

“To allow oneself to dance....”

Understanding the individual training of a selection of young dancers

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I am not quite sure why I started crying on Friday, but I have a pretty good idea. Throughout the entire autumn my body has been in a lot of pain, [I've had] tension that would not subside, wrist pains and an upset stomach. This has made dancing an enormous effort, and I have been very frustrated while working. The feeling of not managing things and not being good enough in terms of my own expectations is sometimes extremely difficult for me to work through. I don't know if it is due to this, but nevertheless; I notice that I tend to brood a great deal and always have a sense of not understanding. This is not necessarily something negative, but so many unanswered questions pile up in my mind and that is a bit exhausting. But then, every once in a while, things function and I feel like I am in place and this is very intense, emotionally. The tears just come and it's actually quite wonderful. The feeling that something emerges that has been completely worked out. And it is indeed often the case that it is a bit sad when things come to an end. Or, beyond this, it is a long time since I cried. I often feel like crying, but there's something that stops me. This creates agitation and imbalance in my body. I recognise that there is a bizarre cyclic nature in all of this...

These are the words of a young dance student regarding her training experience. Her body is in pain; she feels the tears rising, has a sense of not understanding and broods a lot. Her training sessions are personal and frustrating and she speaks of brooding and trying to negotiate with herself on a number of issues. There are many “unanswered questions in her mind” and “problems with the body”. In the above excerpt one can recognise general cultural expectations that being a dancer involves hard work and a lot of physical pain. The perception that being a good dancer is about hard work and “blood, sweat and tears” has been reaffirmed by television series such as “Dansefeber” (So You Think You Can Dance) and “Skal vi danse” (Come Dancing) that are broadcasted by Norwegian television channels. There can nevertheless be a vast difference between such cultural expectations of dancers and what dancers themselves say when they speak of their experiences.

The purpose of this article is therefore to illustrate the experiences of young dancers working with their own individual training¹. I have investigated this in the context of a specific contemporary dance education programme in Norway², and the question posed in this article is: How do young dancers in this context undergo their training and what experiences are most significant for them? The question “*what were the essential experiences of your individual training today?*” constituted the point of departure for my project with young dance students. The main data used in answering this question was taken from the students’ logbooks³.

Educational context

Research on dance education is a growing research field (Thomas 2003, Briginshaw 2001, Bannon & Sanderson 2000). A number of dance theorists point out (Eeg 2006, Fieldseth 2004, Rouhiainen 2003, Oatley 1999) that dance and the dancer in contemporary times can be understood through such terms as flexibility, instability

1 The concept “individual training” refers to the subjective experiences that the students express about practicing “on their own”. However, the students also refer to their individual experiences in the group-based lessons.

2 The meaning of the term contemporary dance is ambiguous, but in general it can be said to be the relationship between dance and society, between the audience and a dance performance understood as “...meaning and culture created in a continuous movement and exchange between bodies and their surroundings” (Eeg 2006, 87).

3 They also responded to another question; what did it feel like to log their experiences and have their logs reviewed by me, their instructor? This question has not been analysed in this article.

and staging. The creation of differences and ambivalence are central. Narrative structures are abandoned and replaced by situated positions, where the dancing subject is not stable or defined by his/her technique, but rather by perception processes, energy, gender and social references. However, as Østern so clearly points out (2009, 51), the bodily experience of the dancers “tend[s] to slip away”.

Karen Bond and Sue Stinson (2007) have investigated which factors make young dancers work hard and which prevent them from working hard. They identify fear, lack of confidence, insufficient correlation between individual skill and what is required in class, and a dislike of hard work as factors involved in young people's experiences. The authors conclude that students' motivation for dance as a school subject is not significantly different from students' motivation and involvement in other disciplines. They also discuss whether instructive perceptions that dancers are to be socialised to “always do their best” should be replaced by an education that is just as much about finding out what is meaningful for the students.

