

# Exploring Counter Balance: Aligning the roles of Dance Artist, Educator and Researcher within Higher Education.

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As I understand it counter balance is effected through forces. It is a being drawn and expanded somehow, with equal force, in differing directions, which can be, I suggest, experienced as a multi-directional experience, as opposed to a conflict between polar opposites. I suggest, that this is a supple state of counter balance, where an aligning of the subject through many different directions and comings and goings of energy, is a multi-directional process of change. In essence, I see this as a state of flux, where nothing is fixed and where there is no holding on in any one area, no emphasis on one over the other but a continual process of change and growth; adjustment and re adjustment.

For me, this is similar to the process of learning and teaching: a continual receiving and giving, listening and responding, a balancing out of energies that makes for somehow a unified whole. The process that I am engaging in, aligning the roles of the dance artist, educator and researcher is, as I experience it, a process of flexible flux. As Deleuze & Guattari describe (1998, p25): a '... way of travelling and moving; proceeding from the middle through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing'

I will talk about coming and going in the roles of the dance artist, educator and enquirer/researcher and how my travelling is increasingly informed by the practice of Skinner Releasing Technique: an approach to working and playing that bleeds between the boundaries and the labels as mentioned.

**1. Skinner Releasing Technique** is a movement practice that seamlessly fuses technique with the creative act, a two in a one, a process of doubleness, neither only technique nor only spontaneous enquiry/creative exploration. Each class comprises specific movement studies, poetic image clusters and hands on partner studies or partner graphics that are designed to increase awareness of a dynamic and multidirectional alignment and to encourage maximum freedom of movement.

The process is one of experiential learning through imagery and touch, where spontaneous movement can occur, as the imagination becomes engaged. The whole self can be enveloped in a process of experimentation and exploration as gradually the practice becomes more familiar and awarenesses are honed. Each

student discovers what each study means for them as they experience it on a psychophysical level.

*A class includes studies that allow the individual to explore his/her own movement through the engagement of the imagination not as an intellectual process but rather as an immersive or total experience where body and mind engage in the task as a unified whole (whole image section). As mentioned, an exploratory approach is used in order to elicit a deeper kinaesthetic awareness for the individual. Other tasks involve hands on suggestions for the body to let go of unnecessary holding patterns in specific areas, thereby allowing the limbs for example an autonomy and maximum freedom. The tasks are specific and there is a progression in the detail and sophistication of the imagery used within the pedagogical practice . Writing/reflection is also part of every Skinner class, where students are encouraged to continue their process from the moving body to the page in whatever form they feel is appropriate. This not only helps the student in their transition from the class to the outside world and their overall reflection on their individual process, but this reflective writing allows the teacher to understand something of people's growing awarenesses or not. There is not time, nor is it my intention here to place SRT more fully within the context of other somatic techniques. But it is recognised that there are similarities in outlook and philosophical underpinnings with other body mind practices such as Alexander Technique ( which in deed was influential in the early stages of the development of SRT). However it should be stressed that SRT is a carefully structured technique and unique in the poetic imagery used.*

SRT focusses on the individual learning experience and the self directed reflection on that learning experience. Skinner is taught in such a way that the student is asked to listen to their own experience through the guided imagery and hands on partner studies. In line with some other somatic techniques and image based bodywork, the role of the teacher is one of a facilitator; a facilitator who through their own experience can engage with the tasks given without the need to demonstrate. The teacher is present mostly through the use of their voice through the empathy and direction that the voice can give to each task in hand. As with other body-mind practices , it is up to the student to engage with a personal process of discovery on a psychophysical level. With practice, in SRT the student learns to let go of preconceived notions of ways to move, trusting in this process which can be playful.

