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Abstract

Contemporary dance is continually evolving. Its landscape has transformed and developed significantly over the past thirty years, slowly shifting from a repertoire company scene to a diverse freelance environment. In this idiosyncratic milieu, the breadth of skills that dancers need to master is continuously becoming more complex. Given that emerging contemporary dancers will be encountering the new reality of an increasingly heterogeneous freelance environment, how should training institutions best prepare students for this paradigm shift? To address this challenge, I began developing *The Porous Body*, a structure of feeling that promotes the practice of heightened physical and mental malleability by following four guiding principles: flow, playfulness, metaphor and paradox, a combination that offers multiple bi-poles between which move the energetics of metamorphosis. Sourcing from my own performative, choreographic and pedagogical practices and the work of dance artists, movement practitioners, philosophers and psychologists from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (such as Carol Dweck, Mihály Csikszentmihályi, Mary Starks Whitehouse, Ohad Naharin, and Anouk van Dijk), I will, through a scholarly presentation, formulate this method and share its fundamental concepts.

Biography

Louis Laberge-Côté is an Assistant Professor at X University, School of Performance, since July 2018. He teaches American modern and Western-based contemporary dance techniques, movement improvisation, and dance composition. Laberge-Côté is an active Toronto-based dancer, choreographer, teacher, and rehearsal director. An acclaimed performer, he has danced nationally and internationally with over thirty companies and has been a full-time member of Toronto Dance Theatre (1999-2007) and the Kevin O'Day Ballett Nationaltheater Mannheim (2009-2011). He has created over eighty choreographic works, which have been presented and commissioned in Canada and abroad. His work has garnered him a Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding Choreography and ten other individual and ensemble nominations for Performance or Choreography. He is a triple KM Hunter Award nominee and has received several grants from all three levels of the Canadian government, the Chalmers Foundation, the Metcalf Foundation, the Laidlaw Foundation, and the Dancer Transition Resource Centre. He acted as Chair of the Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists - Ontario Chapter (2005-2007), Vice-President of the Canadian Dance Assembly (2013-2017), and Chair of the Dance Committee at the Toronto Arts Council (2013-2018). He is currently Vice-President on the Board of Healthy Dancer Canada. He holds an MFA in Creative Practice from the University of Plymouth (UK) and the Transart Institute (USA). His research is centred on contemporary dance and somatic training. His writings have been published by the Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices, Choreographic Practices, The Dance Current, the International Dance Council Online Library, and the Calgary Beacon and shared by schools, universities and blogs in Canada and abroad. He continues to be a sought-after interpreter and investigator of new dance creations.

Full-text presentation

1. Introduction

Hi, and welcome to *The Porous Body: Cultivating Malleability in Traditional Dance Training*. My name is Louis Laberge-Côté, and I am Assistant Professor at the School of Performance, Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly known as Ryerson University) in Toronto, Canada. I am also Vice-President of Healthy Dancer Canada, a service organization whose mission is to foster and facilitate communication and collaboration among the dance community, health professionals and researchers. Before joining the full-time faculty at Toronto Metropolitan, I was a dance artist for more than two decades. I worked as a freelance dancer, choreographer, and teacher in Canada and held full-time company dancer positions with Toronto Dance Theatre and the Kevin O'Day Ballett Nationaltheater Mannheim in Germany.

2. The challenge: A changing world

As I transitioned from a primarily performance-based dance career to a full-time university teaching position, I was preoccupied with one simple question: "How do I want to teach now?". This self-reflective process led me to investigate the current state of Western-based contemporary concert dance training on local, national and international levels. These investigations led me to acknowledge that for the past forty years, the dance field has seen worldwide funding cuts, rendering previously successful dance companies unsustainable. For example, in Canada, 'for most of the 1990s, as Canadian governments concentrated on reducing their deficits by curbing spending, expenditures on culture declined' (Harvey 2006). The Canadian Arts Presenting Association notes that since then '[m]any [dance] companies have scaled down and others [have been] eliminated' (Petri 2012: 17). Even though each country has its distinct cultural environment, numerous dance centres around the world have been through comparable transformations in recent decades.

As a result of this new economic climate, full-time company dancers working with one particular choreographer or director have become rarities and have been replaced by freelance dancers. These independent contractors are often involved in several projects at the same time, nomadically moving from one creative environment to the next. New York-based dancer Veronica Dittman describes: 'Below that very narrow top tier [of employed company dancers], dancers are all working for more than one choreographer and/or holding down outside jobs to fill in the gaps financially' (2008: 23).

With the rise of a nomadic freelance system, professional contemporary dancers must today understand and embody a wide variety of movement approaches and skills. Though exciting and inspiring, this situation creates a real challenge for training institutions all over the world: How should we now train contemporary dance students, and how can we best prepare them for this evolution in contemporary dance?

