

A Critical Reflection of a Cross Discipline Dance Teacher Development Programme in Singapore

Sho Botham MA

Dance and Health Education Consultant, Dance Teacher, Choreographer
The Deco Partnership, Eastbourne, East Sussex, UK

Abstract

In 2002 I delivered dance teacher development workshops in Singapore. During these sessions I encouraged the asking of questions and invited the teachers to challenge what I was saying. It interested me that although the teachers were happy to contribute to some extent, they appeared to accept everything at face value. My thoughts were unexpectedly confirmed in a conversation. A retired government official explained that in her view, the main difference between the East and the West is not skin colour but that in the East they accept what they are told, in the West everything is questioned. If this is the case then such a philosophy supports a traditional expert led or authoritarian approach to the teaching of dance and not an holistic, person centred approach that encourages student involvement in the learning process and the asking of questions.

In April 2003 I delivered a programme of cross discipline dance teacher development workshops in Singapore. This presentation reflects critically on the experience drawing on the reflective journal I kept, together with written and verbal participant evaluations and makes recommendations for the future.

Introduction

This presentation reflects critically on a programme of cross discipline dance teacher development created by Dance & Health Education Consultant, Sho Botham MA, of The Deco Partnership and delivered in Singapore to dance teachers employed by the Singapore Government.

The development programme, delivered in April 2003, was the first of its kind to be offered to this group of teachers in Singapore.

Programme Philosophy

The underpinning philosophy of the programme fostered an holistic dance teaching approach that educates the mind and the body, promoting the flourishing of the full person through autonomy and respect for the person [Botham, 2000, Buckroyd, 2000].

My experience of previous development sessions that I delivered to another group of dance teachers in Singapore in 2002 was that although the teachers were happy to contribute to some extent, they appeared to accept everything at face value. It was as if everything I said was judged to be correct based on the fact that I was presenting the session. My concerns were that the teachers were not being discriminatory about the information presented and how they might make decisions about its appropriateness for their own practice.

Cultural Influences

In speaking to dance teachers and others involved in organising the teaching of performing arts I learned that the local culture actively encourages students to see teachers as the experts. One woman explained that in her view, the main difference between the East and the West is not skin colour but that in the East they accept what they are told, in the West everything is questioned. This was consistent with my experience of development work I did with dance teachers in Singapore in 2002 and offered perhaps some explanation as to why the dance teachers did not contribute to discussions as actively as teachers might in say, Western cultures.

This traditional, expert led or authoritarian approach to the teaching of dance is not consistent with an holistic or person centred approach where student involvement in the learning process is fundamental. It is difficult to understand how dance teachers who rely unquestioningly on the word of the 'expert' can develop the evaluation and selection skills that Kimmerle and Côté-Laurence [2003, pp7-9 &138-139] identify as being necessary for 'the effective teacher'. Without these skills it appears that the stages of analysing, digesting and making sense of new learning [Race & Brown, 1998] in order to assess, for example, the suitability of teaching material, simply do not take place.

Reflecting on Achievements

The programme achieved its general aim of bringing teachers of different dance disciplines together to share in a collaborative learning experience where the emphasis was on the common skills required by dance teachers generally rather than discipline specific. It is evident from the evaluations that considerable learning and development took place at both surface and deep levels [Race & Brown, 1998].

The programme was delivered in three workshops addressing issues of: Good Teaching Practice; Better Dancers, Less Injuries and Teaching Varying Abilities and Ages. The deliberate move away from the usual practical only based workshop format that the teachers were familiar with, was in agreement with the programme organisers and generally worked well in relation to the planned activities.

- *I really enjoyed working this way*
- *I enjoyed the interaction with other teachers*
- *Shared experiences were very helpful*

The range of workshop methods of delivery included: short seminars; group work; discussion; short practical spots and so on. Teachers were successfully encouraged to interact and share ideas and knowledge and it was evident that the programme not only facilitated the learning of new knowledge but also reinforced existing knowledge.

Evaluations demonstrate that at least some of the teachers have taken on board the philosophy of the programme and this is very encouraging.

- *It refreshes my knowledge of good teaching practice such as to try to give more encouragement and positive feedback to students rather than what they did wrong*
- *It has helped me to revise teaching methods and to focus on my teaching plan*
- *Know myself more as a teacher and understand that students' needs are important*

Within the local government system dance teaching practice is audited. Three auditors sat in for the whole programme and were very positive about the format, presentation and contribution to professional development that the programme offered. As a result, some auditing procedures will be reviewed.

Reflecting on Concerns

The workshops took place in two spaces, a formal classroom and a dance studio, instead of the requested single space. Although the delivery of the workshops was adapted to suit the space available I believe one large space would have resulted in a smoother transition from one activity to another. A single space would also enable a less formal seating arrangement more in line with the philosophy of the programme and reduce the traditional, authoritarian feel of the formal classroom. These issues will be addressed in the planning stages of the next programme.

Reflecting on the range of diversity of teaching disciplines I found that the teachers fell into two distinct groups [see recommendations]. Generally those involved with the teaching of classical ballet, modern and jazz dance and so on were keen to explore in more depth some of the issues both practically and theoretically. It was evident that they were attempting to relate the programme content to their own practice [Botham, 2001].

- *Triggers awareness of consequences of teaching practices, objectives and reminds me of the importance of continuing education*
- *I want to know more about teaching this way*
- *I will plan my lessons from now*

In contrast, the other group, which included the social dance forms such as recreational dance, international folk dance, ballroom, line dancing and so on, appeared to view the content generally at surface level and were not trying to relate how it might impact on their practice. This was clearly the case for the teacher who said '*I don't think any of this applies to me*'. Within this group a small number of teachers had limited understanding of English. This posed a few problems as no arrangements had been made in advance. One of the teachers did some interpretation and although not ideal it was very helpful. This issue will be addressed when planning future programmes.

The final concern was one of time. More time could be made available for additional in depth practical sessions in order to develop more fully the concepts and strategies discussed in the seminars and so on. This was reflected by some of the teachers:

- *Under the time constraint and mix of participants, the course leader did well, she was organised, clear and very approachable and it was inevitable that she could not go into greater depth of certain issues. Thanks.*
- *A bit too brief*

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the Dance Teachers Development Programme successfully addressed key issues relating to the teaching of dance and contributed to the professional development of the participating teachers. Reflecting upon the experience has provided useful learning for future programmes.

The recommendations below are already being taken onboard in the planning of the next Dance Teacher Development Programme to be held in 2004 for this group of dance teachers in Singapore.

Recommendations:

- To look at the possibility of holding separate sessions for the two identified teacher groups
- To continue with this type of format but to include additional in depth practical sessions
- Consideration be given how to best facilitate teachers at workshops who have limited understanding of English
- To look for an appropriate single space for the programme to be held

References

- Botham S [2000] A Dancer is a Person Journal of Dance Medicine & Science Volume 4, Number 4
New Jersey J Michael Ryan Publishing Inc
- Botham S [2001] Reflective Teaching Practice The Dancer London British Ballet Organization
- Buckroyd J [2000] The Student Dancer London Dance Books
- Kimmerle M & Côté-Laurence P [2003] Teaching Dance Skills: A Motor Learning and Development Approach New Jersey J Michael Ryan Publishing Inc
- Race P & Brown S [1998] The Lecturer's Toolkit London Kogan Page Ltd