

# Technique class in dance teaching: questioning the obvious

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This paper is based on my first attempts at interpreting the data from my current research for my doctoral thesis regarding “teacher-student interaction in dance technique class”. Field study was carried out with five dance classes given by five different teachers, recorded on video, in two schools which train pre-professional contemporary dancers in Montreal. More specifically, the research focuses on interaction configurations. All recorded verbalisation cited here, whether from teachers or from students, is drawn from the field study data.

In all the cases observed we note a rather typical configuration: the teacher executes a danced sequence, which the students must then reproduce. This learning situation can be qualified as « demonstration – model replication ». If we want to speak in more didactic terms we could say this is an asymmetrical situation involving an expert, or specialist (the teacher) and novices (the students). We will try here to understand the interaction mechanisms involved in a typical « demonstration – model replication » configuration.

Three lines of thinking have provided guidelines for this study.

First of all, a sense of curiosity about why this seemingly set configuration has surprisingly remained stable over time without notable changes. It has, nonetheless, spread to other styles and dance aesthetics whenever the teaching process takes place in a formal setting.

Secondly, relatively recent research in the neurosciences regarding “mirror neurons” requires us to re-think our notions about imitation as learning behaviour, an interaction process particularly present in our teaching practices.

Thirdly, I would like to take into account one of several issues raised during the study: the boredom that may be expressed by a number of students in relation to specific situations. Boredom is often accepted as inevitable; it may be more comfortable not to think about it, yet it is a powerful impediment to the student’s capacity for commitment to the learning process. The question of how to “avoid producing boredom” incites us to re-think our teaching practises in order to understand how this situation works.

The aim is to become aware of certain mechanisms implicitly and inevitably at work, and then, while bearing in mind their limitations, to consider the resources they offer for learning.

## Teaching dance

What is particular about teaching dance is that there is no written score outside of that which is literally embodied by the teacher. What becomes « score », one which is both living and ephemeral, is the teacher’s presentation of a danced sequence. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Lacan, as cited by Jean Oury, has said:

*Ne cherchez pas le grand Autre ailleurs que dans le corps.* (Oury, 2005)  
(The great “Other” cannot be searched for elsewhere but in the body).

Jean Oury has further added:

*L’Autre, c’est le réservoir de matériel pour l’acte.* (Oury, 2005)  
(The other is the reservoir of material for our actions.)

The teacher’s danced “score” is thus seen as the reservoir for the student’s activity.

When the dance teacher shows an exercise, it does remain a “proposal” as in all other teaching situations. Within the dance class framework, we will name this a “danced proposal.” The very concept of “proposal” sets limits to a teacher’s power. Just because the teacher has shown and explained a movement, does not automatically imply that the student has understood it. To some extent, the proposal represents a “suggested signification” (Barbier, 2000:78) from which the student may operate her own “construction of meaning” (Barbier, 2000:78) according to her own level of expertise, to her “attending” at that given moment or even to her degree of receptivity to the proposed signs.

In this regard, I would like to bring to mind a comment made here at the symposium Friday afternoon. Dance educator Eiko Otake, in a filmed interview, spoke about her way of teaching,

comparing it to throwing balls out to the students without knowing how, or even whether, they would catch them. This is exactly what I mean by the concept of “proposal”.

### Interaction mechanisms

We are going to look at three types of mechanisms that come into play at three different levels in the above context:

To begin with, we will speak about the notion of “resonance” at a pre-reflexive level. Then, we will discuss imitation as a two-pronged process: a first, pragmatic, level concerning the acquisition of movement skills, as well as a second, more symbolic, level dealing with the process of identification. Finally, we will address the question of internalization/integration brought about during the final phases of learning, which will be linked more specifically to the teacher’s communication activity.

### Resonance

In the field of neurosciences, the discovery of “mirror neurons” (Rizzolatti, Fogassi, & Gallese, 2001) has led to a “direct-matching” hypothesis which favours action understanding.

By action understanding, we mean the capacity to achieve the internal description of an action and to use it to organize the appropriate future behaviour”, according to Rizzolatti, & al.

...an action is understood when its observation causes the motor system of the observer to ‘resonate’.

The ‘direct-matching mechanism’ holds that we understand actions when we map the visual representation of the observed action onto our motor representation of the same action”... (Rizzolatti, 2001: 661)

...thereby giving access to more than the form of the observed movement.

It has been postulated that a sense of “bodily resonance” allows one to simulate the same actions internally as those performed by another person. Gallese speaks about “embodied simulation” (Gallese, 2005). Berthoz and Petit (Berthoz, Petit, 2006: 237) put forward the notion of “*contagion motrice*”. This mechanism seems to represent a

direct, rapid and non-inferred access to another’s movement.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century several authors although using different terminology in disparate fields of research, have in fact referred to mechanisms which are similar to the notion of “resonance”. Husserl, in the field of phenomenology, put forward the notion of “intersubjectivity”. Philosopher and aesthetics specialist, Theodore Lipps (1935) developed the notion of “*einfühlung*”, or “empathy” in speaking of aesthetic reception. Ballet critic John Martin (1939) mentioned “muscular sympathy” after seeing the German choreographer Mary Wigman on stage. Wallon (1970), a medical doctor and psychologist, put forward the notion of “*dialogue tonique*” (tonus dialogue) with reference to the bonding process between mother and newborn child, as well as the concept of “perceptual-motor impregnation” which specifically links perception to tonus.

