

# Conference Report

*The Congress on Research in Dance Special Conference*

International Conference, De Montfort University,

Leicester, England, June 25–27, 2009

Ray Miller

The Congress on Research in Dance Special Conference's theme was *Global Perspectives on Dance and Pedagogy: Research and Practice*. De Montfort University was particularly well suited as a location for this conference, due to its long-standing reputation for pedagogical research in the performing arts. Likewise, the Centre for Excellence in Performing Arts' (CEPA) primary mission is to foster an environment in which ongoing research into the teaching and learning of dance. It was that combination of theme with location that grounded this conference and gave it additional credibility for those interested in the scholarship of teaching and learning in the field of dance studies.

There were thirty-one panels that included paper presentations, lecture-demonstrations, and workshops. While the majority of participants were from Great Britain and the United States, other countries were represented as well, including Canada, Finland, Norway, Germany, Taiwan, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, Japan, Portugal, and Brazil. Most of the conference was held in the Clephan Building and in the new Performance Arts Centre for Excellence (PACE) building, which houses state-of-the-art facilities for dance, theater, and music.

The structure of the conference facilitated participants' exchange of ideas and viewpoints with colleagues from around the world. Each day began with a movement session, and while people could go out for lunch, the conference organizers provided the opportunity for participants to purchase lunch boxes so they could remain at the conference site to continue their conversations with each other. At the conclusion of the Friday and Saturday sessions, Ramsay Burt conducted a discussion forum in one of the studios that was large enough to accommodate all of those in attendance. This was an additional occasion for the conference participants to take stock of the conference lectures, workshops, and discussions. Burt encouraged an open dialogue in which we could identify major themes or ideas that seemed to arise in that day's panels that might merit additional *interrogation or explanation*. It was also an opportunity for people to articulate concerns or ideas for future scholarly, artistic, or pedagogical investigations. The combination of midday on-site lunch boxes and late afternoon discussion forums created an environment in which people could more easily engage with those they did not know personally but

who clearly shared their professional interests. Similarly, there was a conference reception on Thursday evening following the half-day of sessions. On Friday evening, conference attendees were offered tickets to see a performance of the New Art Club's Extra Ordinary Work at the Y Theatre, one of the oldest and well-preserved theaters in downtown Leicester. In that sense, what Lee Schulman would call a "community of scholars" was created for those interested in the theme of the conference.

Sessions were framed around questions such as What are the implications for defining the field of dance studies as interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinary have on our research and teaching? Are there ways in which ballet can be more dialogic? What does it mean to "creatively research" or "research creatively?" What does the "practicing of knowledge" look like in dance and how has that changed over time? What does the role of the artist-teacher-scholar look like today and how is that measured in terms of promotion and tenure considerations? How can we more clearly articulate to audiences outside of dance the unique ways in which dance "makes meaning" and does so beyond its often self-referential context? And finally, what is the role of the dance scholar as a public intellectual in terms of wider societal discussion about culture, politics, religion, and education? These questions and many others continued to reverberate well beyond these discussion forums.

The keynote presentation was well attended, and the exchange between speakers and audience was lively and intellectually engaging. Ken Bartlett, an internationally recognized leader in the field and director of the Foundation for Community Dance, opened the panel with his thoughts on a pedagogical approach to community dance. He presented a strong argument for encouraging a more reflective approach to the dichotomy that often informs the theory/practice divide in dance-making. He advocated for dance's ability to negotiate power relationships by being inclusive in terms of who it brings into the dance experience. He stressed the importance of linking local and global initiatives between various dance communities around the world.

Thomas DeFrantz, an MIT professor and artistic director for SLIPPAGE: Performance/Culture/Technology, challenged the current practice of incorporating technologies into the classroom. He chronologically placed technology in the classroom that came before and after YouTube. While acknowledging the advantages to having immediate access to clips of dance from all over the world so easily available, DeFrantz wanted the audience to reconsider what this means to the teaching experience. Rather than thinking that this technology allows us to teach "more of the same," maybe we should turn the experience on its head and ban the technology from the classroom. After all, the students can just as easily view these video clips on their own time. Maybe we should think about re-introducing a traditional concept of the classroom as one in which people actually look at each other, talk with one another, engage and pay attention to the physical presence of the other. He advocated for a classroom dynamic in which there is room for improvisation, spontaneity, and a personal engagement between the professor and the students without the dominance of a mediated experience. In many ways, he is arguing for a "studio-like experience" in what has become a "technologically enhanced" classroom that can often inhibit rather than foster a genuine engagement between students and professors with the subject.

