

Perspectives on Disability and Access to Dance Training

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It is a great pleasure to be part of the colloquium today – thank you for this opportunity.

I would like to use the next 20 minutes to present and share some perspectives on disability and access to dance training.

20 minutes are not much, but at least I would like to give a brief overview of dance, disability and access from a practitioners perspective. I would like to ask questions, to provoke responses and to provoke into action.

Just briefly about me:

I danced with Candoco Dance Company from 2000-2003. And working in this format, with disabled and non-disabled performers, continues to inform my artistic and pedagogic outlook.

From 2004-2014 I taught in the Dance Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, which offers BA as well as MFA degrees.

I now live back in Bern, where I am working as a project based freelance dance artist – in particular I work with BewegGrund.

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...not just to teach about integrated dance, but to make the approach applicable to the student body at the university.

Making dance training accessible to a greater diversity of students.

Transitioning from Candoco to teaching in higher education, it was my aim to take the experience of working in a diverse environment with me but:

...not just to teach about integrated dance, but to make the approach applicable to the students at the university –

And in doing so, also ... make dance training accessible to a greater diversity of students.

Working with Candoco I was aware of just how marginal access to dance training for disabled dancers is.

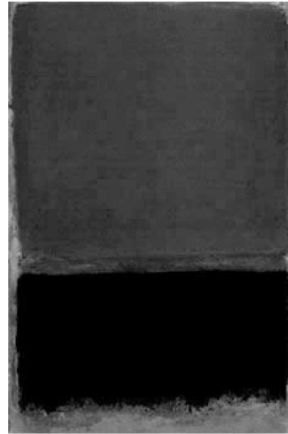
What do I need to teach and how can I teach this in an accessible way, initially was something I needed to clarify for myself.

Teaching at the UW I developed ways to make my contemporary classes accessible and eventually taught in this way whether or not students with disabilities were present in the studio.
in the class.

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Flower Still Life
A. Bosschaert the Elder, 1614



Untitled 1953
M. Rothko

Dance and disability matters

I claim that dance and disability is not some sideshow, a minority practice, it is right at the centre of modern and postmodern dance practice.

Modern art is, amongst other aspects, interested in working with the given, with the properties and possibilities of the material we are working with. Here an example.

* Rather than manipulating paint on a flat canvas to look like, flowers for instance, as seen here in this 17th Century painting, * modern artists like Mark Rothko are interested in making paint on canvas to look like ... paint on canvas.

Modern art engages with the properties and possibilities of the material we are working with. In dance this material is people and their movements.

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All performers come with given aspects, with their movement possibilities and they contribute to a work with their identity.

On the screen we see a collection of artists who work in dance and disability. We see different body shapes, different ages and different dance forms, some performers are in wheelchairs supporting partners in daring counterbalances, yet others are suspended in improbable positions on crutches. – It is an incredibly diverse vision of humanity.

Dance and disability matter.

If we assume that artistic expression is an inherent human drive, do we also agree that all people have a right to participate in this activity both as performers and as audiences?

Artists with disabilities have been contributing to contemporary dance for the past almost 40 years. Artists that however did not and do not have access to dance training and degree programs.

As dance educators we talk about “preparing dancers for the profession”.

Is this really true, when disabled dancers that are working professionally can’t actually make it into our dance studios or degree programs, - when the companies working with disabled artists struggle to find dancers with enough training and experience.

What exactly is the relationship between dance training and current professional practice?
Why can professional companies create access but dance studios and degree programs can’t?
What would make degree programs more accessible?

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Looking at the studio classes taught in dance degree programs we can say that improvisation, composition and even repertory, are largely deemed accessible.

Technique classes on the other hand deserve particular attention. I am convinced that technique classes, in a traditional sense, are the single, major challenge to access and inclusion, because of how they are taught and assessed.

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More often than not the bulk of technique classes are in ballet and contemporary techniques. What technical forms are required and/or offered is one of the conventions to think about when considering disability access.