The tasks are specific and the student is not left to wander aimlessly in the playground, there are constant signposts towards the apparatus that is there for the students to engage with, as they are ready. The student is guided in their play by the teacher and the poetic imagery that unfolds, and little by little areas of the play ground are opened up, revealed to them. The nature of the experience and engagement with the task is up to the individual themselves. It is, as mentioned a psycho-physical learning experience, in which the imagination is engaged. As Jung states: (Dfee, 1999,p28) 'The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect alone but by the play instinct...'

SRT can be, I believe, a valuable part of a balanced dance education/experience. It, I suggest, contributes to the notion of the dancer as artist, as creator, as well as technician. More precisely it can be seen to assist in the blurring of boundaries between those two, often, but not necessarily, distinguishable roles. SRT is centred around the fusing of technique with creativity: a non dualist philosophy and approach. In a recent policy document, published by the Dfee and entitled All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education (1999) I read how by developing (in this context) children's creativity, so vital transferable skills are learned. It states:.. 'creativity is best construed not as a single power which you either have or do not, but as multidimensional'. The Dfee document goes on to say: (1999 p38)

'Creativity is not simply a matter of letting go. It is sometimes assumed that creativity only emerges from free expression and a lack of inhibitions or constraints. This is very misleading. Freedom to experiment is essential for creativity. But so too are skills, knowledge and understanding ... the mutual dependence of freedom and control are at the heart of the creative process'

Whilst this language is not language I would choose to describe SRT, the basic tenet is the same: the integration of technique enhances creativity. However one factor which makes SRT so unique, is its fusing of these two concerns into one unified whole and its inherent and ultimate counterbalancing process that can contribute to the development of the individual's creativity and/or making skills.

## **2. Creativity can be at the heart of learning - artistic practice and the role of creativity within Dance at HE .**

I listened recently with great interest to a radio programme on which Sir Christopher Frayling (President of The Royal College of Art) aired his views on education. He referred to the three Rs as being, not as they have more recently become known as: Reading Writing and 'rithmetic' but as they were thought of in early 19th century usage: 'Reading Wroughting and rithmetic'.

He says , in a transcript of the programme 'Taking Issue' (broadcast on January 3rd 2002)

'The original one strikes me as much more interesting than the current version, since it places creating ,making and performing at the heart of any complete education'. He goes on to say...

'If you have a good time in the art room, it may well enhance your commitment to the other two (this I think we can all take for granted here)?' Moreover and what interests me, is his assertion that 'it may even help explain to you the value of knowledge itself and so help you internalise it rather than learning it by rote'. Whilst I have not really touched on the accumulation of knowledge here, the dancer is undoubtedly accumulating and internalising knowledge as she trains and practices and I have seen and do see how SRT can play a part in that internalising of **self** knowledge.

Frayling (2002) goes on to say 'you are set a task, or better still you set a task yourself ; you approach it creatively through your own experience and the

intelligence of feeling' . To reiterate, 'the intelligence of feeling', for me illuminates a connection between what he is saying, and what happens in the course of a Skinner class that is about allowing (things to happen, things not to happen,) rather than forcing a particular end; the intelligence of feeling within the body can 'allow' so to speak, the discoveries to occur themselves. However it should not go unnoticed that: 'there is a discipline to be mastered in learning to allow , rather than force a (neuromuscular) response'(Matt, 1993,p 17), or to refer to Deleuze & Guattari (ibid)once again: travelling rather than arriving. Further more, the Releasing of Skinner Releasing Technique implies the continual process that is an engagement with allowing rather than directing, and I suggest, connects to Frayling's advocacy of internalising as opposed to learning by rote.

Frayling also highlights the importance of learning not just 'how to', again implying a goal to be reached , but 'through' .. and how 'learning through' experience for example, so the student can learn to trust 'an independence of mind' and so 'find their own answers'. SRT focusses on experiment and a self initiated learning process, that as a by product results in the development of creativity.

'Imaginative activity is a generative process', and 'creativity then is .. in a sense applied imagination' (Dfee 1999). SRT encourages students to engage with their own process of discovery on a psychophysical level, with their imagining whole self .