By contemporary dance, I refer to Western-based concert dance usually rooted in Euro-American modern dance forms and ballet. Of course, some of the challenges I perceive with this particular type of dance may also apply to other forms. However, I am only speaking from my own experience, based in American modern and Western-based contemporary techniques.

The discussion around these challenges has been occurring for some time already. Many solutions have been proposed and tested. For example, some educators suggested that the idiosyncratic nature of the milieu should be met with broader training curricula so that students become accustomed to the versatility that will be required of them once they enter the professional world. This solution, although logical, comes at a high cost; students who are exposed to an extensive range of methods within the limited time of a training programme (three years on average) do not experience the long-term and rigorous commitment to a particular technique. This situation could result in even greater challenges as we could see the next generations of dancers potentially reverting to a superficial or an imitative approach to movement. Consequently, many specialists worry about this lack of profound physical understanding. As dance artist Jennifer Roche states:

[...] [I]t is easy to see how dancers operating outside a clear disciplinary history are regarded as lacking the proper markings of a movement signature. Moving freely between forms in a somewhat promiscuous manner, thus not ‘belonging’ to a particular movement style or choreographer, means that points of reference are no longer evident. (2015: 29)

Extended specialized training offers essential ‘points of reference’ to build upon or move away from, but also provides an indispensable element in dance: the profound expressive ‘meanings sewn into the neuromusculature of the body’ (Albright 2010: 53), as Ann Cooper Albright, professor and chair of the Department of Dance at Oberlin College, describes it.

So here lies the conundrum that challenges our schools today; in-depth understanding, technical proficiency, aesthetic specificity and diversity in training all appear to be indispensable, a combination that cannot possibly be inculcated well in only three years. How can we overcome this? How can teachers help as many students as possible gain in-depth technical skills and aesthetic specificity while developing versatility? I spent some time pondering these questions and realized that the answer for me did not reside in the creation of another technique or movement language, but in how I approached pre-existing training methods. It became obvious that what I had to focus on while teaching was: the cultivation of malleability.

3. The solution: the cultivation of malleability

The term malleability, a scientific term used to describe the ability of a solid — usually metals — to bend or to be hammered into other shapes without breaking, in a human context is used to describe someone with high adaptive qualities. The concept of malleable intelligence has gained popularity in recent years to describe the processes by which intelligence can be increased through alterations in brain plasticity. So I asked myself: what environmental conditions improve malleability in the classroom?

According to psychologists Lisa S. Blackwell, Kali H. Trzesniewski and Carol Sorich Dweck, ‘the belief that intelligence is malleable’ (2007: 246) rather than fixed or frozen is sufficient to result in greater accomplishments. Two studies conducted on 7th-grade students concluded that ‘students who learned about intelligence’s malleability had higher academic motivation, better academic behavior, and better grades in mathematics’ (American Psychological Association 2003). Dweck also states that praising students for their intelligence can be damaging. She proposes praising them for ‘things they can control, such as effort, rather than things they cannot’ (Glenn 2010).

How does this all translate to dance? How can a teacher nurture a malleability-friendly class environment? Talking to students about the non-fixity of their minds and bodies is a natural first step. Being conscientious about complimenting students on their effort and progress, instead of their talent, facility or beauty, is another. However, beyond the external environment, what state of mind encourages malleability? What tools can students learn to access this mindset?

I spent a considerable amount of time in the past years pondering this question and came up with a philosophical framework which I name *The Porous Body* (Laberge-Côté 2018). I consider it a ‘structure of feeling’ (Turner 2015) that focuses on the practice of an approach to movement, instead of the practice of movement itself. This paradigm can be easily incorporated into different dance contexts and environments, such as dance classes, rehearsals, and performances. It shares intriguing similarities with other contemporary concepts recently developed by dance artists and philosophers such as Gill Clarke and Eva Karczag’s conclusions from ‘Mode05’ and the ‘Vienna Research Project’, Anouk van Dijk’s ‘Countertechnique’, Ohad Naharin’s ‘Gaga’, Rosi Braidotti’s ‘Nomadic Theory’ and Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker and Luke Turner’s ‘Metamodernism’. The Porous Body currently has four guiding principles as its foundation, the first one being:

4. First guiding principle: Flow and the loss of self-consciousness

In which moments did I feel like I danced at my best? How did it feel? These fleeting moments of grace all had a surreal quality to them. I felt present and in control, and yet I was completely letting go as if something else was making me move. What is this state, often described as being in the zone?

Psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi calls it flow, which is primarily characterized by the absolute engrossment in what one does, leading to a feeling of stimulated attention, full participation, and gratification. Though flow research in the West started in the 1980s, the concept has been a source of fascination across cultures throughout history. Buddhism and Taoism depict it as *action of inaction* or *doing without doing*. Hindu philosophy and yogic writings also depict a similar state.

