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Student-centred learning and dance technique: BA students' experiences of learning in contemporary dance

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the characteristics of BA dance students' learning experiences in contemporary dance techniques, discussed in relation to teaching approaches in a continuum between teacher-centring and student-centring. The empirical material consists of 11 students' logbooks and interviews. The results elucidate the complex connections between the student's learning activities, their relationship to the teacher, and the teaching methods, and the ways these connections change over time. By analysing the students' experiences in relation to the three themes; *activity*, *power* and *choice*, the research shows how the students become more self-regulated learners, and more interested in student-centred learning approaches during their education. By engaging student voices, the research also sheds light on nuances in the relation between content, teaching methods and learning experiences in dance techniques.

Introduction

In higher education there has been a paradigm shift away from a focus on teaching and instructing towards an emphasis on the quality of students' learning (Barr and Tagg 1995, 16). Today the term student-centred learning is widely used, with slightly different meanings, in teaching and learning literature (Geraldine and Tim 2005, 30). Lea, Stephenson, and Troy (2003) discuss different uses of the term, one defining student-centred learning as 'ways of thinking and learning that emphasize student responsibility and activity in learning rather than what the teachers are doing' (321).

In dance education there has been a similar division between teacher-centred and student-centred learning, described by Donna Dragon (2015, 28) as separate paradigms. One is student-centred, and mostly connected to dance as education, with a focus on holistic development through a discovery process. The other, teacher-centred, has often been used in training of dance artists, with an emphasis on skill acquisition in dance technique. These two paradigms have been practiced quite separately, but towards the end of the 20th century there was a heightened interest in merging more process-oriented work, such as somatics, into dance technique (Fortin 1998; Fortin and Siedentop 1995;

Green 1999). Smith-Autard (2002) describes this as a third or middle model for teaching dance, combining skill acquisition and personal growth through problem solving methods.

Dyer (2009, 119) discusses how this has given rise to new paradigms within dance technique; one focusing on the aesthetic vocabulary of a specific idiom or style, and one more generic approach emphasising sensing and understanding the body. The first is often associated with authoritarian pedagogical approaches, the second with encouraging self-understanding and empowerment. However, Dyer does not consider these different teaching ideologies to be mutually exclusive: 'The technical vocabulary of specific dance techniques can be utilized in a variety of ways for personally meaningful discoveries and artistic experiences in dance without incorporating authoritarian teaching approaches' (Dyer 2009, 120). She suggests that rather than taking an either-or viewpoint, it is more productive to envision how different teaching approaches might complement each other to form richer learning experiences (122).

In this article I will discuss dance students' learning experiences set in relation to teaching approaches in a continuum between teacher-centring and student-centring. Based on material from my PhD-thesis that focuses on BA dance students' lived experiences with contemporary dance, I will focus on the following questions: *What are the characteristics of BA dance students' learning processes in contemporary dance technique? How do these change during the three years of study? How do the students' experiences relate to the topic of student-centred learning?*

Theoretical framework

Learning is, according to educational researcher Jarvis (2006), a lifelong, existential process. 'Learning is the process of being in the world. At the heart of all learning is not merely what is learned, but what the learner is becoming (learning) as a result of doing and thinking – and feeling' (Jarvis 2006, 6). Based in empirical research on adults' learning experiences, Jarvis has developed a holistic model for lifelong learning: The whole person – body/mind/self – has an episodic experience in a social context, and this experience is transformed through three dimensions: action, reflection, and emotion. The result of the process is a changed, more experienced person, entering new learning cycles (23). Thus, learning consists of both learning something and changing as a person. Jarvis emphasises the learners' own activity in the learning process, in relation to a social context. This is especially relevant for understanding the topic of student-centred learning in the context of higher education.

Student-centred learning, as mentioned above, emphasises student responsibility and activity in learning. Lea, Stephenson, and Troy (2003, 322) also suggest other tenets of student-centred learning: Deep learning, autonomy, interdependence, mutual respect, and reflexivity. This approach to learning is rooted in a constructivist epistemology, which sees knowledge and context as closely connected, and meaning as determined by individuals. Students are expected to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, and the teacher is regarded as a facilitator of this process (Barr and Tagg 1995, 15; VanManen 1997, 262). O'Neill and McMahon have analysed different definitions of student-centred learning, and they point out three important common aspects in the literature: *Student activity*, *level of choice*, and *the power relationship* between the student

and the teacher. They argue that in practice there is not a clear-cut dualism between teacher-centred and student-centred learning, therefore they suggest considering these terms as either end of a continuum, that ranges from high to low levels of student choice, activity, and power (Lakes 2005, 32).

One central goal for student-centred learning is to foster autonomy and increased responsibility on the part of the student (Lea, Stephenson, and Troy 2003, 322). This is closely connected to the concept of self-regulated learning, which refers to 'processes that learners use to systematically focus their thoughts, feelings, and actions on attainment of their goals' (Shunk 2012, 391). The self-regulatory process involves component skills such as: setting goals, adopting strategies, monitoring one's performance, and adapting future methods (Zimmermann 2002, 66). Zimmerman argues that self-regulatory processes are teachable, and he suggests that this can be done by supporting the students in setting their own goals and learning strategies, encouraging self-evaluation, and giving them more choices in the learning situation (69). In these suggestions he highlights the three central aspects of student-centred learning: students' activity and choice, and more implicitly, power relationship between teacher and student. Thus, self-regulated learning can be seen as one of the goals of student-centred learning.