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Learning Goals / Assessment Criteria

Female	
Arabesques	2nd arabesque en fondu
Assemblés	Assemblés en avant and en arrière Assemblés de côté dessus and dessous
Attitude	Attitude derrière en ouvert
Ballonnés	Ballonnés composés en avant, en arrière and de côté Ballonnés simples en avant, en arrière, de côté and à la seconde
Brisés	Brisé dessous
Emboité	Emboité en pointe
Entrechats	Entrechats trois devant and derrière Entrechats cinq devant and derrière

RAD Syllabus:
Vocabulary for Advanced Foundation Level

In terms of teaching goals for technique classes we can differentiate between closed and open teaching goals.

The Royal Academy of Dancing for instance uses exacting lists of ballet movements for their assessments. - It is a good example of closed teaching goals.

These types of criteria make access really challenging. Unless you can perform a “2nd arabesque en fondu” as specified – you will fail this criteria.

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Learning Goals / Assessment Criteria

“Execute sustained movement sequences consolidating strength, balance, coordination, flexibility and control with accuracy, safety and technical fluency..”

National Diploma in Professional Dance
Trinity College London

The National Diploma in Professional Dance in the UK uses open teaching goals. Amongst others it requires a dancer to:

“Execute sustained movement sequences consolidating strength, balance, coordination, flexibility and control with accuracy, safety and technical fluency.”

These are generic skills we expect from a dancer. Time and time again have I seen disabled performers demonstrate these very skills. Dancers who do not have access to degree programs.

That sounds more accessible, doesn't it? While this wording allows for an accessible approach, in reality, teachers still usually demonstrate a set movement phrase and then assess, how well a student can copy that version – they end up with implicit “closed” teaching goals even when pursuing these open ones.

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How do we train required skills with a diverse student population?

How can students demonstrate these skills through their movement range?

How to provide feedback and assessments?

The main questions for me as a teacher are:

How to train these required skills with a diverse student population?

How can students demonstrate these skills through their movement range?

How to give feedback and assess these performances in a fair way?

With these questions on the board it becomes evident that the focus of the research has to be on teaching methodology.

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“Universal Design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”

Ron Mace, The Center for Universal Design

Universal Design and its principles challenged me to rethink my own teaching methodologies and have strongly informed what I am doing now.

As an architect and designer with a disability Ron Mace developed the principles of Universal Design, with the main idea of:

“...designing products and environments (that includes teaching) to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”

Today, in this set up there is not enough time to explain the principles of Universal Design in greater detail.

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Working with Individualized Material

Exploring – Improvising – Setting

Me – You – Us

But engaging with Universal Design challenged me to develop the following teaching process for my own classes.

It involves working with individualized material in the class collective. – Individualizing is an approach that is widely used in regular school teaching and there is a large body of pedagogic research available about it.

In terms of teaching dance this means moving from:
Exploring and experiencing movement principles - to improvising - and then varying degrees of setting and developing the emerging material.

This individualized material is then also set in relation to other dancers, in order to discover overlapping and contrasting possibilities in the process.

In this general framework, we move from the individual “Me” to a “You and Us”.

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What makes Ballet – Ballet?

What is the form and/or function of a specific movement?

Can we create new and accessible material consistent with the criteria of ballet?

During the research week for *Dance Unstuck* with GDance in the UK, I ventured into applying this process to Ballet, as a codified form. The aim of *Dance Unstuck* is to develop a website introducing accessible teaching methodologies in dance. As somebody who is not a ballet teacher as such, I am using examples from this project for the following reasons:

Ballet is an entry form, many children start out with ballet and access is important at this level.

Ballet is required in many degree programs.

Ballet usually works with closed teaching goals – if we can crack this, I am convinced we can create access to virtually any form of dance training.

In preparation for the week we needed to work at a definition for ballet: What makes ballet – ballet?

We looked at main types of movements and asked two questions:

What is the form and/or the function of a specific movement?

And

Can we generate new and accessible material consistent with the characteristics and criteria of ballet?

These are important questions if we want to allow a student with crutches or a wheelchair for instance to work with ballet material.

They are, I believe, also important questions for any dancer. Engaging with the intentions and the form of the movement can only make me a better artist and performer.

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Before I show a couple of video examples to demonstrate what physical and danced answers we came up with - here some context.

This is an educational process – not a performance.