As already stated, I have been interested in what dancers themselves express when they speak⁴ of their experiences. Due to this interest I have chosen to conduct my research at The School of Contemporary Dance in Oslo (*Skolen for Samtidsdans*)⁵. According to the curriculum advertised on their website www.samtidsdans.no, the School of Contemporary Dance offers “a study programme in which professional and theoretical studies and artistic execution are integrated, and where the students' own experiences, interests and artistic choices are central” (curriculum, 1). The programme focuses on both dance performance and reflection. The students' collaborative influence is emphasised and it is expected that, by engaging in dialogue with the teaching staff, the students will learn how they can discuss and reflect upon their own artistic practice. According to the curriculum the students shall

*...acquire a critical, open and exploratory perspective on dance and its context in an historical and contemporary perspective. The study programme's work methods are inspired by dialogical pedagogy and thereby based on student guidance, combined with an emphasis on a significant amount of collaborative participation on the part of the students. Through dialogue, work is carried out on how the students can discuss and reflect upon their own artistic practice.*⁶

The study programme emphasised the student as a reflective subject and my interest here is in the students' experience and how they, as reflective subjects, chose to write about their individual training⁷. I consider the students' experience to be emergent and situational and related to the educational context and the study programme at the School of Contemporary Dance. At the same time their experience relates to their life-worlds, which means that such experience is both social and individual and of course more than the students are able to express in the written texts. However, I regard the written text to involve embodied expressions and parts of a larger world that the students' lives are embraced by. I think this “larger” part of the world that embraces experience becomes illustrated in the analyses.

Research position

Taking into account the fact that the context of training and exercising is differentiated by time and space, I needed to further sensitise my research questions on these topics. In this context I was particularly influenced by

4 I write “speak” here, even though the material consists of written texts.

5 <http://www.samtidsdans.no/>

6 Studentene skal tilegges seg en kritisk, åpen og utforskende innstilling til dans og dens kontekst i et historisk og samtidig perspektiv. Studiets arbeidsmåter er inspirert av dialogisk pedagogikk og bygger på veiledning, samtidig legges det opp til en betydelig medinnflytelse fra studentene. Gjennom dialogene arbeides det med hvordan studentene kan argumentere for- og reflektere rundt egne kunstneriske arbeid.

7 In other words, this is training that the students participate in outside scheduled classes, but which is sometimes included as “individual training” on the schedule.



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the phenomenological concept of “the lived body” which transcends all perspectives of the body as a measurable physical object. The lived body reaches out in the world and is an active, perceiving and experiencing body: a subject and an object, visible and seeing, touched and touching. It is always both at the same time, although the two sides of the body cannot be reduced to one another. The lived body not only notices, but also *produces* a spatiotemporal field around itself. This spatiotemporal field around the subject sensitises the subject to how movement is possible in a specific situation and, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 106) so clearly states, “. . . it is never an objective body that moves, but a phenomenal body”. From a phenomenological perspective the body is first and foremost a body-subject, a lived body, and not an object to be controlled. By adopting a phenomenological approach I was able to sensitise the *relationship* between the students and exercise as an experienced phenomenon. The position that I developed was also inspired by Max van Manen (1990) in that my interest was in developing an investigatory stance in relation to our own movements and in exploring ourselves, others and our surroundings in a *reciprocal* relationship.

In practice, adopting this approach meant that my own research position had methodological implications (Engelsrud 2005). My subjectivity created hindrances for the acquisition of knowledge. My “blind spots” became particularly visible when communicating with the students. I think my interest in subjectivity and the student experience is a “red thread”. I realised that it had some limitations, especially because it can be interpreted as a devaluation of “training methods”, which of course also play an important part in dance training. In my relationship with the students the connection between methods for training and experience of training became “a hot topic”. Since ideas of the “perfect body” are a cultural product that holds a position in dance, the students’ reflections on the relationships between themselves and their experience and the ideals represented, as we shall see in their writings, are a vital, problematic and dynamic force.

Since I was responsible for the students’ individual training I was also helping a number of them through counselling and some treatment of stiff muscles and tension, as well as maintaining a dialogue with them about the logbooks⁸ they were keeping on their individual training. On the whole I have been involved in

⁸ Logbooks can be employed in many ways as a means of capturing personal aspects of practical experiences. I use logbooks in accordance with Schriver (2003) as a communication tool between myself and the students as well as for constructing empirical data.



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they could write whenever they wanted to and could choose which experiences they found essential to write about.

