

TEACHING DANCE – JUST LIKE GETTING DRESSED!

John Connell

One of my trainee teachers said to me, “But John, you now mean we have to let them (the young people) get dressed and wear what they want?” Honestly, it was as simple as that. In truth, I was referring to young people’s use of a ‘coat-hanger’, affectionately called ‘Connell’s coat-hanger’, because of what it is. Young people, with the guidance of the teacher, are empowered to go ‘shopping for movement’, the coat-hanger being a series of still positions, movements or motifs possessing meaning which can be repeated and returned to later. The coat-hanger offers individual security in the knowledge and understanding of what is to be achieved and performed and promotes total inclusivity.

This article describes the processes of using coat-hangers in a Year 5 dance lesson. This is one approach explored with trainee and qualified teachers as part of Leeds Beckett University’s dance professional learning programme.

“So where do you go shopping for movement, sir?” asked Lydia. Charlie jokingly replied, “My dad goes to ASDA.” The whole class laughed at Charlie’s comment. “That’s a good question Lydia, and Charlie you are quite right, but different to the supermarket as we know it”. “So where do we go shopping for movement, sir?” Izram enquired. “It is ASDR but see the difference in spelling. What do you think it means? What have you worked with to make your movements?” “I know! I know!”, said Emily, “Actions, Space, Dynamics and Relationships”. Emily smiled and sat back on the floor, waiting for a comment. “Ah! I knew that, sir”, said Charlie. “Absolutely right, Emily. You go shopping for movement at ASDR”.

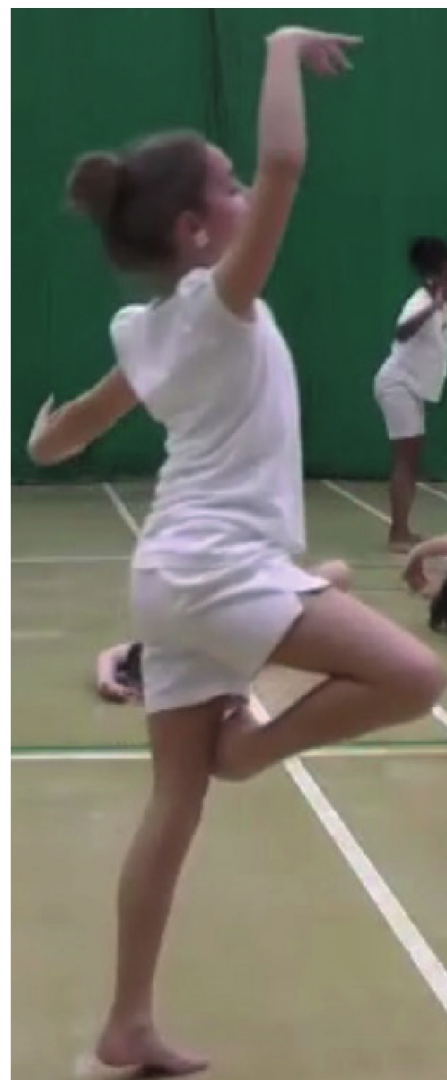
The above account is a transcription of one of the videos I use when working with trainee teachers and participants on professional development days. The visual evidence is one example that permits others to see the variety of teaching styles,

strategies and approaches adopted when teaching dance in schools. The emphasis on the fundamentals of dance – Actions, Space, Dynamics and Relationships (ASDR) – gives ownership to the young people.

Normally we have an introductory activity – moving about the space – while I play the drum for accompaniment. The young people walk, then increase their speed to jogging and change directions constantly in curved pathways. The introduction is more than just a series of exercises to warm up to: it is the creative exploration of movements to prepare the body for more strenuous movement and the development of a library of physical experiences: travelling, jumping and turning (three of the basic body actions). On this occasion a picture stimulus is used (see the example below), but it could be anything, reinforcing the cross-curricular links. The image is projected onto a large screen for all to see and the young people respond; it is their ownership, with their vocabulary of movement.