Referring to the world outside of education, Frayling reiterates that these creative skills can prepare the student for 'a very unpredictable world where the goal posts keep moving' ( and I assume that we in Dance both within and without HE know all too well about that).

He summarises his point of view by stating that by studying the arts so 'the individual can be protected from certitudes.' Here then an encouragement in suppleness in mind/body, thought/action can allow the student to be open to new possibilities and perhaps be more open to the unknown. Mabel E Todd in her *The Thinking Body* advocates that a balanced skeletal structure , ie: good posture, is free from strains and stress, is mobile and ready for action implying the opposite of fixity (Todd, 1997 ed. p56 -59); again a reference back to the notion of counter-balance that is fluid, in flux, uncertain perhaps.

Hopefully the lack of certainty, for example as perhaps felt by the student when embarking on a creative task, that at first seems strange and unpredictable can, over time and with practice, be experienced as a chance to play, to imagine, to be travelling , to be growing to be creating: free from strains, from stress, and ready for action and mobility.

### **3. Enquiry:Researching**

So it is with researching and those of us involved in theoretical and practical research are also experimenting and playing in a sense with what ever it is that interests us most, learning new ways to move, or merely learning new ways through.. ,the process that can be termed research .

SRT as I mentioned is at the heart of my teaching and learning experience, the labels cross over: writing dancing, reading dancing, making dancing. My area of research involves a study of and a questioning into the psycho-physical experiences of space from the point of view of the dancer and the dancer as choreographer, as informed by Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT).

The psycho physical experience is that experience that exists as a result of the interplay between the mind and the imagination engaged with the body in space. The psycho physical experience of space for the dancer and dancer as choreographer is that relationship between the inside body/ mind space and the space the other side of the skin, outside space.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) sees this relationship between the two orders, subject/object, outside/inside, psycho/physical as reciprocal whereby one not only affects the other , but where there is a blurring of boundaries between the two. He perceives space and depth both behind the skin as well as beyond it and defines a non dualistic relationship of intertwining . I have written that:

'This paradoxical thread of the intertwining, an inextricable doubleness of not only two in one (the mind-body complex) but also a co-dependency of one upon another (body affecting space and vice versa).. remains of key importance throughout my research. What is explored is how Merleau Ponty's ideas relate to the blurring of boundaries that pertain to the dancer/choreographer's experiences of spaces and of spaces themselves. Duality is dropped in favour of doubleness as both the self-reflexive and reversible functions of the dancer-and-her-space as one is revealed, through the reading of Merleau Ponty... In short a divergence between the within and the without', (Skelton 2002) or a non separation between inside and outside is revealed.

'Merleau-Ponty ... implies the indivisibility of ourselves from our perceptual experiences of the world. In the same way my experience of the practice and study of SRT relates to a doubleness of inside and outside experience. The imagination is engaged, the interior world opened up as the exterior space is explored, yet there is no division between the two. My imagination is not separated from my body- is not separated from the space outside of the skin that is being shaped and formed. I am journeying both inwards and expanding out into space as the dance is coming into being' (Skelton 2002)

In the practice of one so I apprehend the other. It is becoming clearer how theory and practice are made visible through each other. This notion reflects what has been suggested for the creative( dance) education experience, technique and creativity fusing. It can be non dualistic, a process of coming and going, a state of flux and change, where even in stillness there is motion, flow.

To conclude, my roles, whilst different, are organically connected, counter-balancing , aligning and re-aligning themselves. I experience it as a process of continual shift of emphasis , where spaces inside and out are being discovered, being navigated, being explored: the whole imagining, doing and not doing self engaged. SRT within a balanced dance education experience can and does contribute to an overall learning experience. We are, as I see, it offering up an experience of expansion, education, self knowledge and wider knowledge through the practice of dance and dancing!

a '... way of travelling and moving; proceeding from the middle through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing' (Deleuze & Guattari 1998, p25).

**Key Texts:**

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