

What we use in our teaching and why: The Vienna Research Project

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During early 2005 we participated in two research projects: mode05 in Potsdam, Germany, exploring new models for dance education, and the Vienna Research Project, a two week long exchange where six dance artist/teachers were invited to explore and reflect on the relationship between the artistic and educational aspects of their dance practices. The world we live in has become more fluid and permeable, less certain, and less linear, yet educational and other institutional frameworks frequently do not reflect this state of affairs. Both of these projects offered valuable time for artist to artist exchanges, and embraced a fluid structure without pre-judging outcomes, allowing an opportunity for much needed debate and exchange of ideas to arise.

The Vienna Research Project, was an initiative of Tanzquartier Vienna. and the group consisted of: Gill Clarke, DD Dorvillier, Inge Kaindlstorfer, Eva Karczag, Martin Sonderkamp, and Oleg Soulimenko. The structure of this project included a daily open class, (10 am–noon), taught by each of us in rotation, and afternoons that were planned day-by-day in order to remain responsive to the diversity and vibrancy of discourse and investigation that was generated by the encounters. The experience of taking each other’s classes allowed us to get to know each individual teacher’s way of working, and to develop a common vocabulary.

As individuals, we emerged from the two weeks with a greater clarity about the concepts and values that underlie our shared perspective on dance teaching and how the specificity of the language we have each developed, and the care with which we weigh our terminology, stem from these values.

This list was a first attempt to articulate our thoughts on commonalities present in our approaches to teaching. We welcome feedback in order to inspire further clarification.

[G.C. and E.K.]

Exploring

- To practice self-directedness
- As a teacher to give responsibility to the student to formulate own ideas and points of view
- To encourage curiosity and research

Risk and the unknown

- The unknown opens questions and demands continual evolution of approaches, practices, expressions, answers
- Unfamiliar states of mind and body open up possibilities and inspire us to take risks; and taking risks can give access to the unknown
- Risk gets us unstuck and leads us into the unknown
- When teachers are co-researchers, not the authority holding all knowledge, they are taking risks
- Studio practice can be presented as “a labyrinth which changes as you walk through it.”

Sensory experience/perception

- Because in everyday life we’re not so focused on our senses and they are the substance from which movement arises

- Invites and gives access to individuality and uniqueness of present moment experience and personal history (memory, perceptual history), which are at the root of creativity (see nonlinear learning and touch)
- A performer who is in touch with his/her sensory self is engaging to watch.
- A tool for accessing intuition; important in rebalancing our usually rational selves (see inner and outer)

The interaction between inner and outer

- To develop awareness of how our permeability allows internal and external intentions, impulses, and states to mutually influence one another, and to manifest, emanate or physicalize themselves

Relationship between how and what

- Process as well as product orientation—awareness of the pathway as well as the arrival point

Imagination

- It is a seed of creativity, the bridge between the mind and body, between the action that emerges and its effect/resonance
- Freeing imagination opens up the ability to observe and perceive on many levels

Playfulness

- Is one of the best tools for learning
- Playfulness is a dynamic state
- Is enjoyable, immersive, unquestioning, and exists in the present moment
- We have all experienced it in childhood, and so we all know how to do it
- Draws us in and gets us involved
- Engages us with others in a lighthearted and communal way with shared purpose

Questioning

- Because there is no certainty and not one answer when one works with movement and change, which are the substance of life
- One is not aiming at conformity but facilitating many individual paths of expression
- Because it's more interesting to question
- By asking questions one can direct and shape one's own learning process

Enjoying paradoxes

- Dancing is open-ended, nonlinear, contains an infinite number of temporary solutions to any given idea and acknowledges the potential contradictory nature of experience
- It speaks to the sometimes seemingly opposite yet complementary forces that exist in and act on the body
- Creates fields of tension and pleasure and space for playfulness

Nonlinear

- Because we have all experienced nonlinearity in our early childhood development, rather than presenting this as a new idea...we are reawakening an experience of it.

- If we take the physiological example of the brain and *memory*, where different body/perception systems all work at once as a multidimensional web, we see a clearly nonlinear situation—activity, experience, construction. If this is how memory happens, it follows that a nonlinear approach to teaching/learning is appropriate.
- This complex form is infinitely reflected in nature. But it seems too complex to sustain and often at odds with a typical *logical* sense of *organization* (linear, numeric, pen on paper on a flat surface, two dimensional). A linear process generally aspires to a predetermined result, product, or completion.
- A nonlinear process in dance practice might include movement studies, language, thinking, music, poetry, writing, interaction with others, and multiple states of consciousness, while coordinating/organizing skills, patterns, awarenesses. In this approach, what is happening (some might say what is being learned) is *experience*.
- When experience stays with you, learning happens and memory engages.
- The class reflects the nonlinearity of physical experience, becoming a “labyrinth that changes as you walk through it”.

Multidirectionality

- Physically and imaginatively to have many directions available in the perception/field of gravity (potential).
- Disrupting and not being limited by the accepted definitions and experiences of direction, time, space, etc.
- The availability to move in any direction at any time (action).

