

# **The Dance of the Poetic and the Practical (Reflections on Dance-in-Education in Ireland)**

**Dr. Mary Nunan**

I want to affirm that within our individual selves we can reconcile two orders of knowledge which we might call practical and poetic; to affirm also that each form of knowledge redresses the other and that the frontier between them is there for the crossing (Heaney 1995, p.203).

I see arts-in-education policies and practices as offering unique opportunities for the poetic and practical aspects of both art and education to be collectively explored.

And so I begin by saluting the hyphens: those two little black lines. I imagine them as thresholds over which policy makers, artists and educators step, back and forth, 'round and through, as we bring our respective understanding and skills to bear in exploring the interstitial spaces that they open up and into which they invite us to enter. In so doing they provide the possibility for new interactions and exchanges in arts and education (beyond those circumscribed by their contexts of origin) to emerge.

In this article I discuss some dance-in-education crossings. It is written from my perspective as a contemporary dance artist (choreographer and performer) and teacher who has worked extensively, in both professional dance and educational contexts, in Ireland and abroad. It is also informed by my engagement with policy making. The latter refers primarily to arts and arts-in-education policy.

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Within the school curriculum dance is included as a strand<sup>1</sup> of the Physical Education syllabus at both primary and post-primary levels. However, a recent report on PE activities in primary and post-primary schools (Woods et al 2010) suggests that there are discrepancies between the syllabus and what is actually taught during PE classes. According to this report, team games have tended to be favoured by teachers whilst activities such as dance or swimming were either not taught or provided infrequently. With regard to dance, one of the main reasons for this, according to this report, is that many teachers feel they do not have the confidence to teach and/or assess it.

That is not to suggest that teachers are not interested in the teaching of dance. Quite the contrary, throughout the last forty years, I have worked in a range of educational contexts in Ireland and have witnessed, first hand, the very inspiring work done by teachers who have a particular interest in dance and who recognize the unique contribution it can make to their pupils' educational journey. Many of these teachers

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<sup>1</sup> The physical education curricula (both primary and post-primary) consist of a number of areas of study called strands, namely athletics, outdoor and adventure activities, aquatics, dance, gymnastics, games and health related fitness.

have made a significant contribution to the development of dance, not only in their own schools, but also on a national level through their active engagement with both curriculum development and dance-in-education initiatives.

This is a phenomenon that occurs across the arts. Deservedly, the ‘outstanding quality’ of much of the work being done by these key individuals (and a number of responsible government agencies), gets special mention, in John Colohan’s essay: *The Changing Context of the Arts in Education* (2008). He commends the invaluable contribution they have collectively made, and continue to make, to development of arts-in-education policies and practices in Ireland, particularly in the absence of a coordinated, comprehensive plan of action for more systemic provision.

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In a parallel and simultaneously occurring process, the development of the professional contemporary dance community, in Ireland, can also be seen to be attributable to the work of a number of key pioneering individuals. If we were to take an aerial view of the development of dance, in both contexts, we would see many bright lights - pockets of activities – dotted around the country. Their pattern of development could be described as rhizomatic. This term, borrowed here from Deleuze and Guattari (1980), describes patterns that can spread, like water, across surfaces and through fissures and gaps, finding new pathways and creating new spaces in response to emergent conditions and evolving circumstances.

As the overall provision for dance-in-education becomes more systemic (which hopefully it will, over time, as a result of the collective vision, hard work and continued commitment of individuals, government departments and agencies), I would like to think that patterns of rhizomatic growth will also continue to flourish. Their value lies in their capacity to move through structures and across communities and to respond spontaneously to emerging situations in ways that are not always possible for bigger more systemic processes.

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Dancer-in-Residence programmes, and specifically those in Colleges of Education have proven to be a particularly efficacious way of providing for creative exchanges between rhizomatic and systemic processes and structures: and visa versa. I had first hand experience of seeing this happen during my time as dancer-in-residence, in the Physical Education Department, Thomond College of Education, Limerick (now UL) in 1986. This was the first dancer-in-residence position to be established in Ireland. It happened thanks to the vision of Teresa Leahy (Dance Lecturer in Thomond College) who established a partnership with Brendan Smith (Drama Lecturer in Mary Immaculate College of Education) and secured funding from the Arts Council for the position. The residency was co-funded by all the partners from 1986-1993.

Because it was seeded in such propitious territory the residency flourished in many ways that could not have been anticipated from the start. The flourishing included the establishment of a professional dance company: Daghda (now Dance Limerick). The Company was in-residence in UL until 2002. Other related developments on the campus were synchronous e.g. the founding of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance in 1995. However, the establishment of the MA Contemporary Dance

Performance, as one of the Academy's suite of MA programmes, is directly attributable to what its Founder Director, Professor Micheál O Súilleabháin, refers to as the dance activity that he found on campus when he arrived.

The dialogue with, and exchanges between, the professional contemporary dance community and undergraduate and post-graduate programmes (which was a hallmark of the residency) continues to this day. These exchanges have contributed, both directly and indirectly, to a number of developments in dance, dance education and dance-in-education in Limerick. The latter is now recognized (both nationally and internationally) as a hub of dance activity, particularly contemporary dance.