Based on what the participants and non-participants see, they are requested to create the image with their own bodies. When the accompaniment stops they hold this for four steady beats of the drum (numeracy) or the non-participants draw a stick figure (art) of their ideas and, when working with a partner, ask them to perform their individual still position.





After the young people have held their individual still positions, they start moving about the space again, travelling, jumping and turning. It may be worth quietly asking one participant or a non-participant if they would be happy to share their position with others. Where this is agreed, share the young person's position as they describe it to the rest of the group (literacy). This is ownership and the building of a coat-hanger of movement – a still position or movement created by the young people that everyone can perform, a type of scaffold upon which confidence is developed. When the young people have mastered the position, they can all perform it facing downstage and in unison.

We also made a tracing of one of the sculptures with hands and feet. Again, these shapes were suggested by the young people and developed into a sequence of movement. (See <https://youtu.be/GUMTA8QkAc>).

The young people were requested to create another still position based on a different image and hold this for four beats. Moving within the space is another opportunity for further free exploration of travelling, jumping and turning (later recognised as a transitional movement and choreographed) to repeat the second still position. As before, quietly ask one of the young people if they are happy to share their position and repeat as for stage one until the movement includes four positions. This is where Connell's coat hanger begins to develop further, with the still positions performed in a similar way to the video above: in unison, facing downstage and, if in small groups, in a formation (numeracy, art, literacy).

The reason for sharing young people's creativity is that everyone will be able to perform at least four still positions and three transitions. These coat-hanger examples provide all young people with a vocabulary to perform even if they cannot think of anything themselves initially. To differentiate further, when young people are competent at performing the choreography they can change other participants' still positions and transitions for their own. These developments enhance ownership

and create additional motifs – short movements which can be repeated and mean something to the performer and observer. The performers can now draw upon their vocabulary of movement from their library of physical resources.

The next phase of the lesson, while the young people are in small groups, is to choreograph together group interpretations of the still images, making a series of group still positions. With permission from the young people, these group still positions can be shared as examples of good practice, providing a coat-hanger of group positions to enable all of the groups to perform the same group still position as a starting point.



The small group interpretations are the young people's creativity and ownership. These group still positions are elaborated on with a selection of transitional movements. The young people choose how they wish to move between each of the individual and group positions – travelling, jumping or turning, changing levels and directions, and so on. Transitional movements, initially, are spontaneous, improvised movements, prior to becoming structured at a later stage of the choreography. The choreography can be anything the young people choose, as long as it is safe.

These group still positions can be seen in the young people's performance of their choreography in the YouTube link <https://youtu.be/yUVWpFGbn4A>.

The process described above is one section of a whole module of work, seven lessons in total, some of which can be found on the following Google Drive <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1BO7GoRZpjJvMEmJ-VXM4qEXIRzmN6kg8>.

Research suggests there should be more opportunities for young people to be involved in dance at school, but there are issues with confidence in the teaching of this subject. There are pockets of excellent practice everywhere; finding these and building on positive cross-collaborative experiences will further develop dance opportunities for young people. As someone who was once expelled from school for refusing to participate in dance lessons to now being an advocate for dance, this is a personal mission and a hugely exciting adventure. From my work with the trainee teachers at Leeds Beckett University and the young people in the schools where I visit and teach, I know that dance lessons should be about empowering them to realise they can achieve in any way they can. My PhD in dance practice concluded:

“Maximise opportunities for unconditional, unrestricted involvement in progressive, developmental and differentiated artistic and aesthetic dance experiences for all in the formal education sector. These experiences recognise the sensitivity of individual participants' expectations, goals and desires, fulfilling their cognitive, physical, social, cultural, mental, moral and spiritual needs.”

If you agree and wish to be involved in dance experiences that enrich and empower young people, get in touch.

There is much work attached to the dance module described in this article, far more than can be included in this example. If you wish to discuss the module or arrange a visit to your school or authority, please contact me at j.connell@leedsbeckett.ac.uk or 0113 8124611. There is no charge for the teaching just for travelling and subsistence and, if you choose, a voluntary donation to Parkinson's UK. ■

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