Difficulties teachers report about students' reflection: lessons learned from dance education

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Difficulties teachers report about students’ reflection: lessons learned from dance education

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Despite its relevance to and inclusion in pedagogical practices, reflection is a challenging activity for students in tertiary dance education according to teachers. The aim of the current study was to further explore the challenges encountered in the pedagogical practice of reflection. Data on the difficulties of reflection were collected from 14 dance teachers using semi-structured interviews. The results revealed four categories of difficulty: general difficulties, difficulties describing an experience, difficulties evaluating an experience and difficulties relating to multiple perspectives. The reflection difficulties described in this study correspond to the reflection difficulties reported in other domains of higher education, and illuminate how reflection activities could be facilitated more effectively.

Keywords: dance education; reflection; reflection difficulties; facilitation; higher education

The pedagogical practice of tertiary dance education has, during the recent decades, changed considerably. In the 1970s and 1980s, tertiary dance education in North America and many European countries focused mainly on mastering one prescribed dance style (e.g. Graham or Cunningham modern dance style, or classical ballet) and the repertoire of theatrically defined dance products through copying the teacher (Smith-Autard 2002). This pedagogical practice was not concerned with students’ subjective experiences in dance nor with developing students’ creativity and thinking skills. Several authors (e.g. Green Gilbert 1992; Lakes 2005; Lavender 1996; Morris 2003; Shapiro 1998; Smith-Autard 2002; Stinson 1997, 1998) have criticised this narrow approach to dance education and called for dance educators to recognise and support the individuality of their dance students. From the 1990s onwards, the pedagogy in tertiary dance education has moved towards a more student-centred practice (Smith-Autard 2002). One of the new pedagogical aims in current dance education practice is enhancing students’ reflection on their learning (Lavender 1996; Leijen, Admiraal et al. 2008; Warburton 2004). Leijen, Wildschut et al. (2008) showed that dance students are encouraged to carry out five types of reflection. Four of the reflection types are related to the Kantian notion of reflection, where students are encouraged to reflect on the following: (1) how they apply concepts and principles related to dance disciplines in their dance practice (e.g. reflecting on how far a student is with her ballet technique); (2) how they apply concepts and principles...
derived from awareness of oneself and one’s bodily possibilities in their dance practice (e.g. reflecting on how to use one’s body in an intelligent way and prevent injuries); (3) what new concepts and principles related to dance discipline they have developed based on their dance practice (e.g. reflecting on which meanings can be associated with the chosen dance movements); and (4) what new concepts and principles related to themselves they have developed based on their dance practice (e.g. reflecting on how one tends to move owing to one’s social and cultural background). All these types foster a holistic view of theory and practice. The types are carried out to connect different concepts and principles with students’ kinaesthetic experiences in order to be able to act with self confidence in professional practice. The fifth type of reflection is related to the pragmatists’ notion of reflection: (5) students are encouraged to elaborate on their development over a period of time, point out what needs further attention during a following period, and plan activities for enhancement. Besides the focus on improving practice, the fifth reflection type is also aimed at developing awareness about one’s professional identity.

In the current paper, we focus on the pedagogical practices of students’ reflection and address the gap between the desired and actual situation of students’ reflection according to dance teachers’ perspective.

Below, we elaborate on the notion of reflection in education, provide insights into the desired situation of reflection in education and state the research questions of the study.

**Reflection in education**

It has been pointed out that reflection leads to deeper learning (Moon 2004), achievement of more complex and integrated knowledge structures, and more accessible and usable knowledge (Billing 2007). Below, we elaborate on the characteristics of reflection, requirements for reflection and processes of reflection.