To analyse the students' learning experiences in dance I also turn to some practical theories and models for teaching and learning: Social scientist Donald Schön (2016) shows how professional practitioners, as well as artists, rely on their ability to reflect-in-action when solving difficult problems in their profession. He argues that education for practice should focus on learning by doing and learning to reflect-in-action (Schön 1988, xii), emphasising both the action and reflection dimensions of the learning process (Jarvis 2006).

Musta Mosston's Spectrum of Teaching Styles is a practice-oriented model originally developed for teaching physical education. The model details different teaching styles based in the question of 'who makes which decisions about what and when' (Mosston and Ashworth 2008, 4). The model has two main clusters: *reproduction* where the teacher makes most of the decisions and the students reproduce knowledge, and *production* where the students make more decisions, and they produce their own knowledge in a process of discovery (10). These two clusters clearly relate to the question of teacher-centred or student-centred learning, and to different kinds of activities, choices, and power relationships. And as Geraldine and Tim (2005) also argue, the spectrum is considered a continuum, not two opposite poles: 'Such a non-versus system honours the full range of educational ideas, thus rejecting none' (Mosston and Ashworth 2008, 2).

Related research

Following Sööt and Viskus (2014), dance pedagogy has changed considerably during the recent decades, emphasising knowledge about different teaching and learning strategies, in addition to the traditional focus on transmitting dance content (2014, 290). They have identified seven research trends within dance pedagogy. Two of these are *self-regulation and reflection in learning*, and *a somatic approach*. They connect both of these trends to Smith-Autard (2002) middle model of combining skill acquisition and personal growth through problem solving. This relates to the focus in this article; dance technique in

a continuum between teacher-centring and a student-centring. The following literature overview is delimited to dance pedagogy research which in different ways can be associated with these two research trends, mainly in the context of higher education in dance.

Within dance pedagogy research there has been a growing interest in the role of dance technique, connected to two paradigms in dance education: focusing on skill acquisition or holistic development (Dragon 2015; Råman 2009). Several researchers have questioned authoritarian approaches in dance (Lakes 2005), often with a foundation in feminist pedagogy (Alterowitz 2014; Barr and Oliver 2016; Burnidge 2012; Fortin 1998; Green 1999; Richmond and Bird 2020; Shapiro 1998; Smith 1998; Stinson 1993, 1998). Some of them connect feminist pedagogy to student-centred learning, emphasising personal experiences and self-knowledge (Shapiro 1998), individual enquiry and empowerment (Alterowitz 2014; Richmond and Bird 2020). In Bales and Nettl-Fiol (2008) several of these questions are touched upon, in relation to the development of dance technique in the post-Judson era.

Since the 1990s, researchers have explored alternative pedagogical methods for dance technique to enable 'students to become reflective, active agents of their learning' (Rimmer 2017, 221), especially by merging somatic practices with dance technique (Burnidge 2012; Fortin 1998; Fortin and Siedentop 1995; Fortin, Long, and Lord 2002; Green 1999; Richmond and Bird 2020). However, in the last few decades researchers have pointed out that authoritarian methods can also be found within somatic practices, so the main question is not necessarily about the content of dance, but *how* dance is taught (Burnidge 2012; Dragon 2015; Dyer 2009).

Regarding empirical research on teaching and learning dance technique in higher education, there are several examples based on teachers' perspectives. Some are describing and developing teaching methods for heightening the students' activity in the dance class (Aceto 2012; Fortin and Siedentop 1995; Rimmer 2013; Stanton 2011), and some are discussing questions of authority and empowerment in the teaching situation (Burnidge 2012; Fitzgerald 2017; Fortin 1998; Rafferty and Stanton 2017; Richmond and Bird 2020; Shapiro 1998; Smith 1998).

There has been less research based on the students' own experiences, as pointed out by Bracey (2004, 7). However, this situation has changed slightly since 2004. Currently there is a growing body of research about students' experiences with learning dance technique in higher education. Some identify the students' development throughout their education (Bracey 2004; Highdon and Stevens 2017; Longley and Kensington-Miller 2020), while others detail the students' activity in relation to specific teaching methods (Akinleye and Payne 2016; Barr 2009; Harbonnier-Topin and Barbier 2012; Huddy 2017; Leijen et al. 2012; Petsilas et al. 2019; Rimmer 2017; Ritchie and Brooker 2018). A few articles address student-centred learning in particular, discussing themes such as collaboration, exploration, feedback, dialogue, and reflection (Alterowitz 2014; Dryburg 2019; Dyer 2010; Jamieson and Jackson 2016; Råman 2009).