When one is completely absorbed in the contemplation of a performance, one does not remain passive. It involves more than cerebral stimulus; the stimulation flows out to the muscles. (Wallon, 1970: 123)

Although technique class is neither a performance situation nor a filial relationship, we might suppose that the same type of stimulation would be activated.

The following dancer's comment, in remembering the learning situation, illustrates this idea remarkably well:

It seemed to 'taste good' to dance when we watched her... The whole mimetic aspect, which meant that I integrated her sense of pleasure when I was in her class...

What this student calls the ‘mimetic aspect’ with reference to the sensual quality she perceived in her teacher's movement strongly resembles the resonance mechanism. Another student goes on to say that when watching the teacher move, she gets the same sensation in her own body:

I do (the movement) at the same time, copy and paste there... Because I want to feel what he feels in his body.

She adds that this sensing feedback is what allows her to monitor her own accuracy in the proposed movement:

Like, I look at his placement,... say he's not there anymore, I'll feel it in my own body, so I'll know, or almost, if my movement's right.

She clearly tells us that she doesn't just reproduce the form of the movement but is, above all, focused on the sensations generated by observing the teacher's movement.

It's important to note that the differences in students' capacity to make sense of a given movement may be partly explained by the notion of "resonance between action repertoires". Research about mirror neurons indicates that an individual "resonates" all the better with observed movement when the "model" is similar to her own movement repertoire. To this effect, the following student expresses relative difficulty in accessing the teacher's movement when the internal logic organizing that movement seems far removed from her own:

Sometimes it takes time to feel, because that's it, her (the teacher's) logic is her own (laughs), sometimes I notice that the paths or trajectories of her arms and hands, that it takes time,...

What would seem important to retain pertaining to the term "resonance" then, is that it postulates the observation of other individual's actions and experience as an authentic source of shared body states and of knowledge and competency. Current research hypothesizes that this is a direct process which, while it doesn't require cognitive mediation, does allow the observer to infer the goals of another individual's actions (not necessarily the individual's intentions) provided that the observer's repertoire of actions is similar or related to the model observed.

### **Imitation**

I've mentioned acquirement and the construction of identity as a dual constructive process. The dictionary (Le Grand Robert) definitions of imitation refer to both of these aspects:

To imitate is...

'...to voluntarily reproduce the gesture or actions of another individual...'

And also...

'...to model one's behaviour on that of another individual' (to take someone as a model)

These two aspects of imitation are, in fact, elicited when the teacher's demonstration is the support material used by students to learn a danced phrase. The following statement illustrates the notion of acquiring competency while endeavouring to follow the example of another's actions as a pattern or model:

He teaches the path, the way to get there... Then to see him do it once, for me it's like, well, that's his way, now I have to find my own and for me that's fabulous to see someone move the way he wants us to. Because me, I work by imitating... so the best that I'm going to be able to give, by imitation, that'll be the person that I watched. So if the teacher wants to get us to a certain level, the furthest... that I'm going to get, that's what he does, if I'm capable of imitating him (laughs). So if he demonstrates, I'm convinced that I sure will succeed, because he showed it, I'm sure.

Or, as another student tells us...

...it's very important to me that a teacher demonstrates well... I'm tuned a lot to the visual 'cause the sound I'll get it after. The visual... the path used..., the breathing, the energy and the form, three elements that I'll check.

These two accounts seem to correspond to Winnykamen's definition (Winnykamen, 1990: 94) in which imitation...

...cannot be compared or likened to any form of passive compliance.

This author defines imitation behaviour as...

...the intentional observation of an individual's actions to use as a source of information in order to attain one's own goals. (Winnykamen, 1990: 105).

Students clearly indicate the goal of acquirement when speaking of their expectations in relationship to the technique class teacher:

To acquire movement patterns that are unfamiliar to me,  
I expect the teacher to give me a little of what he already has,  
To master the material that the teacher wants to teach me...

Acquirement and identification are closely related functions. Simply stated, this is the way young children, through their relationship to others, grow, develop and apprehend the world around them. Several authors have developed the two-pronged, both social and personal, aspect of the imitation process (Guillaume, Piaget, Bourdieu, Bandura,...).

According to Wulf's anthropology of child education:

...mimesis is one of the elements to be considered in the history of power relationships in the field of education... (Wulf, 1998: 245)

and...

...forces other than reason or cognition are involved in the mimetic processes. (Wulf, 1998: 266)

...forces which are related to phenomena such as corporality, perception as well as desire and envy. René Girard addresses this subject in his research on desire and mimetic rivalry. The asymmetrical "expert-novice" situation may encourage "prestige imitation" as identified by Mauss, wherein an individual...

