Using Low Cost Audio-Visual Recording Equipment for Task-Oriented Approaches to Choreography and Dance with Adolescents

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Abstract

In this paper, I will present observations and working methods developed while working on dance and choreography with adolescents with hyperactivity and learning disabilities. Choreography and dance can be a powerful tool that acts on and through the body, thereby modulating attention and developing performative, physical, cognitive, social and communicational skills. Unlike particular movement styles or techniques, task- or problem-based approaches do not require particular physical abilities nor prior training. By means of frameworks designed in collaboration with the students to be appealing to them, we seek to foster their ability to focus, stimulate their creativity and challenge their motor skills as well as their conception of movement and selves.

At first, video has proven to provide a more adequate framework than the stage, the latter being either daunting or unknown to the students. It provides a familiar space of representation, accessible tools (mobile phones), evokes popular narratives and forms and enables the shaping and reflecting of one's performance and self-image, a crucial process in this phase of their development. The identification with the medium and the resulting products motivate the students to think in and through action. Using video and task-based methods de-hierarchizes the creative process in two important ways: it does not prescribe any particular movement styles and helps the students gain knowledge in actively shaping and reflecting their self-image through technologies that surround them on a daily basis.

Introduction

A few years ago, I was given the following advice: “As a choreographer, the attention of your dancers is your capital.” Having since been working extensively in schools for children with hyperactivity and learning disabilities, it has become more meaningful than ever. Developing tools for focusing and directing the attention of individuals and groups has become an important part of my practice.

Over the past 5 years and in collaboration with Kristina Veit, I have had the chance to investigate the application of knowledge and skills acquired in the field of dance and choreography to the realm of education. This has been made possible by the extensive experimental frameworks provided by the ALTANA Kulturstiftung. Through a program titled “KulturTagJAhr”, the foundation has incited five schools in an around Frankfurt to dedicate one day per week of an entire grade to artistic explorations with artists from different disciplines as a mandatory part of the school's itinerary. The experiences I will draw from in this article have been gathered in different schools. A specialized school for students with a broad spectrum of learning disabilities, however, has been of central importance to our research due to the fact that we have had the chance to be involved in these projects there continuously for the past four years. The students we have mostly dealt with are 10 to 14 years old.

Amidst the chaos of a large space filled with dancing adolescents diagnosed with attention deficit and diverse learning disabilities, we were surprised by their ability to sustain attention for substantial periods of time in particular situations [1]. This paradox might be an argument in favor of relating attention deficit to a rise of attentive norms and practices in modernity rather than to biological malfunction [2]. Further, if attention is a normative category of institutional power, then one could argue that both designated pathologies and potentially creative states such as deep absorption, daydreaming and distraction share the fact of being beyond or below the thresholds of the productivity and social cohesion [3]. Even though this trajectory of thought delineates some potential intersections between the fields of aesthetics and psychology, I will refrain from drawing general conclusions concerning the students’ behavior due to the fact that the ones we have been working with are very heterogeneous in terms of social and cultural backgrounds as well as in terms of diagnosed

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disabilities. I will rather describe specific strategies and tools that have emerged through our interaction with them.

Approach to working with adolescents

Broadly speaking, our approach to working in the field of education is a pragmatic one. A “[wo]man is a will served by an intelligence” and he/she develops “the intelligence that the needs and circumstances of his existence demand of him” [4]. While I adhere to the idea that thought is an embodied and situated process, I am wary of the reductive relationship between attention and volition. The vast debate and body of knowledge around the question of the nature of attention – whether it is an expression of conscious will, a function of anatomy, of instincts or drives or managed through procedures and technologies [5] – in all its complexity is of greater interest for our practice of working with adolescents than any singular unified theory. So in a somewhat expanded pragmatic sense, I consider the search for a framework that speaks to students a prerequisite to successful knowledge transfer (in dance). Preparatory work is possible, but the search only really begins in interaction with the students, by finding out what speaks to them specifically. Once that has been achieved, the work becomes of fostering their capacity to focus. This entails reducing distracting stimuli, taking possible tensions arising from differences in cultural and social backgrounds in consideration, providing orientation systems and adjusting to the rhythms of the students as well as encouraging the (fragile) selection mechanisms of their embodied perceptual apparatus by calling forth their capacity to reason (conceptualizing, abstracting, reflecting) and attuning their bodies to the environment (coordination and strengthening exercises, stretches, breathing exercises, bodywork and further tools coming from somatic techniques and kinesiology). In the following however, I will focus mainly on what I mean by 'framework'. I will use one such framework and attempt explaining why it worked and what it did.