Participants and material

The number of students has varied somewhat from year to year (between 18 and 34) because the programme permits students to finish after one or two years and to subsequently return and undertake a second and third year of study. All of the students have kept logbooks, and 15 of them have been the most active in terms of producing the material for this article⁹. The remaining students elected to place less priority on keeping a logbook during the study programme. The logbook material has been developed over the course of a three-year period and includes a total of 200 pages of text written by the students. I have chosen to work with these 200 pages with a view to exploring what the students write about most and what affects them in the context of their individual training.

The individual training programme was established by engaging in a dialogue with the students and was based on how they initially (during the first year) described their personal needs for individual training. The majority of the students reported that they needed to train their strength, stability, stamina, resilience, mobility, and release of tension. In addition, a small number wrote that they needed to practice being braver, daring to use themselves more, increasing their physical speed and improving their precision of movement. Thus, in their responses there was a predominance of terms that are recognisable in the training philosophy of sports education (Gjerseth 1992). The students were also asked how they wished to work and the type of follow-up they felt they needed. Their most common response was a desire for sound and frequent feedback - that the teacher should observe them "from the outside", keep an eye on them, respect their pace and offer them her/his knowledge,

how the students found ways of working on individual training. In the training context that was created at the school the aim was to inspire the students to move on the basis of their own situation and explore their own movements, through a perspective that both respects this situation and "goes beyond" it in the most relaxed, effortless manner possible. This suggestion was received by the students in different ways. Some told me that I "always seem to focus on emotions", or that I "do not like people who disagree with me". The challenging position of being a teacher and a researcher who has cooperated with the students and the school context requires an awareness of whose voice is speaking during different phases and parts of the shared process and this research.

Since the students are influenced by the intentions of the study programme, by myself and by other teachers, different voices and discourses may already have been incorporated into their own accounts. I have therefore tried to remain aware of the fact that the students shared critical comments that were integrally related to the context in which they were created. The material was written from the students' perspective and

⁹ During the 3-year period 3 male students participated in the programme. Since only one of them completed the whole programme, I have chosen not to use an explicit gender perspective in the analyses.



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although some said that they were unsure about the kind of role they wanted the teacher to play.¹⁰ Together with the leaders of the school I subsequently produced a teaching syllabus that included topics based on the students' responses. During the course of the three-year period, the school and I also received new and more detailed responses as "the routine" of individual training was established in the context of the education programme. The teaching sessions, each lasting two hours, were generally held once a week. On three occasions we had consecutive weeks where everyone received individual follow-up. Communication about the logbooks took place by e-mail. Sometimes the classes were devoted to individual follow-up.

Analysis of the material

I have carried out a thematic analysis of the material. My approach to the material has been selective in nature and therefore does not do justice to the full 200 pages contained in the students' logbooks. Some students state clearly that, for them, writing is an ambivalent experience. By contrast, it is more pleasurable to train and easier to feel satisfied about training. One student writes: "What I wrote to you today is a little less clever than what I wrote for Tuesday, so the writing was a little different. But then I think that Gunn will think that it is fine, maybe even good."

The logbooks are, as Schriver (2003, 197) points out, an opportunity to gain an insight into another person's learning process, expressed through reflections about experiences. According to Schriver, instructors can also use logbooks as a basis for planning activities. Themes from the logbooks can be used as new teaching subjects. I used the students' logbooks in this way and became interested in their having a function for the students, so that they could "make" me a person who acknowledges their experiences and whose educational task entails supporting their experiences and reflections.

I have read and commented upon the logbooks on a regular basis and I have worked on making the themes of the logbooks relevant in class. When working on the analyses presented in this article, I reviewed

10 Here the question pertained not only to my role; the school management was also interested in illustrating how the students defined their needs. My involvement with the school was defined by my competence as a researcher with a practical knowledge of exercise and the body.

everything anew and chose to present the themes that were found to be essential by the dance students. I devote a great deal of space to the participants' own words. The reason for this is that it is precisely the students' own interpretations that I want to demonstrate. I state subsequently in my own words how I interpret what they write and present the participants' statements under headings that I have developed. I also bring in theories that contribute towards illustrating their experiences. The analysis can be described by using what Kvale and Brinkman (2009)¹¹ call "bricolage". To paraphrase them, in this eclectic form of generating meaning, the researcher adapts mixed approaches that move freely between different analytic techniques and concepts (Kvale & Brinkman 2009, 233). I read through the logbook texts as the students sent me their material. My interpretation of the texts goes beyond a restructuring of the manifest meanings written by the students. Based on what they expressed in their logbooks, I organised the analysis around five main phrases that were emphasised in the logbooks: "Pain and tears", "A body without breasts, thighs or bottom", "Landed within me", "I feel free" and "Everything within me is changing."