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There are currently two, Arts Council funded, Dance Residency programmes running in Colleges of Education. In 2013, Coiscéim Dance Theatre began a three-year residency in St Patrick's College, Dublin. And in 2014, dance artist Lisa Cahill began a two-year residency, in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University. I have no doubt that the exchanges between all involved in these residencies are stimulating and nourishing and that seeds are being sown which are effecting change at many different levels in both communities and in the spaces between them. However it is, of course, far too early to discuss the full impact which these residencies will have in terms of the long-term development of dance and dance-in-education in Ireland. This will really only unfold over time.

However, this is not to suggest that the full impact of residencies can only be measured along linear timelines. Nor is it to suggest that the full impact can be reducible to measurement in dance and/or in education terms alone. Such measurements are, of course, valuable but ironically not everything of value can be measured. How to measure the impact of 'embodied awareness' on a pupil's life: right now: or the impact of an empathetic sense of self and others, awakened through movement: right now. How to measure the transformative power of an apparently fleeting moment and its lasting impact on all who experience it: right now.

Sometimes this impact is felt in the tiniest gesture: a fully embodied sensation, coming into form. Sometimes it is in the delight of feeling one's self in the dance (moving freely through space: stepping, turning, leaping) or in feeling the dance in one's self. Sometimes it is in those moments of connectivity with, and appreciation for, the movement of others. And sometimes it can be felt in all of the above, simultaneously, as 'a state of consciousness involving full engagement and awareness, attending to the inside (Stinson, cited in Sansom 2009, p.168)': being moved.

The value of this, inner felt-experience, of movement is beautifully encapsulated in Pina Bausch's<sup>2</sup> often quoted statement: 'I'm not interested in how people move but in what moves them'.

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<sup>2</sup> Pina Bausch (1940 – 2009) was a German choreographer, performer and teacher. She is widely recognized as being one of the most important and influential choreographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

This statement is both extremely simple and extremely profound. For me it speaks to the heart of dance, its invisible centre, you could say its spirit: that which moves us, each in our own way, and that which connects us when we move together, each with our respective roles (as policy makers, educators and artists) to achieve the shared goal of creating stimulating dance-in-education teaching and learning environments in colleges and schools.

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We currently, do not have instruments that are sensitive enough to allow us to measure the real ‘stuff’ of dance or the full impact of these environments on artists and educators and by default on society. However we can, if not measure, at least account for the collective planning, the delicate weave of the ‘poetic and practical’ strands (ideas and actions), required at every stage of their construction.

Triona Stokes’ (2015) article about the current dance residency in Maynooth, gives a wonderful sense of the relationship between all these strands. The article itself mirrors these relationships as it weaves references to national policies (in Education and the Arts), through examples of specific projects. In addition, the latter are threaded through with first person accounts written by some of the participants: lecturers, student teachers, teachers, pupils and the dance artist. For me, this weave of multiple voices and perspectives makes the article and the activities described within it feel very alive: a dynamically dancing body.

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Pedagogically, dance-in-education projects reflect a collaborative and experiential approach to teaching and learning at each phase of their development. During the planning phase (and generally throughout each project) teachers and artists work collaboratively together, learning from each other whilst, simultaneously, drawing on their respective disciplinary skills to create constructively responsive and creatively reciprocal learning environments for their pupils.

In terms of method, Laban Movement Analysis is often used as a conceptual framework when setting specific tasks for classes and workshops. However, in recent years dance artists and educators have been, increasingly, incorporating somatic principles and practices into their approach (Eddy 2009).

Somatics is the field that studies the soma: namely the body as experienced from within by first person perception (Hanna 1995). With this approach the body is not objectified. It is, instead, perceived as an embodied process of internal awareness and communication. When applied in dance-in-education contexts somatic approaches are used to encourage pupils to attune to their own unique felt sense of movement, to be ‘agents in directing own learning’ (Sanson 2009, p.167) and ‘experts of their own experience’ (Adler, cited in Hartley 2004, p.30). It supports them in developing their capacity to be internally self-aware as well as externally aware as part of the process of becoming more confident in expressing their own unique response to movement and in appreciating that of others.

You could say that this is the heart of the matter.

When we experience the heart as full and present, without fear, we are able to reach out through the eyes and hands to give and receive. As the hands and eyes meet with the environment in this way, supported from within, the heart is also supported, sustained and nourishment by the world outside – the support flows in and out (Hartley 1994, p.185).

It is also the case that the heart of dance-in-education activities is nourished and sustained by the ‘world outside’ and that the support flows in and out: it is, therefore, a living, breathing, matrix of interdependent poetic and practical processes.

In this article I discussed my experience of some these processes, from a number of different perspectives. There is no conclusion - just a reminder of the importance of doing whatever we can, individually and collectively, to ensure that more and more pupils get the opportunity to cross the thresholds of the hyphens: to explore the heart of their own movement, to feel its rhythm, to be moved by its pulse, to create, to connect, to share: to dance.

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