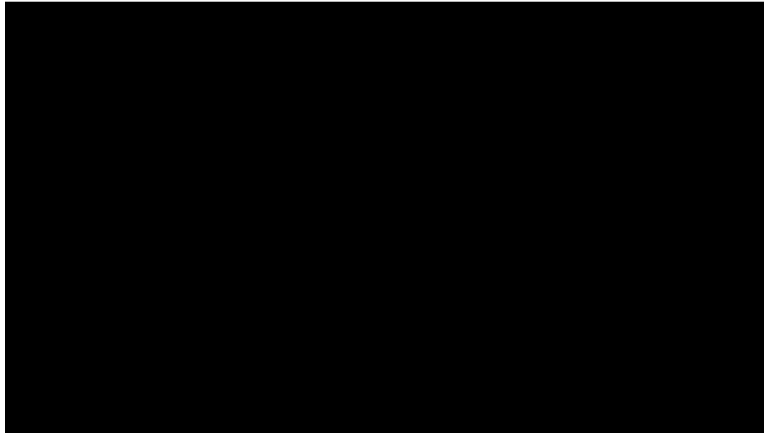
It is about learning, observing differences, making mistakes, receiving feedback and clarifying. It is about showing the teaching process – not just the final result.

The dancers, two with a disability, two without, come from different backgrounds. All are professional dancers. Three have extensive ballet experience. Vicky, the dancer in the red top, is a professional contemporary dancer who had no previous ballet training.

It is important to view the material of each of the dancers with their different backgrounds in mind. By necessity they made different choices and came up with different solutions

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Centre – Waltz Catalogue



During the research week we worked through the entire ballet class, barre, centre and diagonal. Today I would like to just give you a glimpse of the teaching process at the example of a travelling Waltz.

We developed individual phrase material by moving from exploration via improvisation to setting. In the video we are already working with an improvisation set on specific time frames.

(After viewing)

In viewing do you see expected and unexpected solutions to this task?

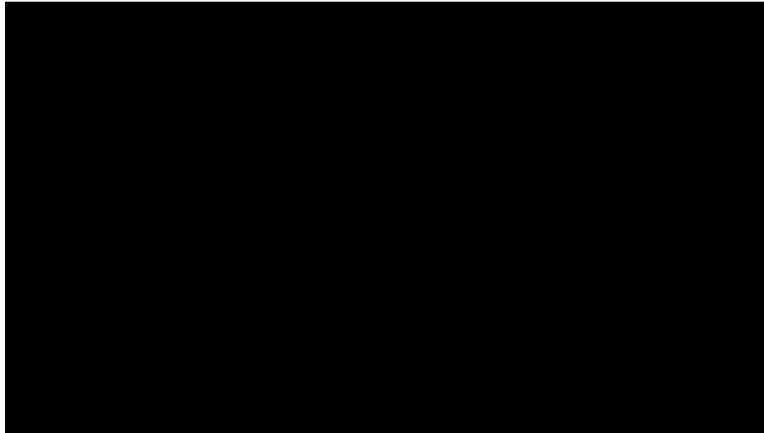
Where do the dancers have clarity?

What would be your feedback?

Is this ballet? What makes it ballet or not?

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Centre Travel – Waltz Travel



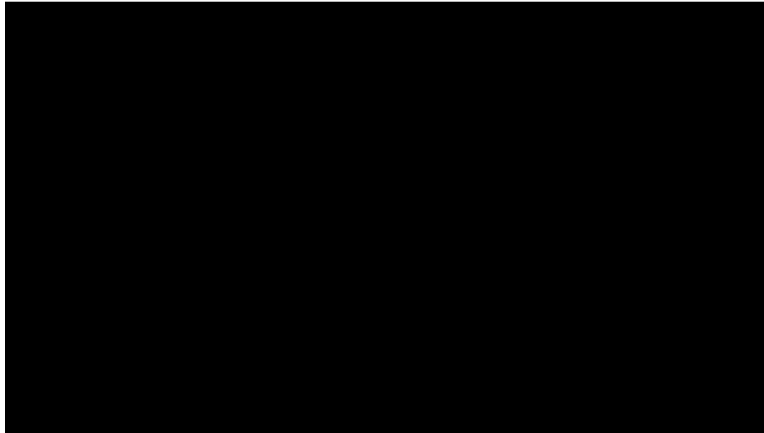
In this task the dancers explored the *Waltz* swing and developed a catalogue of their possibilities. In a similar way we also defined, explored and catalogued their *turn* and *fouetté* possibilities.