Validity and ethical considerations

In the material, the participants describe experiences that supplement my previous knowledge. Even though I have had a relationship with all the students, I have not put words into their mouths or limited what they were allowed to write to me. It could, however, be the case that if the participants had knowledgeably written to someone other than me, they might have expressed themselves more critically in relation to me and the contents of the teaching sessions. The students' assumptions about my research interest developed over time and the project was not initially presented as a research project. However, since the material developed into one that contained insightful reflections I asked their permission to use it for research purposes. With regard to ethical considerations, I asked the students for permission to use the material in research publications. Everyone, with the exception of one student, gave me permission to do so. I have chosen here to highlight the theme(s) that were written about, and to allow the person(s) doing the writing to remain in the background. More precisely, I say very little about the individual students. I have chosen to do this so that it would not be possible for anyone but myself – and possibly the dancer(s) personally – to identify them. They are not identified by personal characteristics, names or language/dialect. My knowledge interest also points towards looking at the contents of the students' accounts instead of drawing conclusions related to the students as individuals.

Pain and tears

All of the students write about the recurrence of pain and weakness in parts of their bodies. Pain and problems claim a lot of attention. One writes: "off the top of my head: weak ankles, extremely tense thigh muscles, little arm strength." Another mentions "weak knees, stiff ankles, locked back muscles, tight hamstrings, pains in my hips, tense jaw, my body feels weak, not enough stamina, not flexible enough, not aware enough, not intelligent enough, the small of my back feels tired", just to mention a few representative expressions. Problems in various parts of the body are recurring themes in the logbooks. Injuries and ailments are a matter of concern for the students and their questions to me are often about what can be done about these problems. Also nausea, tension and problems in "letting go", the feeling of being too much of a "sissy", the need to break out of their movement patterns, not daring to trust parts of the body (upper body, knees), the feeling of being overloaded, and an imbalance between the two sides of the body are all themes that repeatedly arise throughout the written material. One of the students writes that her top priority is to find out what part of her is compensating for the fact that her abdominal muscles are not strong enough. Body aches and pains are time-consuming and receive a lot of

11 Even though Kvale and Brinkman primarily analyse interviews, I have found inspiration in their approach to the analysis of the text material.

attention because it is important for dance students to function without injuries. On the other hand, periods of injury become important learning situations for the dance students.

The students write about their need to “get the exercises done” and to achieve some results from their practise. They often feel unsure about how to “connect” the different exercises. To focus on one exercise after another is a “normal” way of performing exercises. This normality can be related to the themes of the book entitled *The Body in Parts* by Hillmann and Mazzio (1997, xxiv), which points out that the idea of a body in parts is popular despite the fact that it never exists in reality. The body as it is lived is “whole”, in the sense that we never encounter “a hand” or “a foot” as an entity in and for itself. It is only in our thinking about the body that it is divided up and split. Although we never encounter “a body in parts”, this idea also contains a clear reference to social ideals of physical beauty. The concept became popular in the field of medicine as well, as doctors sought to localize pain, asking, “Where does it hurt?” But as Merleau-Ponty (1962, 107) writes “My foot hurts”, this does not mean “I think that my foot is the cause of this pain”. We feel pain not because the cause is in our body, but because it is housed there. What we experience is not pain separated from our body, but pain in the body.

In one example a student writes about the paravertebrae being the object of awareness for the exercises. Simultaneously the paravertebrae become the object that the exercise is to be done upon. Similar statements recur in the language used by the students. This particular student writes that:

I have a set of exercises that are designed to activate the paravertebrae in the back, which I have poor contact with now, and this is certainly related to my back problems. I am supposed to activate them in isolation, and together with the transverse muscles, and then build on this by lifting and lowering my pelvis and simultaneously extending one leg at a time. I vary this by placing my legs on a ball to create instability and then do the same exercise. In the end, I am supposed to sit on the ball and rotate, while activating. These are in fact extremely difficult exercises requiring a great deal of concentration.