With this overview I have shown that there is a growing body of research on teaching approaches in dance technique in general, and also some that relate more specifically to the question of student-centring in higher education. However, even though there are

some examples of empirical research on this topic, I argue that there is still a need for more research based on the students' own perspective.

Methods and materials

The project is methodologically informed by VanManen's (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological method, combining a phenomenological description of lived experience with a hermeneutic interpretation of the experience.

The participants are 11 female students from all three years of the BA study, majoring in contemporary dance. They were between 19–24 year at the start of the project, all had grown up in a Nordic country, and all had several years of dance training ahead of entering the education. Regarding ethical considerations, participation was voluntary, the participants provided informed consent, and they have been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms. The empirical material consists of logbooks and interviews, generated especially for the project, mostly over a two-year period. One student participated in the study for three years. Three to four times during each semester, the students delivered logs detailing their experiences from their daily training. According to van Manen, logs 'may contain reflective accounts of human experiences that are of phenomenological value' (VanManen 1997, 73). In the log-template they were asked to describe in detail one concrete moment from their dance training the last two weeks, and more generally, to write about what they had been interested in and focused on in the period. These guidelines were intended to capture rich descriptions of lived experience (VanManen 1997, 65), as well as the students' own reflections about those experiences. At the end of each semester, I conducted semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), asking questions about themes from the logs and earlier interviews, as well as involving the students in discussions about traditions in dance. The research design combines description and interpretation, involving the students in an ongoing hermeneutic process over time.

The result was quite a substantial amount of material: 102 logs and 36 interviews in total. I analysed the material thematically, combining holistic, selective, and line-by-line approaches. The process consisted of looking for emergent themes across the material, writing condensed descriptions and organising levels of themes (VanManen 1997). I alternated between getting an overview over the whole material, selecting parts for in-depth studies and colour-coded single sentences according to themes and subthemes. Several rounds of this process resulted in an organisation of the material into four main areas: *Traditions, learning, presence in the body and in the dance*, and *transformation*. *Learning* was the most significant area, in terms of amount of material, especially in the logs. This is partly due to the focus of the log-templates, but it also indicates that the students' daily learning experiences are important to them.

In this article I will present and develop findings connected to the main area *learning* and make an extended interpretation of this research material within the framework of student-centred learning. The main focus of the analysis is the students' experiences of their learning processes, and how these change over time. I will look into the logs and analyse changes concerning how the students verbalise their experiences and which themes they emphasise, as well as their own reflections on their learning processes. In this way both the students' phenomenological descriptions, and hermeneutic interpretations form the basis for understanding changes in their lived experiences. The analysis is

based on all the log quotations collected under the main area *learning*, but for the purposes of this article, I have only chosen a few quotations as examples of the general tendencies in the material as a whole.

Results and discussion

After a thematic analysis of the material connected to the main area *Learning*, I identified three main themes in the material: 1) The student's approach to learning, 2) interaction with the teacher, 3) the impact of the teaching methods. This corresponds with Jarvis (2006) understanding of learning, which emphasises the learner's own activity, in relation to a larger social context. The specific context in focus here is the relation to the teachers and their teaching methods, which are also connected to the traditions of the different dance techniques. These themes also relate to the three themes that Geraldine and Tim (2005) call important for identifying levels of student-centred learning: 1) activity, 2) power relationship and 3) choice. I will now investigate the three main themes in the material, with a special emphasis on how they relate to levels of student-centred learning.

The student's approach to learning

I have identified several common subthemes for the students' daily learning activities: *Mastering and understanding dance vocabulary, principles, and style*; *adjusting the dance to one's own body*; *setting goals and strategy for one's own work*; and *emotions and motivation*. The students' learning activity in dance is characterised by a constant shift between physical actions and reflections, and by being emotionally involved. This corresponds with Jarvis (2006) three dimensions for learning: action, reflection, and emotions, as well as his emphasis on how these dimensions are closely connected. These themes also point towards characteristics of self-regulated learning, such as the students' ability to set their own goals, adopt strategies, and monitor their own performance (Zimmermann 2002, 66).

Even though there are individual variations, there is a clear change in the students' approach to learning over the course of their education. This change can be loosely sketched across the three years of study, each with its own characteristics: In the first year the students tend to *recognise and apply*, in second year they *explore and transfer* and in the third year they *develop and personalise*. These designations are inspired by Schön's (1988) description of stages in the development of becoming a professional practitioner, which is characterised by being able to *reflect-in-action*.

First year students' approaches to learning

The close connection between reflection, action and emotion is already evident in the material from the first-year students. Here is one example, written about classes in Graham technique:

> The last two weeks I have chosen to work on contraction and release. I have tried to understand how I can use it to move my body in different directions. I have been working with it in and outside of class. It is difficult, that is why I decided to try to understand it once

and for all, to make it easier to master new exercises. [...] I remember last week when I actually understood how to use contraction in a 'bison'. That was a fantastic feeling! Anne1

Anne is working on mastering and understanding a technical principle. Her actions are both repetitive and experimental (Jarvis 2006, 111), by repeating set vocabulary she experiments with how the principles works in her own body. She reflects by analysing the principles and by monitoring and evaluating her own performance. Based on this she sets goals and makes a strategy for her work. Her goal 'to understand once and for all' indicates that she wants to reach a pre-set, fixed understanding. In the last part of the quote the emotional dimension of the learning experience is evident, where she dwells in the joy of mastery.