Multidimensionality

- To have access to different contexts
- To be able to imagine different states of being

Different States of Consciousness

- By articulating/accessing/playing with a range of states of consciousness, the possibilities for different qualities of interaction, movement, perception are widened and we can reach broader sources of vocabulary (not just *what* kind of movement, but *how* the movement is made, from which state, from/in which *context* of yourself).
- Differentiating between states of consciousness (e.g., Alpha, Beta, peripheral) equals more access to a range of choices and possibilities for navigating (in/around) them
- Certain processes (learning a phrase or moving from the organs, for instance) are more easily accessible within certain states of consciousness
- An alternative to a linear student/teacher relationship (see Nonlinear)
- We access these different states in many ways. Some important ones are: touch, language, music, working with eyes closed (see each of these below)

Language

- We often work with language through the body rather than the neo-cortex, where language is primarily a sensory medium rather than a semantic one.
- Importance of specificity of terminology, tone, timing, metaphor, and nondescriptive elements.
- Experience is made conscious through language.

- Experience needs to be conscious in order to: have choices, make changes, be able to repeat, integrate, have exchange between students/teachers/students.

Use of image

- Taps into imaginative power and the potential to create change
- By-passes the conscious and habitual mind so the dancer can experience movement initiation from an internally resonant source

No physical demonstration

- To not limit a student's interpretation and response to a set of given instructions
- To not prescribe the resulting form

Physical demonstration

- It gives students a clear idea of the nature of a task (see touch)

Touch

- Touch is an integral component of a Non-Linear learning situation
- Touch is a way of learning through *exchange* of information from body to body; in this way, information goes directly to the body, verbal "explaining" has a different effect.
- Through touch, a primary experience of early human development, we can address and integrate essential aspects of the whole being (kinesthetic, emotional, intellectual, spiritual).
- The intelligence of touch is inherent in each human and merits study. There are many different approaches and ways of touching, which address various structures of the body and layers of consciousness.

Observation

- By observing oneself, others, and the environment, one has the possibility of experiencing different relationships to any given idea
- To open possibilities in how to look
- As a way to investigate and consider in order to open up choice (embracing intuitive/unselfconscious choice as well)
- Observation can lead to exploration

Working with eyes closed

- To amplify and stimulate perception through senses other than the visual
- To heighten sight and vision as a result

Making sounds

- Sounding is part of our movement range and can enhance our proprioception
- Is an expression of breath and feeling
- Is a sensory experience and easily creates physical, mental, and emotional changes (see sensory experience)

Writing and drawing

- A tool for accessing intuition, sensory, and mental experience, and imagination

- Each activity requires a different physicality and range of movement, and offers a translation into another creative medium which can, and often does, feed the dance.
- Integrating experience and ideas and bringing them to consciousness
- They materialize dance and are lasting; acknowledging the continuity between studio experiences and the world (see daily life experience)

Use of nondance structures and exercises

- To bring dance within the sphere of ideas and creative tools utilized by any and all other art forms
- Dance is a visual, musical, theatrical, architectural, and cinematic art form
- To expand the imagination and the dancer's frame of reference

Daily life experiences

- Expanding our vocabulary and the influences upon it
- To sustain the learning process inside and outside the studio

Gender parity

- Why not?
- Each dancer/learner is an individual

Composition and the disruption of pattern

- Learning how to perceive material in time and space, how to make choices about what is needed or not within a given parameter, and how to order and or dis-order the elements
- To open possibility and move beyond mental/physical/emotional habit

De/re-construct

- Break apart in order to be able to see detail with great clarity
- To deconstruct a pattern allows one to break down habit
- Reconfiguring clearly understood detail as part of the whole (see detail)

Detail in relation to whole

- To show and highlight that the process of change can be initiated by focusing on a part
- Demonstrates the interconnected system
- Attending to detail can be a catalyst for affecting the whole
- The pleasure of detail in and of itself
- Gives specificity, articulateness, range from simplicity and essences to complexity

Improvisation

- As a method that allows collaboration
- Facilitating learning through the experience of investigation, observation, and the practice of present-ness
- A tool for interdisciplinary practice
- To stimulate the exploration of unknown territory and the unexpected
- Bringing the art of spontaneous creativity into class to integrate practice and performance

Collaboration/cooperation

- Dancemaking is often a collaborative/cooperative creative act
- To learn from each other
- In partner work, many of the sensory tasks are enhanced by touch, and learning happens in both directions
- Creates a safe environment in which confidence is built and risks can be taken
- In a nonlinear learning situation there is collaboration between teacher and students, and students and students

Choice

- Choice thrives in the process of refining observation and consciousness
- Narrowing the focus for a while in order to open possibility
- Choices can happen rather than be made
- Intuitive choices are possible and encouraged
- To be able to edit and build
- A vehicle for noticing your interests
- To allow for investment, commitment, investigation

Rather than being a product-led model, both mode05 and the Vienna Research Project were process models, facilitating debate around education that considers, above all, the interests and learning journeys of individuals. This list of concepts touches on some of the tools and resources that dancers and dancemakers of the future will need in order to create a vigorous and responsive art form. This is especially true for the Independent Dancer, a freelance artist, who needs to have his/her feet in the real world, be unphased by its unpredictability, and be stimulated to create opportunities and shape those that arise.

END

Image caption: As teachers and class participants, we considered questions as basic as, What kind of dancer are you? What is your practice, and how, when, where, why and with whom do you do it? What is the environment that supports your practice and its development? We wrote on long pieces of newsprint, collecting thoughts from both teachers and class participants, and made mind-maps, attempting to visualize in a nonlinear fashion the ideas we were discussing and their inter-relationships. The papers became a history of accumulating thoughts.

Some text in the introduction to this article was drawn from "Mode05 and The Vienna Project," an article by Gill Clarke and Eva Karczag published in Dance Theatre Journal, Vol 21#4, 2006.

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