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In the above excerpt, the student shows how the process of working with an exercise that is focused on a weak point evolves by allowing this point to become integrated with other parts of the body through specific movement. Instead of isolating a body part in pain, the exercise moves towards healing by fostering a specific bodily focus and connection. “Disciplining” someone to perform the exercises results in the back starting to *work* in a new way together with the body as a whole. The situations where the students describe an “improvement” are ambiguous and fluid. A question that appears to be implied in their experiences is: in which direction does a wish for improvement take me? What kind of body shall be “improved”?

A body without breasts, thighs or bottom

Through dance training, cultural values are also learned. It provides an understanding of the body, places values on it and transmits bodily ideals. Many of the students write about their ideas of “improving”



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their dancing skills and the shape of their body. They write both that they would like to improve and that they have begun to doubt whether being so concerned about improvement is beneficial for them. Instead of encouraging them, their desire for improvement makes them more stressed and problem-fixated, as they put it. Becoming a proper dancer is a task that the students addressed at length. Problems with the body are described by several of the students and the subject is something that the students in a more or less explicit fashion negotiate individually with themselves and with the school. Classical ballet is a frame of reference that “lives” in the community and the ideal body presented by this tradition is influential. One of the students states: “. . . I wanted to have another body, like my brother’s, without breasts, thighs or bottom”.

Feelings of guilt, not being good enough and not working hard enough are reflections of cultural expectations interwoven with gender issues and late modern requirements for “real” women (Solheim 2007). Guilt-related statements are made by many young dancers, the majority of whom are women. Cultural ideas about what a good dancer is and should be are interwoven with a culturally defined femininity that entails never being good enough, making mistakes, a guilty conscience, etc. Many of the students refer to their own socialisation within their families and early dance training in classical ballet as being formative for such ideas. Numerous discussions about the status of “technical” skills and the cultural hierarchies that exist between the national ballet and its school on the one hand, and non-commercial, contemporary dance on the other took place during the teaching sessions. Discussions about these phenomena were illustrated in the logbooks. Many wrote that “ballet” and “my classical training”, as one expressed it, required the greatest proficiency. On the other hand, the students also spoke about “all the other things” that open up for them when they let go of ballet-related ideals.

The frequency with which these topics came up in the logbooks may derive from the education programme’s emphasis that awareness is as important for dancers as “technical” skills. In the logbooks some of the students problematised how the difference between skills and awareness should be defined. Zarrilli (2007) maintains that awareness means exploring and supporting a practice that is focused on becoming attentive with and from the body. He writes: “My hypothesis is that ‘thematizing’ the body-mind allows one’s awareness to be

more fully 'present' within an act of embodiment" (Zarilli 2007, 49). Practicing dancers "know" that they will be assessed by the gaze of others and defined according to cultural expectations regarding what a good dancer is – how good their "technique" is, etc. They know simultaneously that being "a good dancer in terms of technique" is not enough; that they are to engage the audience through their presence, personality and subject matter. Obviously there exists no outer relationship between "me and my body", and as Merleau-Ponty might have said, "I belong to my body, and my body belongs to me, although not in the sense that other things belong to me, and not as a thing I can manipulate as an object outside of myself." In the logbooks the students come back to these questions concerning "me and my body – what is what?".

Doing individual training certainly makes the students critical of a dualistic theory. They become unsympathetic towards viewing their body "as such" and considering it merely a "thing" that they, for example, do not like. The body belongs to the person and the person to the body. There is no way of escaping from this intertwinement, and this is one of the main discoveries that took place during the process of writing the logbooks. A number of dance researchers, who are particularly inspired by philosopher Merleau-Ponty, have pointed out that dance is about how dancers give meaning to bodily expression and make it relevant to dance. As dance scholar Leena Rouhiainen (2003, 156) so clearly states, it includes "all embodied ways of expression that are relevant to the formation of meanings related to dance".