What exactly is flow? Jeanne Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi have identified six factors surrounding the flow experience:

- Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment
- Merging of action and awareness
- A loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
- A sense that one can control one's action; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
- Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process. (Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi 2009: 90)

How can flow be generated? Most would agree that one cannot force flow, but certain conditions can increase the chances of its manifestation. Psychologist Owen Schaffer puts forward seven flow prerequisites:

- High perceived challenges
- High perceived skills
- Knowing what to do
- Knowing how to do it
- Knowing how well you are doing
- Knowing where to go
- Freedom from distractions (2013)

To promote flow in the context of a class, the teacher must then be clear as to what needs to be achieved, and how it should be done. The class environment must also be focused and without any disturbance. Since flow is more likely to take place 'when above-average challenges are matched to skills' (Csíkszentmihályi 2000: 34), the teacher must then push students above their comfort zone, while giving them positive reinforcement in their abilities. Since the experience of the activity should feel intrinsically rewarding, the teacher should also communicate a sense of satisfaction to the class, which brings us to the second guiding principle of The Porous Body:

5. Second guiding principle: Playfulness and collectivity

As some of you may have experienced, traditional technical dance training tends to become more about control and discipline than pleasure or playfulness. Why is this?

At its most basic level, a dance life is just plain hard. Physical exertion, the constant risk of injury, the continuous reaching for ideals, combined with the lack of professional opportunities often result in aspiring dancers who are exhausted, pessimistic, overly ambitious or self-conscious. These qualities can have severely detrimental effects on a dancer's evolution. Einav Katan, a research associate at the Humboldt University of Berlin, states: '... the mood of a dancer, and the internal emotions that evolve, can be either supportive of or obstructive to perceptual processes. When a dancer places too much ambition in a movement direction, the process ceases, as it does when a dancer gives up' (2016: 91)

‘Connect effort into pleasure’ is one of the principles of Gaga, a contemporary movement language emphasizing the somatic experience. As explained by Ohad Naharin, its originator, this concept not only allows dancers to embody sensuality but, more importantly, it reminds them, despite the inevitable struggle, of their love of dance.

What can a teacher do to incorporate more playfulness within the struggle associated with dance training? Informing and reminding students about Naharin’s ‘connect effort into pleasure’ concept while meeting Schaffer’s flow conditions is a good strategy. Dance has naturally and universally been used as a social activity. However, conservatory training, although usually practiced in groups, has been mainly focused on the individual, often leading to feelings of isolation and competitiveness in the studio and beyond. As a remedy to this, there should be a stronger focus on building a sense of collectivity among classmates. Feeling part of a collective not only helps self-consciousness subside, but it also brings a joyful sense of belonging. Consequently, I aim to have students work in pairs or small groups, watching each other’s dancing, giving and receiving oral and tactile feedback, and making conscious eye contact. Also, the incorporation of humour can do wonders.

However, the most successful factor in bringing a sense of playfulness to class is encouraging students to connect with their creativity, through the use of their imagination. This element brings us to the third guiding principle of The Porous Body:

6. Third guiding principle: Guided mental imagery and metaphor

Guided mental imagery has been used in dance for quite some time. For example, Butoh’s form and expression have been, since its conception, steeped in the embodiment of profound mental visualizations. In the West, its use gained popularity amongst dancers and health professionals in the 1930s through Ideokinesis, a form of somatic education conceived by Mabel Elsworth Todd, Barbara Clark and Lulu Sweigard. Since then, Ideokinesis has inspired an extensive list of artists and movement specialists, which has led to the development of numerous physical practices such as the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Gyrokinesis, Contact-Improvisation, Body-Mind Centering, Skinner Releasing Technique and aforementioned Gaga, among many others.

Not only does mental imagery ‘improve skeletal alignment and posture through the re-patterning of neuromuscular pathways’ (Pavlik and Nordin-Bates 2016: 56), but it also taps into our creative selves by propelling our movement into the poetic and infinite realm of metaphors. According to renowned Ideokinesis practitioner Irene Dowd, ‘Metaphor can be the fist that breaks through the dark glass between what is already known and what is still mystery. Through the vehicle of metaphor, we can participate in that movement from what is to what can be’ (1995: 69).

Working with imagery requires energy and attention. For a mental representation to impact one’s movement, state, or alignment, attention must be directed and sustained. This process requires mental stamina, which in turn entails practice. The ability to use and embody mental imagery effectively is an important skill for today’s contemporary dancers. Therefore, I aim to include visualization exercises in my classes and consider this element of training to be as fundamental as the practice of movement itself. Through guided mental imagery, I aim to practice not only efficient movement, but also creativity, focus, enjoyment, connectedness, and empathy.