...imitates actions which he has seen successfully accomplished by persons whom he trusts and who are perceived as authority figures. (Mauss & Lévi-Strauss 1983, 2004: 369)

Thus, in remembering his own training, the following dancer speaks about a much-admired teacher:

He still teaches with the school of the National Ballet... S. was a star, a "*danseur étoile*" with the National Ballet of Canada, among others. A wonderful dancer and, still today, when I do a "port de bras" that's who I think of. Talk about an example to follow, ("un model") yes, definitely.

### Internalization / integration

Berthoz and Petit point out that in order to imitate, "co-attending" must be developed. This presupposes that the teacher will guide the student's attention to a particular aspect of movement:

In the following example we notice how the teacher's verbal directions:

...the foot pulls us, the head pulls; my back goes... tad a dum head, pelvis, hip up...

...guide the student's attention and, according to the following statement, enable her to assimilate the movement:

...she explains what has to be activated, in which order, then I find it's so clear about which coordination you have to find, then I can really let go relying on those words, then... I'm surprised sometimes how well it works.

Vygotsky's hypothesis concerning the development of higher mental functions may help us to understand this mechanism. This author considers that the process of integration involves moving from an inter-subjective to an intra-subjective phase ("*de l'inter-psychique à l'intra-psychique*"), where language plays a decisive role. That is to say, the process of integration may involve, first listening to another person's instructions, for example, and then repeating the same instructions to oneself. This is what Vygotsky calls "internal language" which is, according to Brossard, "self-initiated". (Vygotsky, Brossard, 2004: 237). He considers language to be a "psychological tool" (op. cite: 23) which enables the teacher to guide the student's attention in a particular manner. The above example illustrates the inter-subjective appropriation phase.

Subsequently, the student reaches the intra-subjective assimilation stage, which corresponds in fact to the integration mechanism, when he or she is able to internalize the discourse previously expressed by the teacher. In the following statement, the student relies on what might be considered previously acquired competencies while using earlier-understood instructions given by a teacher:

...that time I just trusted the different connections in my body... working with oppositions, to bring one's back in that direction to be able to turn afterwards...

... And that she is now able to activate on her own.

Indeed, Berthoz and Petit (2006) also consider this aspect of abstraction

... which enables one to step back from the continual influx of lived information in order to come up with new solutions... (Berthoz, Petit, 2006: 48)

The interpenetration of symbolic and practical activity is made evident through this mechanism. Symbolic activity frees the subject of the direct constraints pertaining to a given situation; the subject is no longer submerged by the opaque complexity of observed movement – rather she is explicitly focussed on a particular aspect of that movement. This allows for a sense of perspective and a greater mastery of movement.

### Conclusion

We have described how the typical “demonstration – model replication” configuration spontaneously activates the complementary mechanisms of resonance, imitation and integration; the kinaesthetic, emotional, and cognitive aspects of these mechanisms have been pointed out. It would seem that this particular configuration sets up the scenario for a ‘spontaneous’ way of working within the framework of a formal situation.

We put forward the hypothesis that, as these processes are activated spontaneously, with apparent success, this is what creates a favourable context for a self-perpetuating tradition which shows very little change over time.

The importance of the teacher's danced score cannot be overlooked; however, what about the recurring issue raised by students concerning the question of boredom within the context of particular interaction configurations, notably during the learning process?

There I thought I was worn out, like when we spend so much time, especially like an adage is so slow... then that's twice she showed it.

Ok, like, let's get on with it, y'know... I thought we were getting bogged down. It was long a long time.

... I spent the time doing something else 'cause I thought it was too long just going over the counts...

Boredom may be a sign that the students' attention has not been consciously stimulated and directed towards specific aspects of movement; consequently they are left to their own spontaneous learning strategies which can lead to a sense of weariness.

The continuous/discontinuous theory may help us to understand the process. If we consider...

1. that continuous flow of information tends to generate boredom,
2. and that boredom, being the opposite to a state of emotion, does not provide a favourable context for student's commitment and motivation,
3. and also that emotion has the power to create rupture by breaking up the continuous into discontinuity,

...then the question becomes:

Bearing in mind the mechanisms developed in this paper, how can we create emotion which will enable the student to engage in his learning activity?

We put forward the hypothesis that by better understanding these three mechanisms, we could exploit their inherent potential: develop variations and interplay using their components in order to create stimulating appropriation and integration situations, thereby enhancing commitment. Teaching situations can, in fact, evolve through the use of inventive strategies which have the power to renew our practice.

Translation from the French by Catherine Ferri

## Thanks

I express my deep thanks to Catherine Ferri who realized, with a lot of rigor, this translation, without counting her time.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Symposium « Re-Thinking practice and theory », CND Paris, Friday June, the 22<sup>nd</sup> 2007: “some things are only effectively known through their enactment: an investigation of the teaching/learning of Contemporary Dance Technique” with Katja Koclio, Wesleyan University; Robin Gee, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; Nicole Stanton, Ohio State University; Bebe Miller, Ohio State University /Bebe Miller Company; Eiko Otake, Eiko and Koma dance company.

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