It is widely acknowledged that reflection is a cognitive process or activity (e.g. Benammar 2004; Dewey 1933; Mezirow 1991; Schön 1983). Simons (1994) states that reflection allows creation of knowledge about one’s own cognition, and regulation of that cognition. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) emphasise, in addition to the cognitive dimension, the importance of the affective dimension in the reflective process. Besides the cognitive and affective dimensions, several authors starting from Dewey (1933) emphasise the role of experience in reflection. In Dewey’s theory of reflective thinking, action and thinking are intertwined and take place at the same time. A distinction between an experience and reflection was developed further by Schön (1983), based on studies of students and teachers in professional educational practices. He found that practitioners engage in two types of reflection: reflection in action and reflection on action, where experience and reflection are related differently. Similarly to Schön, Mezirow (1991) showed that thoughtful action with reflection can occur during a developmental or challenging experience, and retrospectively as retroactive reflection. The latter is similar to Loughran’s (1996) notion of retrospective reflection. In addition to recognising reflection during action and after the action, Loughran (1996) uses the term anticipatory reflection to describe reflection, which takes place before a developmental experience.
In order to engage in reflection on experiences, active participation of an individual is required (e.g. Moon 2004; Procee 2006; Schön 1983). Dewey (1933) stated that reflection requires attitudes that value one’s own and others’ personal and intellectual growth. The attitudes required for reflection according to Dewey are the following: *whole-heartedness*, which indicates the enthusiasm of an individual for his or her subject matter; *directness*, which includes trusting in the validity of one’s own experience without spending a lot of time worrying about the judgements of others; *open-mindedness*, which means being willing to consider different perspectives and acknowledging the limitations of one’s own and others’ perspectives; and finally, *responsibility*, which means, first, that the three above-mentioned attitudes should be carried out and grounded in reality and, second, acknowledgement that the meaning one acts on, is one’s own meaning and not a disembodied meaning that is out there.

Several authors agree that, in addition to the requirements of active involvement, reflection needs to happen in a community, in interaction with others (e.g. Benammar 2004; Dewey 1933; Procee 2006). This enables individuals to share and learn from the perspectives of others on experiences and ideas, and (re)interpret and develop their own perspectives further. Prawat (2000, 6) states that language is the key in this process:

It allows the individual to transform his or her own inchoate understanding into a form that is more conscious and rational, thus serving the self. It also allows the individual to share insight or understanding with others, thus serving the community.

Procee (2006) pointed out four general processes of reflection in an educational setting. First, students need to describe their experiences from an objective perspective; for this, the focus for viewing an experience should be made explicit. Second, students should evaluate their experiences. It is necessary that students know the criteria for evaluation; moreover, students should determine the usefulness and relevance of the criteria for learning from their own perspective. Third, in order to support learning from the manifold perspectives, students should consider their experiences from different viewpoints. These viewpoints can be embedded in different theoretical notions but also represent the different perspectives of peers and the teacher. Fourth, the process of reflection itself and aspects of professional identity should be reflected upon. One of the aims here is to explore the relationship and fit between the professional and personal identities of the student.

The above-described features illustrate an ideal situation for reflection. Despite its relevance and inclusion in pedagogical practices, dance teachers find it difficult to support their students’ reflection and see it as a challenging activity for students in tertiary dance education (Leijen, Admiraal et al. 2008). According to teachers, it is often difficult for students to set and focus on individual goals, to relate concepts of dance methodologies to their own dance work, to analyse their learning process, and to carry out reflective writing. As traditional pedagogical approaches to dance education were not concerned with students’ reflection on their learning, and as the latter is a relatively new pedagogical goal in tertiary dance education, it is not surprising that dance teachers find it difficult to encourage their students to develop their reflection skills. However, in order to propose teachers’ guidance for supporting students’ reflection activities, it is necessary to examine further the difficulties
teachers currently experience with teaching reflection skills. Zwart et al. (2008)
studied teacher learning through reciprocal peer coaching, they found that the
majority of learning activities reported by teachers were concerned with their
students’ learning and its outcomes. Therefore, besides indicating the obstacles
students might encounter, the difficulties teachers point out regarding their students’
learning also mirror the challenges teachers themselves experience with their
teaching.

Based on the above, the following research question for the current study was
formulated: What kinds of difficulties do students encounter while carrying out
reflection activities in practical dance classes according to dance teachers? To answer
this question, an empirical study following the cross-case study design (Miles and
Huberman 1994) was carried out; we focused on the perceptions of dance teachers
from the Netherlands. In answering the research questions, we hoped to gain insight
into the actual and desired situations of the pedagogical practices of reflection. We
compared the results of this study with the results of studies on reflection difficulties
from other fields of higher education. Finally, we aimed to find out how dance
teachers could facilitate students’ reflection more effectively.

Methods

Data collection

The sample consisted of 14 teachers from four dance academies in the Netherlands.
Seven dance technique teachers (four female; three male), six choreography teachers
(five female; one male) and one dance pedagogy teacher (female) agreed to
participate as a result of our contacting the directors of all five dance academies
in the Netherlands. All teachers taught practical courses in the four-year higher
professional education programmes, which prepare students for a career as a
professional dancer, a choreographer or a dance teacher.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview in the context of a larger
study on pedagogical practices of reflection in tertiary dance education. First, the
teachers were asked to describe how they encourage their students to carry out five
types of reflection (listed earlier in the paper) in their teaching practice. Second, for
each of the five types of reflection, a question was posed about the possible
difficulties dance students encounter while carrying out the reflection activities. For
example:

- Do your students encounter difficulties reflecting on how they apply dance
  concepts and principles to their practice?
- What kind of difficulties?
- (If difficulties are indicated) Why do you think this happens?