The common traits in the quotes from the first-year students is that they mostly focus on mastering concrete vocabulary or principles directly connected to a specific technique. Their actions and reflections are bodily based, with a tendency to try to adjust the body to the material. They often expect to get one clear answer to a problem or believe that there is one right way to execute a movement. I interpret this as relating to the first stage of becoming a professional practitioner, which involves being able to recognise and apply concrete rules and operations (Schön 1988, 40). The first-year students' approach to learning is characterised by *recognising* movements and principles and *applying* them in similar contexts.

Second year students' approaches to learning

In the second year the students write about several of the same themes as in the first year, however with a slightly different approach:

> I have focused a lot on centre of gravity and alignment. The teachers have reminded me of this, and this is also important in all the dance techniques. It isn't always so easy to find the centre of gravity and feel the right alignment, so I have tried to work on activating the right muscles and to feel if the weight is distributed evenly between the two feet. [...] I remember one moment when I had an aha-experience of finding my centre. This was a big moment for me, and I try to find that feeling again every time I do floor-work. Beata2

In this quote Beata indicates that she has chosen her own goals, based on both the teachers' feedback and her own needs. Her work is analytical and detailed, and she lets the feeling of mastery become a drive for further work.

A common trait in the material from the second-year students is a focus on how technical principles are relevant in different courses, rather than just being connected to specific exercises or techniques. The students evaluate their own performance, and they set goals that are relevant to several of their courses. This reflects Schön's (1988) second stage, in which a person applies general rules to specific contexts. This stage is also about learning forms of inquiry specific to the profession (39), and the student's logs show that, during their second year, their approach to learning is becoming more explorative in several ways: They have more knowledge about dance and can use this in a more detailed and analytic exploration. They explore different questions and solutions, rather than striving for one right answer, and they reflect upon their own learning process. This exploration often ends in aha-experiences and strong emotional involvement which gives

them a motivational drive. The second-year students' approach to learning is characterised by being *explorative* with an emphasis on *transference* between subjects.

Third year students' approaches to learning

The third-year students show an even more autonomous approach to their learning process:

> I need to develop a stronger floor-technique, to get more efficiently up and down from the floor. I noticed this in a workshop with a lot of fast transitions between three levels. To be able do this as smoothly as possible I need to use the right amount of muscle effort and distribute my energy more efficiently. I think it might be helpful to have more explosivity in my movements, this will also create more dynamic variations. I try to focus on this in all the classes. Hanna3

Hanna discusses how a concrete challenge from one of her classes is relevant to her work in general. Her own body is her point of focus, not a teacher or a technique, and she suggests her own solutions to the problem.

In the material from the third-year students, there are some similarities with the second year, now with a heightened self-assuredness: They work on mastering overall principles and movements relevant to different subjects, with a heightened awareness of their own needs. Their reflections are more based in their own knowledge about the subject, and less dependent on feedback from the teacher. They evaluate the relevance of what they work on, both for themselves and in relation to the field of dance. The third-year students' approach to learning is characterised by developing a feeling of ownership of the subject, which gives them self-assuredness when making their own choices. They *develop* their own base of knowledge in a process of *personalising* the dance. Following Schön, the students are on their way of gaining a professional insight and ability to reflect-in-action, where instead of following rules, they develop their own methods, understandings, and strategies for action (Schön 1988, 39).

Discussion: activity in the student's learning approaches

Critiques of dance technique often take issue with the students' role as passive recipients of information transmitted from the teacher, rather than active participants in the learning process. Barr and Oliver write that this is an especially prevalent tendency among students first entering university dance programs (2016, 102). The analysis of the students' experiences shows that for the first-year students there is indeed a tendency towards passivity regarding accepting the information from the teacher without question. However, they still show high activity in their learning approaches, by reflecting, acting, and being emotionally involved. When working on mastering movements, principles and style, the students set goals, reflect on strategies to reach the goals, and evaluate themselves. This show that skill learning in dance is never just about receiving information, it involves 'an active engagement in problem-solving' (Dyer 2010, 380). This also resonates with Schön's emphasis on professional practice as more than just the application of rules and techniques. It also involves the ability to solve unfamiliar situations and problems by reflection-in-action (1988, 34).

Over the course of the education the nature of the students' activities changes, which is loosely connected to the three years of study. First-year students tend to be relatively dependent on their teachers when setting goals and evaluating themselves, and they often want to get clear definitions of right and wrong. Third-year students are setting their own goals and learning strategy more independently and evaluating feedback from their teachers more critically. I interpret this change in the students approaches to learning during their education as a development towards becoming more self-regulated learners. This is manifested in the active regulation of different learning processes, 'e.g. the setting of, and orientation towards, learning goals; the strategies used to achieve goals; the management of resources; the effort exerted; reactions to external feedback; the products produced' (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006, 199).