Video as a framework for focusing attention

In the specific contexts we have been working in, the medium video has proven to be more adequate at first than that of live stage performance. It is not intended as a replacement of live art, but rather as a way of introducing a consciousness for the value of presence in performance and an understanding of how one's behavior has an impact on a space. During the creation process, the recording device incites the heightened attention needed for performance. Replacing the audience often imagined as overly judgmental (peers, parents), the device disinhibits the students and provides a medium through which they can safely reflect their performance. In a second step, it allows them to determine whether or not the results are presentable. It therefore does two things: it creates intermediary products in the otherwise fleeting medium of dance and it enables self-reflection. Once they are satisfied with how their work appears on video, it is much easier to lead them towards live performance, an invaluable experience for them in many respects.

The practical affordance of the medium of video however was not decisive for choosing it as an exemplary framework for this paper. It was much rather the sudden change of attention in the room triggered by the running camera. It seemed self-evident to the students that time had increased in value by the sheer fact of being recorded. At most, a “Shhh, the camera is running” was needed to bring the attention back to the action.

Now of course, one can and should be critical of this phenomenon but I propose that the tendency of technological devices to draw attention can be put to work in a way that exceeds the purpose of self-control and surveillance or of pure narcissistic validation in the confinement of one's private space. The attention captured by the setup can be instrumentalised for the sake of experiencing the value of activities such as collaboration, concentration, listening and quietude, self-awareness and self-reflection, spatial and social organization. Further, a sense of pride over their achievement might help create a positive relationship to these abilities the students otherwise have difficulty accessing, which are precisely those fundamental to thinking and working together.

On a third plane, the medium of video provides a familiar space of representation, accessible tools (mobile phones), evokes popular narratives and forms and enables the shaping and reflecting of one's

self-image – a crucial process in this phase of their development. What is interesting here is that “the strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and inhabit time as disempowered” [6] in spectacular visual culture can be countered through a re-appropriation of the medium. Of course, this only functions if the facilitators of the process are aware of these phenomena and are able to question the ideals and values present in the work of the students in order to increase their agency and foster a productive relationship to themselves, to each other and to the environments they inhabit. Besides raising question linked to self-representation, creating and implementing scenes mobilizes a vast set of skills. The participants have to understand the spatiotemporal relations between the frame, the actual space and the logistical implications of the shoot, develop movement and performance skills to appear as desired and negotiate their wishes and desires with those of others. The creation process takes place in different phases that require different types of attention and skills. Roughly speaking, it begins with introspection, experimentation in movement, reverie, conception, articulation and decision taking. The following performance mode is one of heightened awareness and demands a strong physical presence and mindfulness. Finally, reflection directs the attention outwards towards the result or towards a collective recollection of what happened provides opportunity to release the tension created by the creative and productive phases while facing the challenge of being confronted to the difference between how they had imagined the scene and how it turned out. Frequent reiteration of these three phases has proven useful for the students to comprehend and actualize the potential of the frameworks provided (or redefine them).

Frameworks have different degrees of complexity and incite the development of different sets of skills. In choosing them, the development stage of the students has to be considered. Constraints such as rules, problems and tasks can increase creativity. In a particular example of problem-based video-dance, the video, once filmed, is played back in reverse. This proved to increase the motivation by making special effects possible (taking off a jacket, for example, looks spectacular in reverse) while turning everyday actions into stimulating puzzles. For movements to appear 'normal' in the resulting video, they have to have been performed in reverse during the shoot, which demands high levels of abstraction and complex coordination skills. In another example, we applied slow-motion effects to jumps filmed from beneath. The challenge was then to compose movement while in the air.

Conclusion

Choreography can be understood as a way of directing attention. Operating with and through the body, it engages and at best enhances a variety of sensory, motor and mental processes and faculties. Much of the responsibility concerning content and movement styles can be delegated to the students once a common framework has been delineated. Video is one example amongst many of such a choreographic framework. I propose that the force of attraction exerted by the technological apparatus often perceived as a cause for social separation and deficiencies in attention capacities [7] can be redirected for the sake of fostering agency and social cohesion. The medium of video-dance helps develop motor skills as well as the visual, tactile, auditory and kinesthetic sensory apparatus and to create a space in which collaboration and self-awareness is needed. The self-confidence gained in the process of making the video and the experience of pleasure in experimenting and thinking in movement tends to lessen the fear of live-performance. Using video and task-based methods de-hierarchizes the creative process in two important ways: it does not prescribe any particular styles of movement, helps the students to inhabit time in a more active way than the one promoted by our spectacular visual culture and gain agency in actively shaping and critically reflecting their performance and self-image through technologies that surround them on a daily basis.

References

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