Janice Ross, Stanford University professor, continued some of the themes the previous two speakers initiated and contributed her thoughts on the current status of the “society of the spectator” and its impact on the classroom. She contrasted the idea of the “star dancer” and the notion of the “audience as spectator” with Margaret H’Doubler’s sense of dance inviting the student to experience his or her life as an artistic process in which they have agency. Ross used her presentation as an opportunity to challenge preconceptions that we might have regarding the impact of big business, commercial interests, reality TV, and celebrity status, on what we teach and how we teach.

A committed exchange occurred between the keynote speakers and their audience regarding an active interrogation of the classroom in light of current dance practices and a critique of selected values inherit in contemporary culture as they impact the lives of young students. At the heart of this exchange was a strong sense that learning-centered pedagogy requires a more thoughtful interrogation of contemporary practice and a recognition that learning who our students are rather than assuming that we know is essential to responsible scholarly teaching practice. There was a sense that being clever and up-to-date technologically were being replaced with what Parker Palmer would call “the courage to teach,” which is more genuinely found in the identity and integrity of the teacher. Getting “back to basics” seemed to resonate here, but it was not a call for a Luddite-like reaction but rather a thoughtful examination of the teaching and learning environment as it is lived today by our students and what that experience can mean to those who teach.

The range of papers and workshops on research into dance pedagogy and practice were broad in scope and subject. Some of the areas represented included sessions on elementary- through university-level studio and academic dance instruction, special education, dance communities, history and historiographic analysis of selected dance practices and theories, scientific, philosophical, and feminist critiques of pedagogic approaches, assessment and general education related to dance studies, varied approaches to dance pedagogy from representatives of North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia and the impact of emerging technologies and Internet capabilities in the classroom, in the studio, and in theory-making related to dance education.

Some themes were more prominent than others. For example, there were many papers on ballet pedagogy. Some were studio-based, such as Lorin Johnson’s “A Contemporary Approach to Ballet Training for University Dance Majors” and Heulwen Price’s “Pedagogy in Ballet Studies at Undergraduate Level in the United Kingdom.” Others focused more on a theoretical critique regarding ballet practice, as illustrated in Claire Wootten’s “Navigating Luminal Space in the Feminist Ballet Class.” A second prominent theme had to do with the fluid relationship between historical study and studio practices. Sue Stinson, Doug Risner, and Ann Dils took aim at research expectation in graduate programs that were focused on the dancer as artist and educator, while Hanna Järvinen argued for a metahistorical perspective in the teaching of dance history and Tresa Randall advocated for incorporating archival research in the teaching of undergraduate history courses.

Another major focus was the pedagogical impact of technologies into the classroom and studio experience. One of the most interesting presentations in this area was that

of Kerry Franksen, Bret Battey, and Jo Breslin entitled “Creative Process and Pedagogy with Interactive Dance, Music and Image.” In this workshop/lecture, audience/participants were introduced to dance and music technologies that were applied to selected compositional structures. After several demonstrations, those in attendance were invited to experiment with the various technologies that allowed you to “compose” and “interact” with music while exploring composition patterns.

A fourth theme that infused the conference had to do with dance’s relationship to typically nondance audiences. Candace Feck, in her presentation “Teaching for ‘Buy-In’: A Mixed Methodological Approach to Dance Studies in the General Education Curriculum,” incorporated dance criticism, visual culture, and inquiry-based learning strategies into a dance history course with the intention of “imparting reusable tools rather than dispensing a body of fixed information.” At the same time, Ann Cooper Albright, in her presentation “Gravity Matters: Finding Ground in an Internet World,” used the 9/11 demarcation line as a way in which to argue for dance pedagogical practice as being historically situated and therefore demanding that we acknowledge the impact of the “world out there” to the world of the dancer in the studio, the classroom, and the theater. These two presentations reflected a genuine concern that many conference attendees had regarding the location of dance within a wider societal context and the role that we as educators can and should play in that context.

The size of the conference (approximately 160 participants) encouraged an ease with regard to an intellectual and social exchange that was professional and by no means inhibiting. Rather than focusing so much on narrowly defined research areas and presenting work on those topics, there was a strong sense that the “elephant in the room”—our students—were really at the center of these investigations and conversations. The communicative power of dance to affect and transform student lives in the classroom, on the stage, and in the studio on a daily basis provided not only the focus for many of the presenters but also a palpable energy that permeated both the formal presentations as well as the many informal conversations that took place.

While I did not hear the phrase “the scholarship of teaching and learning,” nonetheless, that was in fact what the conference was about. The presentations were anything but dry and antiseptic. In the summary discussion sessions moderated by Ramsay Burt, there was a strong sense of passionately expressive scholar-teachers coming together not only to share their work and the questions that inform their work but also an openness to articulate and think through issues together as what Kent Bartlett might refer to as one of the many dance communities that make up our profession.

There was a strong sense by many that they hoped that this conference theme would “have legs.” They wanted to continue, to go deeper. Let’s hope that that opportunity will come.