Interaction with the teacher

Learning occurs in the intersection between the self and other persons in the world (Jarvis 2006, 7), and in education the interaction between the teacher and the student is especially important (Barr and Tagg 1995; VanManen 1997). This is evident in the material from the students: Teachers have a major impact on the students' learning, by being a source of knowledge and inspiration, and by guiding and evaluating their work. However, over time the students understanding of the teachers' role in relation to their own role changes in correspondence with the changes in their approaches to learning. I my analyses of the research material, I have identified three teacher-roles: The teacher as *expert*, *tutor*, and *facilitator*. I understand these roles in a continuum between teacher-centred and student-centred learning, and between a view of the teacher as a transmitter of information or a facilitator for learning. They also indicate different power relationships in the teaching situation (Barr and Tagg 1995; Geraldine and Tim 2005; VanManen 1997).

The depiction of the teacher as *expert* is only visible in the material from first-year students, as *tutor* mostly from the second-year students, but also from the other two years, and *facilitator* mostly in the third year. It is important to stress that these roles are perceived from the students' point of view, and not that of the teachers themselves. Thus, the same teacher might be ascribed different roles by different students.

The teacher as expert

The understanding of the teacher as *expert* is only seen in the logbooks from the first-year students, and they are often concerned with getting concrete feedback from the teacher:

> I noticed that I master the technique better now since the teacher told me that I did it better than earlier. Dina1

> It is not always so easy to know what is right and wrong in this technique, I feel that I don't get enough concrete answers about what is wrong or right. Beata1

> I have been working on the quality of movement because the teacher asked us to do that. The teacher showed us an exercise with the right technique and quality. It motivated me a lot, and it made it easier for me to understand how I can work towards doing the same. Dina1

These students are working on mastering concrete movements, relying on feedback from the teacher to be able to evaluate their work. They consider the teacher

to be the one who defines what is right or wrong. Beata expresses a certain frustration with not getting clear enough answers from the teacher. This frustration might be due to different understandings of roles and decision-making: The teacher might have encouraged the students to find their own answers, while Beata may not have been ready for that. The last quote from Dina indicates that she is not just a passive receiver of information, but that she finds her own way of working. It is also evident that the teacher is an important source of inspiration for her.

A common trait in the material regarding the teacher as *expert* is an expectation that the teacher will make most of the choices about content, goals, methods, and evaluations, and that the student should reproduce the material after an ideal set by the teacher. This view of the teachers' role corresponds to teacher-centred learning, where the teacher is transmitting a defined content, and the student is a passive recipient (VanManen 1997, 262). However, even though the students show some passivity by wanting to be told what to do, they are indeed active in their learning processes, as shown in the last section. Rather than characterising the students as passive and receptive in this kind of process, I consider them active and receptive.

Only first-year students have such an understanding of the teacher's role. This might be connected to the students' expectations of what dance education will be based in their former experiences of learning dance, in other words, 'that they expect to be taught as they were taught' (Dragon 2015, 26). This might further result in 'a "mismatch" between the students' expectations of dance technique and the teachers' style of delivery' (Rimmer 2017, 223), as exemplified by Beata's frustration with not getting clear enough answers from her teacher.

The teacher as tutor

The understanding of the teacher as *tutor* is seen mostly in the logbooks from the second- year students, but also a few from the other two years. One change from the first year is how the students relate to input from the teacher:

> The teachers have focused on flow and initiation. I find it easier to focus on the same thing as the teachers, but then find my own ways to work on it and feel it. Beata2

> I feel partly that I master it now, and I have also gotten feedback that it looks like I'm thinking right. This is fun, and I try to analyse it and take it with me in all my classes. Gry2

While the first-year students often describe how they work with goals set by the teacher, the second-year students reflect on why they choose to work on these goals. In the first quote Beata experience seems to indicate that it is her own choice to follow the focus from the teacher. For Gry the feedback from the teacher confirms her own evaluation.

In the material regarding the teacher as *tutor*, the students are relying on the teacher to provide guidance, advice, and inspiration for their own work. Rather than just accepting the teacher's instructions, they evaluate whether it is relevant to their own needs. The choice of what to work on is considered a shared choice, and a shared responsibility. The students are no longer looking for concrete answers on right and wrong but discuss how different approaches can all be useful. This view of the teacher's role corresponds to what Kember describes as a transitional bridge between teacher- and student-centring (1997,

263). The student is regarded a participant in a more interactive process of discovery, within the framework defined by the teacher (262). The students' understanding of the teacher as *tutor* reflects their growing independence, self-assurance, and trust in their own knowledge and abilities.

The teacher as facilitator

The understanding of the teacher as facilitator is seen in the logbooks written by third-year students, who evidence a more independent relationship to their teachers.

