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Learning from Cinderella: putting dance education partnerships centre stage?

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Background

Often seen as the Cinderella of the artforms, dance and its capacity to nurture creativity in education has been under scrutiny since 2008 by a team of Exeter University, TrinityLaban and school-based researchers. This paper details some findings of these AHRC-funded investigations within the Dance Partners for Creativity (DPC) Research Project. The project is investigating the kinds of creative partnerships manifested between dance-artists and teachers in co-developing the creativity of 11-14 year olds. The aim is to contribute to redressing the balance between creativity and performativity, in secondary level dance education in England, and beyond.

Sitting at odds with the performativity and attainment agenda which challenges creativity are recent cultural and education policies encouraging partnerships between artists and teachers to foster student creativity in schools (e.g Creative Partnerships: www.creative-partnerships.com; DCMS et al, 2008). The Roberts Review (2006) and Government response (DCMS, 2006) suggest renewed onus on partnership could offer a fruitful arena to re-connect with the creativity inherent within disciplines like dance. It is this partnership practice which the DPC research is investigating.

Beyond dance education, the research is also responding to current debates regarding how young people and staff are disenfranchised within education (Fielding, 2007; Troman and Woods, 2001). This research aims to provide an antidote to this, drawing on a conception of creativity developed previously in dance education settings which argues for creativity as individual, collaborative and communal, and as such potentially humanising (Chappell, 2008). This humanising element is guided by empathy and shared cultural values, whilst acknowledging the partiality of these; it is embodied and encourages an active change process. Recognition of controversy and conflict is vital; difference is not buried. The research is particularly exploring how this might be played out pedagogically and culturally, responding to Jones' (2009) call to move beyond understanding 'context' to explore issues of culture within creativity studies.

Research Questions

The main research question is: What kinds of creative partnerships are manifested between dance-artists and teachers in co-developing the creativity of 11-14 year olds, in dance education, and how do these develop? The aim is to work towards transformation for partnership practice and invigorate young people's creativity in these research settings and through dissemination/provocation in new settings. This paper/presentation will focus on the findings surrounding the kinds of creative partnerships manifested between dance artists and teachers. In particular it will consider what has been learned about these partnerships from the investigation of four such close encounters.

Methods

The DPC Project involves university-based researchers and school-based partner researchers stretching across boundaries between 'university' and 'school' spaces. It adopts a qualitative methodology underpinned by an epistemological standpoint acknowledging the social construction of reality. It is broadly informed by critical theory, oriented toward critiquing and changing, as opposed to theory oriented only to understanding or explaining (e.g. McCarthy, 1991). The team is therefore working to find space for change in how all researchers interact in research, classroom and studio practice (Ellsworth, 1989). In particular the methodology has employed 'creative learning conversations' (Chappell & Craft, in development; Craft, in preparation) as one of the methodological tools. Applying Lefebvre's (1991) ideas of production of space, these conversations aim to create knowledge as partial, 'bottom up' and participatory, conceptualised within DPC as 'Living Dialogic

Space'. It is within these research spaces that university and school-based researchers, across four school sites, have sought to collaboratively investigate together the creative partnerships manifested between dance artists and dance teachers.

Frame

Analysis has been applied in cycles with data collection. Drawing on the principles of the constant comparative method whilst acknowledging the methodological frame above, all researchers have engaged in increasingly focused analysis of data in different media, with intermediate triangulation of analysis by variously positioned team members.

Research findings

In particular this paper draws on the voices of the University research team supported by a selection of the school-based researchers to focus on the inter-relationship of three key areas developed from the project's analysis. It will consider how aspects of culture, pedagogy and space contribute to the manifestation of the partnerships in question, and will articulate the effective and less effective processes and tensions at play within this interrelationship. The research demonstrates the power of the arts, in particular the traditionally marginalised Cinderella discipline of dance, to challenge and change by creating spaces for new and different hopes and expectations and thus to choreograph centre stage rather than being overlooked at the periphery. It offers perspectives on embodied understanding and communal approaches to creativity in education as a key way to challenge the status quo, and push for a more humane approach to education. In so doing the findings seek to offer provocations for the development of future education scenarios within and beyond dance.

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