In the logbooks the students address the paradox of a perfection that does not exist, but that they strive for nonetheless, in despair over never being good enough. One student writes:

In class today I found I was pushing myself a bit past where I normally give up and refrained from falling into the same habit of speaking negatively to myself throughout. This is a challenge that I have worked a good deal with in movement awareness classes in other dance programmes and what happened then and what also happened on Friday is that inside myself I became incredibly sad. It is as if I am sort of apologising to myself because I often work counter to my body and my training, instead of supporting what I am actually doing.

Another student writes:

Today I had difficulty in achieving contact with my abdominal strength and the rest of my body. The training session became somewhat awkward and frustrating in that my body functioned better earlier in the autumn. I spend a long time trying to get a sense of how I should use my body. My body feels heavy and stiff and I just want to lie quietly. But because this has been the case for such a long time, I am sincerely tired of it and want to get into shape again. I need a massage and my muscles feel irritated.

The students discover frustrations which seem to increase and they write about these irritations frequently in their logbooks. By "speaking negatively" to oneself while training, and pushing oneself and "going against oneself," patterns of tension are initiated and breathing cannot function in an energy-producing manner for movement. The feeling of "being off balance" and "outside myself", as a number of students express it, is different from the feeling of being "landed within me".

Landed within me

Expressions such as feeling comfortable, finding one's own space, landing within the self and moving in "one's own way" are recurring themes in the student logbooks. A number of them express dissatisfaction and say that they would want "to do what they yearn for". One student writes: "Most of all I long to lie down and do the kind of training that I feel that my body needs there and then." Attending a dance class or performing an individual training routine satisfies the requirement of "having done my duty", but as several of the students state, that is

not synonymous with finding out more than they knew previously. Instead, it often just reveals their own limitations. Several emphasise that doing individual training also gives them the freedom to sense, or as one puts it: “I like individual training very much. I have been obliged to recognise that it is just as important to work with releasing tension, if not more important, than to push myself hard in training.” A similar experience was described by another student:

I have found out that I had less of a need for weight training than I thought initially. On the whole it has as a rule worked well just having a little time to myself (outside the classical training). To land a bit, in my body, and get a sense of what my body needed then and on that day.

Reflections about the students’ own needs are also prevalent in the material. Many discover how differently they feel from day to day. One writes:

My experience of myself when I train is completely different from day to day. At the beginning of this session, I was overwhelmed by a guilty conscience about this, due to a feeling that I was working too little or too poorly. I have understood this feeling, but not so often.

Experiences from and in the body can potentially resist a given type of language, such as the terminology used about or in dance. This resistance shapes the dancers’ experience and further influences how their experiences can be situated and adapted in enhancing understanding of both the implicit and explicit sides of the body and dance. As written by Karen Bond and Sue Stinson (2007) about their own dance students, these students work hard at finding out how they *can be* in the classes, what they can accept, and when they are, in the words of one student, “just there”, without managing to absorb experiences and learn. One of the students writes:

The biggest experience that I had this week was not in connection with individual training, but more about the class we had with you on Thursday. It was indeed the best experience I have had. Right after the class I became very tired, so very relaxed. The next class was contact improvisation and then the teacher included the experience we had had from your class. In this way we had a relaxed start. The entire class was very relaxed and calm. For my own part I have never been so calm and relaxed in a class. The experience was very good for me and it felt very significant because I managed to be completely calm and not stressed at all. I managed to take in everything we learned. I landed within myself. It was much easier to collaborate in contact improvisation. My ability to do this in the past has varied very much. It was a very positive, important experience that I hope I will continue to have. It gives you confidence in yourself, something you have, but which should be cultivated in a favourable direction.

The student changed the voice here and began to write “you” instead of “I”. This often happens in written text, and I interpret it as a wish to connect with others and to make the experience valid in an intersubjective context. Another point in the student’s text that was also described by other students illustrates a type of learning experience that can be related to the phenomenon of “letting learn” (Standal 2009, 211). Several mention that they sometimes are surprised at how “easily everything goes”, how “enjoyable and liberating” it was to be in movement. One writes about how lovely it is to experience that standing on one’s hands can occur on its own. This revelation came about when she understood that standing on her hands has just as much to do with stability as standing on her feet does. She writes: “I understood that it had to be this way before, but now I can feel it without thinking about it so much.” Some of the students’ descriptions of their experiences demonstrate what Hyams (1979, 92) calls “understanding it in my bones”. This type of immediate bodily understanding can arise when one no longer struggles with using one’s strength or with focusing on trying to achieve something specific. As Standal (2009, 213) proposes, it can emerge with pedagogy that “. . . begins with an understanding of each participant’s lived experience and which is followed up by respecting and honouring these lived experiences through

tactful teaching”. When the students experience something which they feel they understand in their bones, they begin to question “when I train (really), what is training?”