The primary challenge with mental imagery is that sometimes, the images can become either static, lacking in life, predictable, or one-dimensional. How can we make sure that an image stays alive, organically morphing, surprising, and multi-layered? This brings us to The Porous Body’s fourth and final guiding principle:

7. Fourth guiding principle: Paradox and unknowingness

The positive effects of paradox are three-fold: embracing paradox takes away the rigidity of absolute beliefs, dissipates the desire to overly control, and allows us to reveal ourselves genuinely. As David Appelbaum, Professor of Philosophy at State University of New York, writes: ‘The force of contradiction alone provides the tonic against hiddenness’ (1990: xii).

As with mental imagery, paradox has been used in dance for a long time. Butoh is, once again, a good example. Countertechnique, a contemporary dance technique developed by Anouk van Dijk, uses paradoxical opposition as a fundamental movement concept: ‘The heightened alertness that is typical for dancers trained in Countertechnique stems from the need and ability to be in at least two places at the same time, both mentally and physically. Dancers have to think and focus on direction as well as counter-direction, thus dividing their attention’ (Siegmund and Van Dijk 2011: 76).

The focus required to navigate through endless contradictions and oppositions often leads to a meditative flow state, which ideally results in a return to The Porous Body’s first guiding principle and creates a positive sense of circularity in experiencing each of its components: concentration, pleasure, imagination, and wonder.

8. Conclusion: Continual metamorphosis

The contemporary dance world is in perpetual mutation. Considering the current state of flux and nomadic nature of the professional dance scene, how should training institutions best prepare students for their future careers?

I have not ultimately found an answer to this question, as there are systemic changes which are beyond my present understanding of institutionalized dance education. However, I think formal codified training still is relevant and necessary in our current context, though to be entirely pertinent, it should be taught with a strong focus on cultivating physical and mental malleability. It is my hope that The Porous Body, a structure of feeling I developed to help dancers achieve a state of responsiveness, openness, and vulnerability in different dance contexts – including traditional training classes – will help fill this gap. Of course, I need to spend more time refining this approach through continuous practice and experimentation. However, at this point, I continue to work with my four guiding principles:

- Flow and the loss of self-consciousness
- Playfulness and collectivity
- Guided mental imagery and metaphor
- Paradox and unknowingness

The investigation and practice of these principles inspired a list of “prompts”, not meant to be strictly followed as “hard rules”, but meant to serve as loose inspirations, opportunities for reflection, and gentle reminders:

- Consider the state of mind in which movement occurs to be just as crucial as the movement itself.
- Consider class environment to be just as critical as class content.
- Talk to students about the non-fixity of their minds and bodies.
- Praise students only for things they can directly control, such as effort and commitment.
- Be clear as to what needs to be achieved and how it should be done.
- Make sure that the class environment is focused and without any disturbance.
- Push students beyond their comfort zone, while giving them positive reinforcement for their accomplishments.
- Communicate a sense of satisfaction to the class.
- Build a sense of collectivity among classmates.
- Work with humour.
- Encourage students to connect with their creativity through the use of their imaginations.

- Make working with guided mental imagery, and building mental stamina for it, an essential part of the daily training.
- Promote the ability to dance with an external attentional focus.
- Include time for mindfulness, breathing, “self-scanning” or “grounding” exercises regularly.
- Foster the ability to work with paradox, unknowingness, discomfort, and impossibility.
- Offer a range of approaches and purposes in the practice.
- Describe the work as an explorative process, as opposed to a goal-oriented procedure.
- Ask the students to aim for integrity and clarity, not perfection.
- Remind the dancers to look for pleasure, sensuality, curiosity, and empowerment within the practice.

I have since planned and taught my classes with this framework in mind, and exploring and applying these principles has enriched my pedagogical practice. It has transformed my use of language around dance training, improved my relationship with the students, and clarified my educational intentions.

The combination of flow, playfulness, imagery and paradox offers multiple bi-poles between which move the energetics of metamorphosis. The daily practice of embodied transformation paired with a clear sense of self-awareness within community are probably some of the most valuable tools professional training programs can offer its students today. Not only do they effectively prepare students for a freelance career, but they also teach them about themselves and their value to one another. I will leave you with this beautiful quote from Mary Starks Whitehouse, founder of Authentic Movement:

Movement, as I know it now, touches people in their lives. It opens up their individual sense of themselves and teaches them that they are humanly valuable to each other. It is the discovery of the growth process that is themselves becoming. The word ‘becoming’ moves, it is the movement aspect of eternity. Being is the essence; becoming is the movement of the essence. After all, it is Life that dances. (2009, 62)



Louis Laberge-Côté leading a dance class with students from Toronto Metropolitan University.
Photo: Marlowe Porter

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