To allow the teachers to prepare for the interview, we provided them with the
interview questions and supplementary materials approximately a week before the
interview. The supplementary materials contained a model of reflection practices in
dance education, including descriptive information about the model and illustrative
examples from dance education practice.
Data analysis
The interviews with teachers were recorded on tape and fully transcribed. Following this, the interviews were ordered and analysed following the procedures suggested for cross-case analysis by Miles and Huberman (1994). First, all data were inserted in five matrices. The matrices contained information about difficulties students encounter with reflection activities regarding the five types of reflection. Second, for every type of reflection, difficulties were clustered in each matrix using three aspects. The ‘activity’ with which the problem was associated was identified and inserted. In addition, the problem types relevant to an activity were identified using ‘the modal problem type, the one mentioned by most informants, when there were more than one’ (Miles and Huberman 1994, 181), and inserted. Third, the illustrations of the problems from the interviews were presented. This procedure resulted in five partially ordered displays of the data. Three of the most used activities were related to the processes of reflection: describing, evaluating and relating. This procedure was carried out by one researcher. The initial clustering of each type of reflection was then discussed and verified by three researchers in the course of reviewing the partially ordered data displays. The verification procedure resulted in minor changes to the initial clustering, which were included in the final categorisation of reflection difficulties.

Results and discussion
The results revealed four categories of difficulties students encounter according to teachers when carrying out reflection activities. The first category was called general problems as the included difficulties could appear across different processes of reflection. This category included dealing with emotions in reflection, verbalising ideas and showing poor outcomes of reflection. Three other categories were related to specific processes of reflection: describing, evaluating and relating. Table 1 gives an overview of the difficulties related to reflection as reported by teachers.

The difficulty of expressing oneself in words (1.4) overlapped with the following problems in other categories: students remain on the level of description in writing (3.7), and are ashamed of sharing their ideas or dance combinations in class, or are shy of expressing them in a group (4.4). As each reflection process includes communication in an educational setting, the difficulties mentioned above could be placed under the general problems category. However, given that some communication difficulties related to reflection are specific to reflection processes, e.g. being shy of expressing one’s ideas in a group occurs in the process of relating to multiple perspectives, we organised these difficulties according to the process they were associated with. We elaborate below on the problems most often mentioned in each category.

General difficulties
The most often mentioned general difficulty related to reflection was dealing with emotional and personal matters (1.2 in Table 1). This occurred especially while reflecting on how awareness of oneself is applied or developed based on practice.
Table 1. Difficulties students encounter with reflection as reported by teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulties</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. General difficulties</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Making merely general comments to reflection (e.g. I need to learn a lot).</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dealing with emotional and personal matters (e.g. getting in touch with troublesome emotions, dealing with awareness of limited bodily abilities, refusing to reflect owing to emotional load).</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Finding it hard to reflect on one's professional identity as a dance artist.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Finding it difficult to express oneself in words.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Describing an experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Discrepancy between doing and awareness (thinking, feeling what one is doing).</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Difficulties noticing details of one's own and others' experiences (including the problem of not observing sufficiently).</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Difficulties remembering previous experiences.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Not working enough with the feedback provided by one's own body.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Evaluating an experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Waiting for the teacher to provide corrections instead of evaluating own experiences.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Focusing mainly on aspects of what the student did wrong, missing positive aspects.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Difficulties thinking about how one did the movements in relation to what one wanted to do and how.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Believing without question that anything presented in one's own choreography project should be amazing for viewers.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Lacking the criteria for evaluation.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Being shocked to realise that the image of dance in one's mind does not come out in practice, and realising weaknesses.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Remaining on the level of description in writing.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Relating to multiple perspectives</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Not questioning the corrections and comments given by the teacher.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Focusing on doing the movement in the right way; having difficulties thinking about alternatives.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Being ashamed of sharing own ideas or dance combinations in class, or shy to express them in a group.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Pointing out others' weaknesses while giving feedback to them.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Being focused mainly on oneself; not focusing on and observing peers.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Difficulties positioning oneself in relation to different conceptual notions.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Issues related to the self can be too personal and difficult to realise, for example, becoming aware of limited bodily abilities, as noted by a technique teacher:

I think it is difficult especially with somatic. Very often at the beginning of studying somatic, you really learn to see what is really not in line, you see that one leg is shorter than the other or that you do not breathe properly, and that is hard. A lot of somatic work tells you that before you feel what to do. To achieve a better alignment mentally and physically, you need to know what doesn’t work, and knowing what doesn’t work is not easy.