To feel free

The question of which phenomena the students categorise as training and not training comprises a large subject and is open to a great deal of discussion. Several write about the freedom they experience when they understand that categories like “real training”, “my classical training – that is something separate”, “it was not exactly like training” can be defined separately. In the logbooks they ask themselves how different types of movement are classified as training or not actual training. They spend a lot of time reflecting on such questions as: When should I train? Does training have to be an effort? Can it be fun? One writes:

I have thought for a long time that training is something that one must do and that it is an ‘effort’ to do it. But after the last class with you and the other teachers about how a training programme can be, it suddenly became much simpler. I used to think very differently, that standing on my hands, playing a bit, was not training (or not training enough). I have done it, but thought that I should do more, I must have some proper ‘training sessions’ like weight-training or condition training all the time. I found out after this class that I have had the wrong idea about what training is. I have not always thought that the classes at school have been training either. I have made a big distinction between dance training and other training. But the distinction has actually been that I have viewed the one kind of training as an effort, as something that is not fun. The class about training programmes changed that view a little bit.

Another wrote:

Lately I have been having a desire to train, go for a walk or a run, climb one evening, getting to school early and preparing my body properly before class. And in class I am interested in finding new paths in the body when I dance, breaking a pattern or daring to make unfamiliar choices with respect to space and dynamics, or to be lifted higher than I usually dare...

The students clearly state that their perspective on training has changed and that their experience of moving has expanded. This is supported by the broader spectrum of words and categories they used in their later logbooks compared to the ones they used at the beginning of the study programme. Among other things, training has opened them up towards a manner of being in the world that creates connection and belonging (Leseth 2004). When the students write about experiences that remain influential beyond the scope of their training they utilise such terms as *continuity* and *belonging*. Moving in ways that are exploratory can activate memories and situations that have “taken hold” of the body and which are literally mobilised by movement. In this context they write about how swimming, running and moving in dance provide insights and recurring experiences that enable them to “loosen up” and express joy. One of them writes: “Life is wonderful right now and need not be anything else!”

Difficult experiences can also arise through movement – or to put it another way: rather than being merely isolated physical movements, the body, movement and experiences become imbued with personal meaning. Descriptions contained in the material include examples of *access* to a type of reconciliation with topics of existential significance. The statements illustrate how memories are (re)mobilised and experiences are allowed the space and time to be what they are. This is nonetheless a difficult subject. Many of the students run frequently. Running is described as creating a feeling of liberation - to get out of the studio and be able to get some fresh air. It offers a place where they can “run off their thoughts”. One writes:

It is a quite a new discovery, the feeling of sensing that I am not running a race with myself, run-

ning without becoming stressed about draining myself. I am very pleased about this. I get excited about running and it requires very little or no effort whatsoever to go out and do it. I enjoy being able to run at my own pace, on my own route. Wearing headphones and listening to music and not having to think about anything much except for the body in movement. I feel free when I run. I experience that I can focus on myself and manage to let go of thoughts that are usually very present in my mind.

Another student writes:

“I have been running a good deal and benefit from it enormously”. It seems as though, in taking responsibility for breaking the “rules” of indoor dance practise, they gain new energy and a desire to move. They write about running as “a wonderful realisation that there are paths to movement and energy”. In describing their running they also use themes from the dance training, such as “drawing strength from the ground by pushing consciously away from it”, and “relaxing into the movement”. According to the majority of those who use running for individual training purposes, breathing also becomes more natural during running. Running is integrated with ideas derived from indoor training: pushing away from the floor or ground perhaps acquires even better meaning and physical articulation than it does indoors, and the surroundings offer a continually changing horizon that one moves in relation to.