> The teacher talked a lot about that if we don't fully lengthen and gather, the movements will become more difficult and a lot heavier. This is something I really want to try to work on, to be able to move faster. I have heard before that I need to move bigger, and I think this can help me with that. Ida3

> All the teachers have personal preferences which are visible in their material and focus. I have noticed that I easily work in a way that feels natural for me, that I do the exercises in my own way. This is good, but I also need to try out new approaches so that I don't miss out on what the teacher can provide. Karin3

The teacher is important to these two students, but they consider the teachers' input as inspiration for their own individual work, and as suggestions for possible solutions rather than pre-defined correct answers. Ida analyses the feedback she gets from the teacher in relation to earlier experiences and its personal relevance, and Karin reflects on her working strategy and relationship with her teachers.

In the material regarding the teacher as *facilitator* the third-year students show a heightened autonomy. As in the second year, they make their own choices in relation to feedback from their teachers, and analyse its relevance with a higher degree self-confidence. In addition, they reflect on their own relation to the teacher. Some of them write about openness and trusting the teachers' competence, while others are critical of their teachers' choices. The students acknowledge that different teachers have different points of view, and thereby that there is no one single truth, but rather many possible truths. The students start to see themselves as contributing to the knowledge being produced in the situation, rather than only being receptors of knowledge. This view of the teachers' role is characteristic of student-centred learning, where the teacher is a facilitator for the student's individual learning process, and the focus is on the students' conceptions of knowledge (VanManen 1997, 267).

Discussion: power-relationship between the teacher and the student

Embedded in the students' understanding of the teacher's role, is a question of the power-relationship between teacher and student. Is there an asymmetrical power relationship between an all-knowing teacher and a passive student, or a more shared power dynamic with less dependence on the teacher as the only source of knowledge (Richmond and Bird 2020, 136)? Belenky et al. (1986) seminal study of adult women's epistemological development highlights a change from considering knowledge as received from authorities, to discovering how knowledge is subjective and based in one's own experiences. This development is also evident in the analysis of the students' experiences, in the shift

from wanting specific answers about right and wrong from the teachers, to trusting their own competence and having a more divergent view of knowledge. They alter their perception of the teacher from a provider of knowledge to a facilitator of individual knowledge.

This change in the students' relationship to the teacher corresponds with the change in their approach to learning, as discussed in the last section. They develop a heightened autonomy in their learning process, which is characteristic for self-regulated learning (Zimmermann 2002). The students increased self-confidence strengthens their ability to make judgements about their own learning-process as well as the teaching situation. They develop their ability to think critically, an essential element of student- centred learning (Råman 2009, 77). This kind of autonomy contributes to making the power-dynamic in the dance class less asymmetrical, as learning to take control over one's own learning process and experiences is a process of empowerment (Richmond and Bird 2020, 140).

The impact of the teaching methods

The students learning strategies and their interaction with their teachers are closely connected to the teaching methods used in the dance classes. In the material I have delimitated three central methods: 1) *reproductive method*, 2) *explorative method* and 3) *improvisation*. The first corresponds to the reproduction cluster of Mosston's spectrum model, the other two belong to the production side of the spectrum, where gradually more of the decision-making is transferred from the teacher to the student (Mosston and Ashworth 2008, 20). As Geraldine and Tim (2005, 32) point out, the level of choice is an important factor in the continuum between teacher-centred and student-centred learning.

During their education the students had different dance techniques, with different teaching traditions. The most central are Graham technique, Cunningham technique, release-based techniques, contact improvisation and improvisation. The first two fit into Dyer's (2009, 119) first paradigm in dance technique, focusing on an aesthetic vocabulary within a specific style. They also work mostly with reproductive teaching methods. The latter three belong to the second paradigm: a generic approach emphasising sensing and understanding the body. Here production, and explorative teaching methods, play a larger role, although reproduction is also used.

Reproductive method

In the reproductive methods the teacher makes most of the decisions, and the student reproduces pre-defined knowledge or skills. Mosston and Ashworth (2008) present several learning styles within this cluster, such as *the command style*, *the practice style*, and *the self-check style*. In the first the teacher makes all the decisions, in the second the student can practice on their own and in the third the students evaluate themselves. Thus, even when reproducing skills, the students can make some decisions themselves. This dynamic is present in the following two examples from classes in Graham technique:

> The teacher asks us to practice based on her feedback directly after the exercises, otherwise it is easy to make the same mistake in the next class, because the skills are not in the muscle memory. Carina1

> In Graham technique the exercises are often the same from class to class. This helps me to really focus on how I do the movements, and I have developed a lot because of this. Gry3

The students are describing how they work on reproducing set material. Despite clear leadership from the teacher, the students are not just following signals, as in the command style. Instead, they are working independently on feedback and exercises, and they evaluate themselves based on set criteria. There are elements here of both the practice style and the self-check style, which can foster greater independence and the ability to trust one's own evaluations (Mosston and Ashworth 2008, 94, 141). Repetition is a central method in Graham technique, and Gry considers this important for her progress because it gives her opportunity to dig deeper into the material. This implies that she considers repetition as an active exploration. This corresponds to Jarvis' view of repetition: 'It is always the changes person repeating the learning, so that even rote learning may be about continuous change and not mere repetition' (Jarvis 2006, 24).