Similar difficulties have been pointed out in previous research. For example, Stein (2000) points out that learners may be unable or unwilling to confront or seek disconfirming information about themselves or implicitly held knowledge. Drake and Dart (1995, 128) illustrated that trainees were ‘avoiding the issue’, when mentors attempted to challenge their ideas during feedback sessions in the context of teacher education. Personal problems as a barrier to reflection have also been elaborated by Miller, Tomlinson, and Jones (1994) in the context of nurse education.

In addition, teachers noted that it is difficult for students to express themselves in words (1.4 in Table 1). This difficulty was also pointed out in the context of applying and developing awareness of oneself in relation to practice. Regarding this obstacle, literature suggests that on one hand the difficulty can be related to a lack of vocabulary, which was noted by Chung, Mak, and Paul (1995) as a barrier to reflection in their study in the teacher education context. On the other hand, Eraut (2000) distinguishes between awareness and representation. In his view, the knower may not be aware of what she/he is doing, but once she/he becomes aware she/he can communicate it; however, there is also knowledge which cannot be communicated.

**Difficulties related to describing an experience**

A frequently appearing difficulty related to describing an experience was that students do not notice details of their experiences (2.2 in Table 1). This difficulty was associated with reflecting on how dance concepts and principles are applied in practice and reflecting over a longer period of time. A technique teacher explained:

I find that especially the people who are looking or standing the closest to the mirror are the ones who are looking, idealizing themselves, but not really seeing themselves. Not seeing the details: where is my arm, there are my fingers, where are my eyes?

Another difficulty which often appeared in the describing category concerned the discrepancy between doing and awareness (2.1 in Table 1). What students think or feel about a movement, and how they do it, differs from the actual physical image of the movement. This issue appeared the most frequently in the context of reflecting on how certain dance concepts and principles are applied in practice. A choreography teacher explained this as follows:

They have the movement vocabulary and they have a mental process of how the movement feels, but that is just the theory. The picture they have in their minds about how it felt, is also how it must look. So they look at it with this picture in front of their eyes, actually.
These difficulties negatively affect one of the main functions of reflection (e.g. Dewey 1993; Proceè 2006; Schön 1983) – learning from one’s own experiences. The discrepancy issue has been pointed out by Argyris and Schön (1974). Based on the research on practitioners in action, they discovered that two types of theories are involved in practitioners’ actions. The first type, called espoused theories, represents notions about what we are able to say, think and believe. These theories exist at a conscious level, and they change relatively easily in response to new information or ideas. However, espoused theories are often inconsistent with behaviour, and new ideas do not lead to new behaviour. The second type, theories-in-use, are elusive and difficult to identify, yet these theories have more influence on our behaviour. The challenging task of describing experiences has also been pointed out by Benammar (2004) and Proceè (2006), as it requires taking an objective stance towards one’s experiences, which is often difficult to achieve.

**Difficulties related to evaluating an experience**

A difficulty often reported in relation to evaluation was that students mainly wait for the teacher to provide corrections instead of evaluating their experiences themselves (3.1 in Table 1). This problem was associated with reflecting on how students apply dance concepts and principles to their practice and reflection over a longer period of time. For example, a technique teacher described the following:

The more open-minded the student is, the easier it is. And they are very quickly into this opening: was it good? Or, okay, try this again; maybe do this little bit again; let’s see how much you can do with your facility, body. What you can do? And you see somebody who can really work with it intelligently and somebody who tries once and then stands still and waits to be corrected.

From the research on reflection in nurse education, Mountford and Rogers (1996) reported similar results. Prospective nurses did not value personal knowledge and their role in the construction of expert knowledge. That students experience this difficulty shows that one of the three basic attitudes required for reflection, directness (Dewey 1933), is not presented by dance students. Contrary to waiting for another’s judgement, according to this attitude, students should trust the validity of their experiences without spending a lot of time worrying about the judgements of others.

Another problem related to evaluation was that students mainly focused on aspects which they did wrong, and ignored positive aspects (3.2 in Table 1). A dance pedagogy teacher explained:

At that moment they have a problem; they are not used to that way of looking at themselves, they have always been taught to say what they have done wrong and not what they have done right.

