

# A Dancer is

**a person who performs a dance** [Encarta Dictionary 1999]

**a person whose profession is dancing** [Encarta Dictionary 1999]

**an artist who is an athlete** [Brinson & Dick 1996]



# A Person is

**an individual human being** [Encarta Dictionary 1999]

**a human being with the capacity to value its own life** [Harris 1985 p18 in Seedhouse 1995 p83]

**a human being with basic characteristics of `personhood' including a basic degree of autonomy** [Seedhouse 1995]

# A Dancer is a Person

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## Abstract

An area of current study which supports the argument for ethical dance and dance teaching practices. This particular topic stems from my belief that being a dancer should not be at the expense of the person and that by learning through ethical teaching practices, every individual dancer can be helped to flourish as a person as well as a dancer.

Comparison of the traditional, biomedical or body centred approach to dance teaching and the holistic or person centred approach demonstrates the need for dance professionals to facilitate the flourishing of each individual dancer by valuing them for what they are as well as what they can do. This integral concept of ethical teaching practices is identified in 'A Theory of Health Education for Dance Teachers' initially developed from an exploration of theories of health, psychology and ethics together with models of health education, in my unpublished paper 'Considering a Health Education Role in the Training of Dance Teachers' [1997].

The comparison of these two approaches raises questions about existing teacher training methods and their ability to create fully rounded teachers, capable of moral reasoning leading to continual development and self evaluation. The findings demonstrate consistency with the growing evidence of criticism of existing training methods and the need for new methods of learning and development.

This presentation looks at current progress in promoting and facilitating the person centred approach which is part of my doctorate research into the development of a code of ethics for dance teaching, training and choreography.

## References

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**The film `Billy Elliot' tells the story of a boy in a mining town in the North of England during the miner's strike and his fight to study ballet. One scene showed `Billy' practising pirouettes over and over again in his quest to get them right. The delight on his face was obvious when he showed his dance teacher his achievement but the delight instantly turned to disappointment when no praise was offered. Instead his arm placing was criticised.**

**The scene characterises the teacher intent on correcting the technique whilst neglecting to consider the impact of negative assessment on the person. This method of teaching is consistent with the traditional or body centred approach rather than the person centred approach which this presentation argues for.**

### **DANCERS NEED TO FEEL VALUED FOR WHAT THEY ARE AND NOT JUST FOR WHAT THEY CAN DO**

**Approval for their work is what every dancer strives for and how this positive regard is gained could be a determining factor in the ability of the dancer to develop, a healthy self-concept. The need for approval can be so great that it motivates dancers to work through physical and psychological pain and injury. This `dancing for love', where the dancer feels that they are only valued for what they can accomplish as a dancer can be described as conditional positive regard consistent with the body centred approach and not unconditional positive regard consistent with the person centred approach.**

### **WE NEED TO ASK OURSELVES IF THERE IS TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON BODY CENTRED TECHNIQUES AND PHYSICAL FITNESS AT THE EXPENSE OF PERSONHOOD**

**In looking towards the fostering of a humanistic or person centred approach to dance, dance training and choreography, the dance profession [teachers, choreographers, artistic directors, school and company administrators and so on] needs to explore methods of teaching and training which facilitate the flourishing of each individual as a person as well as a dancer. In other words, dance training needs to consider the holistic or whole person. We need to reflect upon our own practices to identify if we are following the biomedical or body centred approach to training where the concern is physiological or biological health rather than being concerned with the person as a whole.**

**In order to understand further the concept of a person centred approach where the individual human being is valued and respected, it is necessary to consider some aspects of what a person is.**

## **HUMAN POTENTIAL IN ABSTRACT TERMS IS A FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF `PERSONHOOD`**

If one can value one's own life then it is also reasonable to believe that one therefore has the basic human potential for autonomy. Disregarding this basic human potential is a major criticism of dance teaching practices and perhaps the most important argument for developing new ways of training dancers.

As with any proposed change, there are likely to be those who are resistant to it. However, this cannot be an acceptable reason for not improving the methods of coaching dancers today. Nor can it be morally right to continue to promote teaching, training and choreography practices that do not respect the autonomy of others nor value people as ends in themselves and not simply as means.

Dance needs to have a holistic training which educates the mind and the body and thus promotes the flourishing of the full person. It is necessary to broaden dance teaching, training and choreography education to incorporate skills which will facilitate the development of dancers who are flourishing, individual human beings able to respect the autonomy of others.

### **METHODS WHICH DO NOT ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PERSON CAN BE JUDGED TO BE `IMMORAL`**

Training methods which facilitate the flourishing of the person through encouragement of autonomy and respect for the person can be described as `moral teaching` methods because dancers would be equally encouraged to achieve the fullest potentials of which they are capable. The valuing of people for what they are as well as what they can do are the basic aspects of personhood and an integral concept of ethical practice. Therefore, it stands to reason that methods which do not encourage individual growth and development of the person can be judged to be `immoral`.