There are several examples from Cunningham technique and release-based techniques where the students are given more choices while working on reproducing set material:

> In Cunningham technique we were playing with change of directions and starting points in an exercise. This was challenging and fun, and I learned a lot from it. Anne2

> We were asked to focus on suspension and fall in a combination, this gave it a totally different energy and quality. It made me understand why those contrasts are so important. Dina1

The students describe how they make their own decisions regarding timing, use of space and movement qualities. This is similar to *the guided discovery style*, where the teacher asks questions and gives tasks to help the students discover the solution themselves. This method can help students to understand connections and experience aha-moments (Mosston and Ashworth 2008, 212). This style is on the production side of the spectrum, but I place it here under reproductive method, because the goal is to reproduce set material, with a fairly convergent view of the outcome. Mastering this kind of challenges seems especially motivating and gives the students a feeling of mastery and of discovering something new.

Explorative method

On the production side of the spectrum model the students are encouraged to discover and produce new knowledge, rather than just receive, and reproduce knowledge from the teacher (Mosston and Ashworth 2008, 48). There are several styles in this cluster, *the convergent discovery style* (237) corresponds with what I have called explorative method, which is often used in release-based techniques:

> I remember a moment when we played with having the pelvis in and out of the centreline with free movements. This was a big moment for me, like an epiphany of understanding what I do or don't do. I often think about this experience in other exercises. Gry2

> The connection between head and tail has been a big theme in class, the teacher has used improvisation in the beginning of class as a method to explore different possibilities. I like this a lot, exploring different alternatives before we take the experiences into set material. Hanna3

These students describe experiences of exploring a technical principle using improvisation as a method. The choice of movement material is their own, but the focus is set by the teacher. Both students emphasise that they understand something new which is transferable to other situations. These experiences correspond to the convergent discovery style: The students are more independent in their discovery process and in finding the right answers. The answers may be defined by the teacher, the tradition, or physical laws, and finding the answers is often experienced as an aha-moment (Mosston and Ashworth 2008, 237). This method fosters a greater independence, giving the students more freedom of choice. However, because the goal is connected to mastering dance technique, the solution of the problem is convergent.

For the second- and third-years students explorative methods allow important experiences of learning and an increases sense of ownership for the subject matter. The first-year students, however, don't mention this kind of work at all in their logs. I asked the students about this in an interview, leading them to reflect on the value of such methods. But rather than having important learning experiences, they emphasised how it sharpen their focus before working on set material. This indicates that appreciation of learning methods based on independence and divergent thinking is a process of maturity.

Improvisation

In improvisation as an own subject, explorative methods can also be used. Here there are even more possibilities for the students to make their own choices, and improvisation is an end goal in itself. I consider improvisation to be similar to the *divergent discovery style*, the first style in the spectrum where the student has freedom to discover different possible solutions. This fosters divergent thinking and acceptance for different approaches (Mosston and Ashworth 2008, 247). This style often involves strong emotional responses, which is apparent in the students' logs:

> It has been hard to walk on straight lines in improvisation, I feel trapped and frustrated. I have tried to work on my feelings, but it is hard to work within such set frames. Beata2

> Even though I was afraid of improvisation, I chose to make an initiative. When the decision was made, nothing could stop me. I forgot to be nervous and let myself be taken by the unpredictable situation. I was surprised by the positive response from the group, and this strengthened my self-confidence. Julie3

> It is difficult to write about contact improvisation because it is more about your automatic reactions. Do you withdraw, or do you go straight in? You are more confronted by your own reactions when you are with someone else. Karin3

Beata struggles with the set frameworks of a structured improvisation; this does not match her expectation of improvisation as free. This is an example of how improvisation can have rather set frames, when working on concrete skills. For Julie it is challenging to make an independent choice of action while being observed by others. Making choices is an important part of improvisation, and Julie's description is an example of the experience of learning to make choices. Her challenge is not mastering particular movements but learning to make good choices in relation to others. This gives a feeling of control, freedom, and self-confidence.

Karin finds it difficult to write about contact improvisation because it involves her personal patterns of reactions. Here she touches upon an important tendency in the material: While working with improvisation in a technique class is often focussing on exploring technical principles, improvisation classes more often involve more personal and relational skills, such as being aware of one's own patterns of reactions and being in interaction with others. Several students experienced that reducing their emphasis on achievement gave them a feeling of freedom and personal growth.

Discussion: the level of choice in dance technique

The level of student choice is an important marker in the continuum between teacher-centred and student-centred learning (Lakes 2005, 32), and it is directly correlated to the potential for self-regulation (Shunk 2012, 409). Being able to make choices is also an important part of being a professional practitioner. Schön argues that professional education 'needs to prepare students for competence in the indeterminate zones of practice' (Schön 1988, 21).

The spectre-model provides a tool to recognise nuances in the kinds of choices that students make within the different teaching styles (Mosston and Ashworth 2008). The students meet different kinds of reproductive methods in the education. However, the command style, where the teacher makes all the decisions, is not apparent in the material. Even in techniques working with mostly pre-set movement material, the students have some possibilities to make their own choices: By self-evaluation and individual practicing with set material and by interpreting the material regarding choices of timing, spacing and movement quality. In techniques using explorative methods the students can also choose their own movements and working process. For several students this resulted in important moments of learning and of understanding connections. In improvisation the process of making choices becomes a theme in itself. The students learn to trust their own choices and to interact with others' choices.