One possible explanation for such practice can be embedded in the culture of traditional dance training. As described in the introduction, traditional dance education focused merely on mastering a prescribed dance style and the repertoire of theatrically defined dance products in the course of repetition. Although dance education practice has generally become more student-centred, there is evidence that more traditional ways of teaching are still used in some dance technique classes, namely ballet classes (Morris 2003).
Difficulties occurring while relating to multiple perspectives

In regard to relating to multiple perspectives, teachers pointed out that students find it difficult to question the corrections and comments given by the teacher (4.1 in Table 1). This problem appeared in the context of all five types of reflection. A choreography teacher described this as follows:

For example, when I give corrections in dance classes, everything I say is like gospel. I have a lot of power in this; for example, if I correct somebody’s hair, which has nothing to do with dance, just with appearances, it has a lot of influence on how they style it next time. They don’t criticize my correction, they don’t look at it critically, you know; no one, for example, comes back with, I don’t want to change my style, that’s how I look.

In general, the difficulties in this category point out that according to teachers it is difficult for students to question teachers’ comments and share their own ideas with classmates. As a result of the latter, compliance behaviour towards group members can occur, which was also pointed out as a barrier to learning from reflection by Platzer, Blake, and Ashford (2000) in the context of nurse education. The effects of particular group members who may be critical or dominant can influence the course of reflection in a group setting, as pointed out by Wade (1994) in the context of teacher education. In addition, Mackintosh (1998) has pointed out that writers may suffer from selective recall of events, and may be reluctant to express thoughts that others may read. Students’ responses might include feelings of vulnerability that follow from exposing their perceptions and beliefs to others. This occurs especially if the locus of control is not with the individual. These barriers disturb development of another basic attitude for reflection, open-mindedness (Dewey 1933), which points to the willingness to consider different perspectives and acknowledge the limitations of one’s own and others’ perspectives.

Conclusion and suggestions for practice

Analysis of teachers’ perspectives on their students’ reflection revealed four categories of reflection difficulties: general difficulties; difficulties describing experiences; difficulties evaluating experiences; and difficulties relating to multiple perspectives. It has been shown that the difficulties described in this study have been reported in previous research in other domains of higher education. This shows that more effective facilitation for supporting students’ reflection is needed in educational settings, not only in tertiary dance education, but also in nurse education (e.g. Mountford and Rogers 1996; Platzer, Blake, and Ashford 2000) and teacher training (e.g. Chung, Mak, and Paul 1995; Wade 1994).

Billing (2007, 509) concludes that reflection skills can be taught, ‘... e.g., through “learning journals”, discussion groups about self-appraisal, modelling and coaching’. Simons (1994) proposed 14 principles for ‘Meta-cognitive Instruction’, including emphasising learning processes (rather than outcomes) and deeper cognitive processing, helping students to recognise and practice their learning strategies, reflectivity and self-regulation skills, and gradually shifting responsibility for learning and its regulation to the students. Based on these suggestions and the difficulties reported in this study, we suggest that the processes of reflection in tertiary dance education can be facilitated in the following manner.
First, since students may not have a realistic view of their experiences, video recordings could be used to help them to describe their practice. In the Netherlands, experiments with the use of streaming video are currently being carried out in teacher education and other professional training programmes using a web-based video application called DiViDU to support students’ reflection (Kulk et al. 2005). Teachers can support the describing process by asking questions to encourage students to think about their practice. Students should also be asked explicitly to point out positive and satisfactory features of their experiences, rather than focusing exclusively on problematic areas.

Second, in order to support self-assessment, students need to comprehend evaluation standards and the criteria representing these standards. On one hand, students can be provided with these criteria by their teachers. Liu and Carless (2006) suggest that involvement of students in assessment can help students to develop conceptions of quality approaching those of their teachers. This would help students to process the feedback given by teachers. On the other hand, students can also use their own subjective criteria after they have made these explicit. This would support students in learning about their own conceptions and value judgements. As a last step in this process, students should be encouraged to determine the usefulness and relevance of the criteria to learning from their own perspective, and if necessary reconsider the criteria used.

Third, more aid could be gained from implementing peer feedback activities for the reflection process. Owing to the perceived expertise of teachers and power relations, it can be difficult for students to consider their teachers’ comments critically. Students may be more open to questioning the comments given by their fellow students. It may also be easier emotionally to accept feedback from peers instead of that provided by the teacher.

Finally, safety and trust need to be established in a classroom in order to support the activities of reflection, especially for dealing with delicate matters related to individuality and other areas of the self. This is particularly important since, besides enabling awareness of the self, which can be challenging to recognise, reflection activities in an educational setting often imply that the private areas of learning become public.

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