In a next step the dancers improvised with their waltz possibilities traveling on the diagonal using set straight and circular pathways.

(Video)

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Centre Travel – Waltz Travel Phrase



The final step in the process was to develop a longer travelling waltz sequence via a verbal score - naming elements, like “shift forward to a high extension” – and letting the dancers pull material from their movement catalogue.

(After the video)

Viewing this as an instructor I ask myself:

Can we recognize all the score elements?

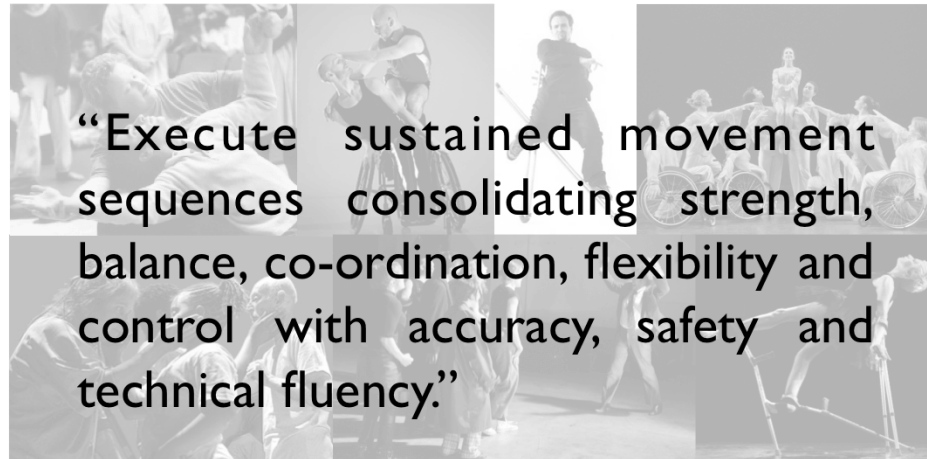
Are there choices that challenge and expand our expectations?

What would we want the dancers to work on?

Is this ballet? What makes it ballet?

In this example the dancers work with different movement possibilities but share the same space and time use. A next step in this process could be shadowing each other, learning and transposing material from one dancer to another etc. Moving from the individual to partners and the group.

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Dance and disability matter.

If we assume that artistic expression is an inherent human drive, do we also agree that all people have a right to participate in this activity both as performers and as audiences?

Artists with disabilities have been contributing to contemporary dance for the past almost 40 years. Artists that however did not and do not have access to dance training and degree programs.

At the risk of banging my own drum, I talked quite a bit about my research. It is a collaborative process and it builds on dance teaching methodologies that are out there and are used by other people as well. I felt however it was important to show some concrete examples.

Philosophically it can be rather easy to agree to the need for more access, for equality, for the same rights for all people to participate in the arts. Implementing these lofty ideals is where it becomes really interesting.

Remember the open, generic teaching goals? I am convinced that using these processes allows more and a greater diversity of dancers to demonstrate these skills through their own movement possibilities.

Again and again I asked, is this still ballet, what makes it ballet? Is it legitimate to subject a traditional form like ballet to these changes? Doing this we should not forget that the form developed over some 200-300 years – ballet today is not what ballet was 100 or 150 years ago. The dancers looked different and they moved differently – The form has evolved. Working with dancers with disabilities can be understood as part of this on-going process of dance as an evolving art form.

20 minutes are not much and certainly not enough to provide complete solutions, but at least I hope to have provoked into action and to leave you with some questions.

Questions like:

Where does this concern you as an artist, teacher or training institution?

How do you practice or create dance?

Do you work with open or closed goals?

Who is in your degree programs, companies, and institutions?

How does what you are training, relate to current dance practice to the artists and companies around you?

Would the dancers you see in the video fit your criteria? Would they be able to work with you?

With this I conclude my presentation but hope there will be some questions we can discuss in the remaining time.

Thank you.