The analysis shows that there is a change over time in how the students relate to the different teaching methods in the continuum between teacher-centring and student-centring. The first-year students seem to be more concerned with reproductive methods, as a result of their desire to receive fast answers about right and wrong. Discovery methods involves more divergent thinking, which can be unfamiliar for fresh students. Some of the third-year students say that they prefer to work more explorative and with improvisation. They also seem to have an attitude of discovery when working with reproduction, by finding a freedom to work from their own bodies within set frameworks. This corresponds to the students' heightened autonomy in relation to the teachers and their own learning approaches and indicate that they are becoming more self-regulated learners. The students become more interested in making their own choices, and they also seem to increase their ability to make independent decisions, even within rather strict frameworks. Following Schön (1988, 21), they are developing their abilities to handle the 'indeterminate zones of practice', which is important on the way of becoming a professional practitioner or artist.

Conclusion

In this article I have analysed the characteristics of the students' learning processes and how these change during the three years of study, set in relation to the topic of teacher-centring versus student-centring within dance technique training.

The students' approaches to learning are characterised by how action, reflection and emotion are closely connected. The students actively work on mastering and understanding dance vocabulary, principles, and style, adapting the dance technique to their own bodies, and planning and evaluating their own performance. However, their learning approach evolve over the course of the three years: In the first year the students mostly work on recognising and applying principles in similar situations and they consider the teacher to be an expert and authority, from whom they expect clear answers. In the second year they explore and focus on transference between subjects, and the teacher is regarded as a tutor who provides guidance for their own reflections. In the third year they develop their own base of knowledge in a process of personalising the dance and view the teacher as a facilitator for their own autonomous learning process. The students become more interested in explorative methods during their education, and they develop a more exploring approach to reproduction methods, which corresponds to a heightened autonomy, agency, and ability for divergent thinking.

This division between the three years is an analytic simplification. However, the research shows that there is a substantial change in the students' learning processes during the three years of study. By analysing the students' experiences in relation to the themes of student activity, power relationship and level of choice, the research has shown how the students' learning processes become gradually more in line with the goals of student-centred learning (Lea, Stephenson, and Troy 2003), and that they become more self-regulated learners (Shunk 2012). I consider this to be related to the process of becoming a professional practitioner, where the students, instead of following rules, develop their own methods and understanding (Schön 1988). This is an example of how higher education is also a process of conceptual change, not just the acquisition of information or skills (Biggs and Tang 211, 23).

There are examples of previous empirical research with some findings that correspond with my own: Regarding the challenges of entering higher education and the students change over time, Jamieson and Jackson (2016) points out that first year students need to be supported in developing enquiry-based learning strategies. Rimmer (2017) highlights how first year students' expectations of the teacher as a provider of knowledge made it challenging to involve them in enquiry- based learning approaches. Dyer (2010) shows how first year students preferred their teacher to deliver judgments about right and wrong, while more experienced students were more interested in student-centred pedagogical approaches.

Regarding the two paradigms in dance technique associated with teacher-centred (and often authoritarian) teaching approaches and student-centred approaches, Dyer asks whether it is possible to combine reproduction of set movement material with more democratic teaching perspectives (Råman 2009, 122). She argues for a middle position, going beyond the traditional dichotomies in dance. My analysis of the students' experiences gives concrete empirical examples of such a middle position, showing how the relationship between the teacher and the student is not necessarily

fixed to the content of the class, and that students are actively engaged in their learning process, even when reproducing set material. This is in line with the findings of Harbonnier-Topin and Barbier (2012), identifying numerous activities taking place also when learning through imitation, Alterowitz (2014) exploring ways to combine student-centred strategies that favour individual inquiry, self- discovery, and colla-boration, within the frameworks of a ballet class, and Råman (2009) using collabora-tion as a way to shift power-relations and foster critical reflection in a Cunningham technique class.

The research presented in this article gives a supplementary contribution by elucidat-ing and detailing the complex connections between the student's own learning strategies, the relation to the teacher, the teaching methods, and contents of the technique class, and also by showing how these connections change throughout the three years of study.

This combination of studying concrete everyday learning experiences and a transformation over time, based in the students' own perspective, provides a supplement to existing research, and it might also have implications for teaching dance technique in higher education; A heightened knowledge about the students' transformation throughout the education, can potentially make the transition into higher education easier and lessen the mismatch between fresh students' expectations and the teachers' ambitions for more student-centred learning processes. By detailing nuances in how the students are active in their learning process, how they learn to make choices, and how their conception of the power-relation in the teaching situation changes over time, the article provides concrete examples and tools for a further development of the teaching of dance technique in higher education.

This article is based on, and developed from, my Phd thesis 'To make the dance one's own. Bachelor students' lived experiences in modern- and contemporary dance' (Rothmund 2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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