Everything inside me is changing

How change is experienced and “absorbed” is also a topic of discussion in the students’ logbooks. One writes:

My focus changes all the time and I have now realised and experienced this, even though it has taken some time. And it is something that has helped me with training, understanding that focus and interest change. I have for a long time wished that I could train in one and the same pattern and with the same focus in order to more easily see the development in my body. But I was only disappointed every time the focus and approach, time and other things changed my pattern.

When the students write like this they are gaining insight into the experience that change exists as a fundamental phenomenon – and they can use this to their advantage. Their communication in the logbooks illustrated how they personally experience change. Such insights potentially function as a positive “buffer” and prevent disappointments when things “are not as we had hoped”. The students were aware of how movement takes place in relation to their surroundings as a reaction to other movement, to the wind in the tree branches, cars driving fast, voices and the motion of others. They wrote about their own involvement and as one expresses it, “I recognise that I often keep seeking a state or a feeling and experience that I have had previously, but have not understood with my body that that is something that will always undergo change, since nothing can ever be exactly the same and time is always changing.”

Over time the students seem to be aware that things can be similar and yet be experienced slightly differently at different times. They write about how change is dependant on the way they focus, and when they discover the power of their own focus they express both joy and satisfaction. One writes:

I had a fantastic experience with my crooked back. Lately I have begun trying to gain a sense of what causes my right side to be stiffer than the other. I focused on this throughout the entire training session and suddenly, while I lay stretching the inside of my thigh against the wall, my back went crack, crack and crack and afterwards everything was in place! I don't know if it means anything, but if I pay a little attention to the areas of the body that don't feel well, and accept that they are not wholly alright, it feels like it resolves itself when the time is right.

Writing the logbooks seems to help the students register the fact that being attentive during training is beneficial. They wrote about “happiness” when individual training sessions went very well, and when they discovered the power of their own concentration and motivation. One student wrote: “I hold onto my goals a bit differently, but I still have my goals for progression and presence”. There seems to be integration between “skills and presence”, and one student notes that “My individual training is not a series of problems to be solved. I don’t think ‘I can’t do this’ anymore”.

Conclusion and further questions

My project has involved investigating how young students in contemporary dance education articulate their experiences and give individual training meaning. I think the analyses of the students’ logbook material contribute towards acknowledging the significance of their personal experiences and enhancing dance-theoretical understanding of the topic. The results show that the students’ focus changes during the three-year period. With an initial emphasis on training for strength, mobility, resilience, stamina and balance, they reoriented their training so as to give themselves the space *to relate to* and be more confident. They learned that subjective and relational experiences have validity in a professional dance context. As young, prospective professionals they learn gradually that what they experience is “not wrong” but an expression of “where they are”. Their experiences contribute towards questioning “narrow” definitions of dance and dance pedagogy, as a number of dance researchers also do today (Østern 2009, Rouhiainen 2003, Oatley 1999, Fieldseth 2004, Cohen 1993, Parviainen 1998). Additionally, the students’ experiences offer a perspective on training as a field of negotiation and not simply something concerned with a single method. In order to investigate and be able to understand what working with individual training entails, reflection and writing play a key role.

For further research in the field of dance education I suggest undertaking projects that relate to the actual pedagogy. How are young dancers taught dance? Are they encouraged to explore how they can move in the most effortless manner possible, and thereby refrain from “turning on” tensions in the body when they move? Are they encouraged to explore the many kinds of habits and tension patterns they have in their own bodies? My experience from this project has been that discovering an expedient manner of using one’s own strength is a challenge, as is “allowing movements to happen” and finding one’s own situation in the present moment of motion. The challenge in dancing is to allow oneself the time and space to be attentive to whether it is possible to relax “internally” when a movement requires using one’s own strength. To find the softness in the strength and the strength in the softness was a theme I often came back to. The expression “allow the movement to happen” must be explored. What is required to experience it? How much of a sense that “I am active” is required and what does it mean when “something moves within me”? By writing and receiving commentary, the students clarify what is important to them and learn to create connections between their training and their lives outside dance education. This article aims to contribute towards providing insights into how training processes take place and how the significance of such processes can be investigated so that they are both of practical relevance and theoretically informed.

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