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Conference or Workshop Item

Title: Choreography and pedagogy: a provocation

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Provocation

In the current work I am making with first year Dancers here at the University of Northampton, they are making a creative contribution to the work in two ways: devising movement material, and responding to physical sensations/experiences to embody in performance of movement material.

The work forms part of my teaching on the module *Foundations in Choreography*, the first term of which involves a staff member (myself) choreographing a work on the students. The pedagogical rationale is that one of the most productive ways to learn about choreography is through participation in a choreographic process. The studio work is accompanied by critical discussions, unpicking ways of working and decision making, and a reflective blog that documents the work as it develops, to demonstrate process, evolution and development of the work, and also to give students insight in to my thought processes, decision making and reflections as a choreographer.

The task I set myself is to write a reflective account of every devising session with the dancers. I have found this to be very revealing about my own developing choreographic practice and ways of working, but also in reflecting on the role and function of the choreographer in a wider sense. Approaching this choreographic work and reflection as a pedagogue, I have begun to realise that this is also an inherent function of the choreographer. I refer to pedagogy as distinct from traditional teaching or schooling, as the craft of creating an environment for discovery and exploration in which learning can take place rather than the transmission of information. I would argue that one of the myriad of roles of the choreographer, specifically when working with devising dancers, is to create an environment for discovery and exploration where creativity can take place. The old fashioned model of coming in and teaching a work to dancers - the transmission of material - doesn't require this pedagogical crafting.

I am not arguing that the choreographic process is an educational experience or environment for the dancer (although it can be), nor am I reducing the role of the choreographer to teacher. I am trying to articulate that pedagogy is one of the many crafts of the choreographer - a craft I believe is necessitated by the role of the devising dancer.

One of the roles of the choreographer is to construct tasks to prevent devising dancers from 'end gaining' - a term borrowed Alexander Technique that I use here to refer to devising dancer's working towards an end goal or result that they believe the choreographer desires, rather than exploring an idea or task. I acknowledge that choreographers do work like this for a multitude of reasons, but when dancers are devising towards a predetermined goal, I do not consider their contribution to be creative.

I set tasks for my dancers to devise movement material because there is an idea,

experience, sensation, image...that I want to explore. These tasks help clarify my choreographic intention - the work comes in to focus once my ideas have been physicalised by the dancers through the devising of movement material)- and gives me a range of movement material from which to choreograph. This contains an assumption that I have been discussing with my first year students as I make my current work - devising movement material is not choreography. I could break apart the meaning of *choreo* and *graphy* and make an argument about defining the term, but I am more interested in the practice. In the same way that the choreographer has a myriad of role, choreography contains a myriad of process of which devising movement material is only one. I noted earlier that one of the creative contributions my students are making to my current work is in embodying experiences and sensations in the performance of the work - similarly, performance isn't choreography.

I do not deny that the dancer is playing a creative role when they devise, but that creative role is not choreography, and it is carefully constructed and facilitated by the choreographer. The dancer is making a creative contribution to the work but they are not a collaborator. A collaborator implies 'a clearly stated and consciously shared purpose', and I learnt the hard way that a clearly stated and consciously shared purpose and treating dancers as collaborators isn't the best way to make choreography.

The dancer as collaborator implies shared decision-making. I set my dancers devising tasks - the craft of which should not be undervalued. When my dancers devise material, I decide what we move forward with in developing the work. I then structure the material into phrases and sections and begin to work of the piece as a whole. I give the dancers ideas and experiences to embody whilst performing the movement.

I am not trying to devalue the creative contribution of the dancer. I am trying to revalue the creative contribution of the choreographer, by acknowledging that contemporary choreographic processes, involving dancers devising movement material, requires further craft and creativity from the choreographer.