*“Many teachers and choreographers don't deaden the person now  
as they did ten years ago”*

Tony Geeves [in his opening remarks at the Moving Matters Conference 2000]

Tony Geeve's remark above is encouraging in the continuing research and promotion of `a Dancer is a Person` and the person centred approach.

## Testing the Water

***Priority to be given by the relevant dance personnel to further explore the psychological and ethical issues raised in this paper and in particular, the person centred or holistic approach to dance teaching.***

*Botham [1997, p72]*

In order to establish the level of support, in principle, of furthering this research I have had informal discussions with many dance professionals. Opportunities have arisen for discussion at annual dance teaching conferences, dance medicine and science conferences, during workshops and so on. The main, general observations from these discussions are :-



Generally, a positive response is received when discussing the research area with people who have an interest in the health and wellbeing of dancers eg delegates at conferences promoting the health and wellbeing of dancers; university dance lecturers; directors of dance organisations who value and understand the benefits of encouraging life long learning.



A very positive interest in this research area was shown by the delegates I spoke with at The Healthier Dancer Conference 'Moving Matters' in London, October 2000. Many of the presentations at this conference discussed and supported a more humanistic approach to working with dancers, for example presentations under the heading of The Psychology of Optimum Performance by Dave Collins, Britt Tajet-Foxell and Sue Coryndon and also the forum on Your Body, Your Risk which discussed prevention of eating disorders and associated health problems.



It is interesting to note at this stage that there has been a less enthusiastic response from certain areas of the dance teaching community [often private teachers] who appear to view research and progression in dance teaching and training methods as being something for others to do and not something that they need to concern themselves with. From some informal discussions with such teachers, it appears that there is some degree of thinking that progress or changes to methodology is something which only happens to academics or professionals who teach within the academic or vocational system. This is consistent with their apparent resistance to considering alternative approaches such as the person centred one discussed in this presentation.

## **Some Comparisons of the Person Centred Approach with the Traditional or Body Centred Approach**

*'He was always trying to utilise the good points in each one of us - not concentrating on our defects, not trying to re-shape our personalities, but on the contrary, respecting them, so that each could bring to his dancing some individual colour, the reflection of his own inner life.'*

Rudolf Nureyev in his autobiography [1969,pp63] about his teacher Alexander Pushkin

### **Person Centred Approach**

**Encourages positive feedback**

**Holistic – considers psychological as well as physiological**

**Prevention policies considers psychological and physical injury**

**Builds confidence**

**Encourages involvement of the dancer with the learning process and the asking of questions**

**Dancers feels empowered**

**Promotes internal locus of control**

**Dancer feels unconditionally valued**

**Enables dancer to take responsibility**

**Dancer feels able to contribute to learning process**

### **Body Centred Approach**

**Encourages negative feedback**

**Emphasis is on body centred techniques and physical fitness**

**Prevention policies focus on physical injury**

**Undermines confidence**

**Expects obedience – authoritarian**

**Dancer lacks control or has feelings of inadequacy**

**Promotes external locus of control**

**Dancer feels valued for what they can achieve**

**Dancer has reduced or no responsibility**

**Dancer feels unable to contribute to learning process**

## **Other Presentations**

**Sho has presented aspects of her research to :-**

**Health Dance`97 Conference at Huddersfield University, England. Presentation `Health Education and the Training of Dance Teachers.**

**IADMS Conference 1999, Tring, England. Poster presentation `Considering a Health Education Role in the Training of Dance Teachers`**

## **Published Articles**

**Various short articles, relating to dance teacher development, ethical practice, the person centred approach and risk management of dance teaching, have been written by Sho and published in dance bulletins, magazines and dance organisation yearbooks.**

## **The BBO Project**

**Sho is currently collaborating with the British Ballet Organization [BBO] London, England on a project to promote ethical dance teaching practices and the person centred approach. The project currently consists of three aspects:-**

- 1 Teacher development workshops will be held at the 2001 annual concourse to explore and discuss ethical practice and the implications**
- 2 Sho will contribute regular articles to the BBO magazine based on the person centred approach and ethical issues**
- 3 The feasibility of extending the project to the Australasian Branch [Australia and New Zealand] of the BBO is being considered**

## **Putting it into Practice**

**Sho aims to practice what she preaches when teaching, choreographing and lecturing. She also adopts the person centred approach when working with her health education clients who range from private individuals to community and/or workplace groups. Sho believes that adopting the person centred approach has made her a better dance teacher who values the person and not just the dancer.**

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