can experience that same action within a far more complex dynamic framework that can also extend the physical body, technical competency, artistry and musicality.

The value of a codified dance technique from a pedagogic perspective is the pre-existing framework that allows for progression and development in both bodily and intellectual contexts. The historical connection has an important role within the technique class itself because it contextualises the physical experience at the point of reception. Humphrey's broader aesthetic can be discussed and related directly to individual sequences that focus on different stylistic aspects – successional flow, opposition, rebound. The inclusion of repertoire makes a further connection. There is a limit to what one can incorporate within an hour and a half technique class but it is certainly possible to include short phrases to create that direct link to the choreographer and her choreography. Our experience in both Humphrey and Graham is that there is a thirst amongst students for this form of engagement because it adds a further dimension to the performative aspect of class work. Humphrey technique prepares the body well for dancing generally because of its emphasis on expression and performance alongside rigorous and exacting physical challenge. From the point where she began to articulate her theories of movement in the early 1930s, Humphrey did so through the vehicle of the performance study. The studies were essentially her movement explorations formed into mini-dances on particular themes, such as falling, swings, hinges, succession, and allowed her to be creative within a class situation. The tradition of the performance study has continued to the extent that one can structure an entire class in this manner. Current exponents extend the existing body of

knowledge, adding variations or new composition on existing themes. The advantage for students is the perpetual focus on performance. Technical fundamentals take on a different guise when shaped into a completed form.

Progression, development, dialogue, reflection, evaluation are all equally significant in terms of creating a student-centred learning environment. I go into class with a structure in mind, ie. what will follow what, and with some pre-determined ideas of what we will focus on within particular movement phrases. As important however, is that I respond to their responses. More often than not, the focus of the class will be determined by something that wasn't in my plan but arises through dialogue that follows the dancing of a particular sequence. By the time students reach Year 3, the dialogue in class has greater sophistication than the more rudimentary discussions at Year 1 which tend to focus on how to release from the pelvis, keeping ribs down, abdominals engaged, securing turnout, what comes next. The language in Year 3 relates to concepts, dynamics, locating and catching the impulse, playing the edge of the movement, finding the contrasts. The focus can be performative from the initial stages of learning something new because students already possess the technical competency to know where to put themselves. By year 3 they know when something goes wrong and how to fix it. In Year 1, they just know it's wrong. This example illustrates why the act of 'repetition' is so important. The body needs repeated exposure to movement forms and ideas to reach the stage of moving instinctively, knowing when to self correct, not having to think mechanically about what's coming next.

My research process incorporated the student perspective through class observation, discussion groups and questionnaires. In response to a question on effective teaching strategies, the single most cited across all three year groups was ‘repetition’. The benefits articulated included having time to fully understand the material and being able to know sequences well enough to move beyond technical execution and accuracy to focus on expression and performance. These reasons are precisely why we structure classes the way we do. However, I was struck by their collective use of the term ‘repetition’ because they are actually engaged in far more, as demonstrated through Stinson’s framework. Through revisiting material they are able to deepen their understanding, evaluate their own development and extend their articulation of the movement ideas. We need to make this more explicit perhaps, so that they can fully appreciate the nature of their learning.

At Middlesex University, students experience modern and post-modern dance as core techniques from Year 2 onward. I was especially interested in their perception of both genres: “Modern dance is more rigid and stuck in its ways but I feel it reaches out to more students – it is easier to understand. There is something very straightforward about these techniques whereas Release I believe is more interpretation, feeling weight and organic processes and movement.”

(Year 2)

“In classes you are told to do the opposite but all involve the mind being aware of the body and use of the core.” (Year 2)

“They are completely contrasting but complement each other.” (Year 2)

“Every style is different. I find that each technique helps me to discover different things about the body.” (Year 2)

“Release allows you to be free which I love, but not all of the time.” (Year 3)

“They all have totally different elements and require varying skills. Studying all of them has contributed towards me being a more intelligent dancer.” (Year 3)

My argument is not about privileging one form over another but more in emphasising the value of both. As an educator, I would not consider having a dance technique programme that did not include Release or Contact Improvisation as a core component because of their relevance to current choreographic trends *and* their place within the historical development of the genre. Equally, the value of Humphrey and Graham should not be discounted. Tomorrow’s dancers should know where they have come from, experientially as well as intellectually. Would a drama student be discouraged from reading Shakespeare, Ibsen or Miller, a music student from playing Mozart, Britten or Copland? Unlikely. Why, therefore, would we consider dismissing our roots and traditions to the extent that they disappear completely? In her recent review of the Bales/Nettl-Fiol volume, US scholar Jill Green commented, “is this the end of technique as we know it?” (Green, 2009: 94). I sincerely hope not. Natalie Gilbert, Music Director of the American Dance Festival and long time accompanist for dance, refers to modern dance being taught with historical reference, acknowledging tradition without being bound in it. She makes an even more important point when noting the importance of having something to both react against but also to take forward (Bales & Nettel-Fiol, eds. 2008: 49).

To return to Stinson’s “what is worth knowing” position, I offer these thoughts from Humphrey:

There are two still points in the physical life: the motionless body, in which the thousand adjustments for keeping it erect are invisible, and

the horizontal, the last stillness. Life and dance exist between these two points as the arc between two deaths.

Doris Humphrey, 1959: 106

Not such antiquated or fixed concepts. In questioning the value of the Humphrey tradition today, or any other modernist tradition, we can draw two conclusions. First, the onus is on us as current exponents to illuminate the relevance. Second, the field itself should be as open to tradition as it is to new thinking, particularly when tradition is actively embracing new thinking.

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- www.dorishumphreyfoundationuk.co.uk

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Lesley Main

Middlesex University, London

Dr Lesley Main teaches Humphrey Technique and Repertory at Middlesex University. She danced with Ernestine Stodelle from 1985 and is director of the Doris Humphrey Foundation UK. Lesley stages Humphrey's work for Arke Compagnie Danza (Turin, Italy) and Momenta Dance Company (Chicago, USA). Her book on directorial strategies for dance for SDHS/Wisconsin Press is due out in 2010.