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Searching for the yet unknown: Writing and dancing as incantatory practices

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Searching for the yet unknown: Writing and dancing as incantatory practices

Abstract

As two ballet dancers and university educators, we began this collaborative research with a shared belief in ballet and writing as liberatory practices and a desire to confront pedagogies that rely on intimidation. Both we and our students have experienced ballet and writing classes that rely on audit-and-surveillance, and we sought to foster individuality, value differences, and cultivate agency through multimodal approaches in our ballet technique, history, and dance studies courses. During the spring semester of 2021, the history and dance studies courses were online and asynchronous; the ballet classes met in a 'hybrid' model: classes were held in person, with students given the option to take class via Zoom either synchronously or asynchronously. Through interviews and analysis, we found praxes that ignite curiosity and motivation by drawing from definitions of writing and dancing as incantatory practices. Notably, this is the first research that takes a capacious view of 'ballet pedagogy' to include history, writing, technique, and dance studies courses. Ultimately, we hope these findings support exploratory and multimodal teaching, reinforce connections among language, empowerment, and pedagogy, encourage students and educators to collaboratively challenge current practices, and motivate administrators to rethink university structures that replicate the audit-and-surveillance practices of certain ballet and writing pedagogies.

Practitioner Notes

1. Collaboration among students, students and instructors, and faculty members is generative, and encourages creativity and investment in ballet education in universities.
2. Pedagogies that amplify 'play' are 'incantatory', and an antidote to authoritarian approaches.
3. Activities and approaches that foster growth mindsets are beneficial at all levels of the university: among students, faculty, and university administration.
4. By paying greater attention to relationships among theory, history, and movement practices, ballet pedagogy is redefined, and allows students to process/ create knowledge through both writing and kinaesthetic experience.
5. By honouring self-knowledge and self-sovereignty, teachers and students enrich learning experiences.

Keywords

Play, collaborative research, ballet, incantatory practice, empowerment, writing, pedagogy

Introduction

Recent articles about ballet training have highlighted the assumption that students are “willing to endure trauma as part of their education” (Zeller, 2020). As ballet dancers and educators, we understand the ubiquity of this assumption, and counter it through pedagogies that foreground self-knowledge, freedom, and play. We began our collaboration in Autumn 2020, establishing connections between our courses in dancing and writing in university dance programmes. Our methods integrate embodied and discursive practices, and contrast with widespread pedagogies that are predicated on a lack of trust. As a counter to the audit-and-surveillance teaching we experienced as students, we embarked on a study of how writing offers ballet students methods for exploring “as yet unknown answers,” and for engaging with ballet as a relevant and malleable art form (Burns et al., 2018, p. 182).

In our teaching, we value play as a practice that emphasises the ‘how of doing.’ In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) defines play as “a form of intrinsic motivation, attention to means rather than ends” (p. 50) and adds that these means can “actualise what are otherwise only potential brain and behavior connections” (p. 229). We found that notions of play can subvert associations of ballet and writing pedagogies with formal studies that are anathema to creativity or freedom. We identified three tenets of play in our teaching. First, we align with John Huizinga’s (1955) description of play: “The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action” (p. 132). Huizinga’s definition resonates with ballet as a system of organising our bodies that can generate feelings of “exaltation and tension” in dancers and viewers. We avoid idealised positions or language – “clean,” “correct,” “pure” – and emphasise ballet technique as an emergent strategy, a way of understanding how complex systems and patterns arise from multiple simple interactions (brown, 2014). Second, we integrate emergent strategy and play, utilising writing practices to scaffold simple prompts for free-writes (which we call ‘letting words flow’), and progress to more structured and complex essays. And third, we use play to subvert habit and ignite curiosity. Writing and ballet are repeated and iterative practices, and as writers and dancers we daily approach the blank page or stand at a barre for our morning *pliés*. Essayist Heater Havrilesky (2014) describes this moment:

You have to love the process, because that’s all there is. You have to wake up and make your tea and sit down to a blank page and start writing, without knowing whether it’ll be a day when words flow freely or a day when words won’t cooperate. You have to savor the uncertainty of half-finished, barely formed thoughts and mind puzzles. In order to mature into a good writer, you have to commit to this uncertain way of life, and you have to savor it ...

Advocating for uncertainty as a crucial aspect of learning and creating, we approach our teaching as practices of play and collaboration, entwined with perseverance and protocols (Dangeli, 2016).

Drawing on research by Tom Burns, Sandra Sinfield, and Sandra Abegglen (2018), we emphasise connections between creativity and confidence, and aspire to “[unleash] the creative potential in our students; a creativity that once harnessed develops self-efficacy and self-belief and that builds our students’ confidence in themselves” (p. 182). We noted the importance of methods that encourage our own and our students’ self-knowledge and self-sovereignty, and developed the inquiry: *How*

*does a multimodal pedagogical approach that engages writers and dancers in writing and kinaesthetic practices inform and enrich learning for teachers and students?*¹

During the 2021 Spring semester, and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we taught undergraduate courses in ballet technique, ballet history, and dance studies. Mattingly's history and dance studies courses were online and asynchronous; Marrs's ballet classes were 'hybrid': classes were held in person, with students given the option to take class via Zoom. While ballet is a transnational art form, each dance training setting reflects the values of its communities; our study is focused on university dance programmes in the United States. In the next section, we highlight existing scholarship in ballet pedagogy as well as insights from interviews, and then describe how our teaching both disrupted and aligned with ballet and writing pedagogies.

Literature and voices from the field

Recent scholarship about ballet pedagogy challenges authoritarian methods (Alterowitz, 2014; Weidmann, 2018; Zeller, 2017). These journal articles are implicit critiques of methods advocated in texts such as *Ballet Pedagogy: The Art of Teaching* (Foster, 2010) and John White's *Advanced Principles in Teaching Classical Ballet* (2009). White (2009) writes, "Students must learn to trust their teacher, to accept everything the teacher says as truth. Students should be like sponges, soaking up all the knowledge and information their teachers give them" (p. 75). While these books continue to be used as pedagogy course textbooks, we believe their methods limit student sovereignty and allow for abuse. These texts discourage teachers from praising any performance that is less than flawless, an approach that equates acceptance with perfection. In our interviews we found this resistance to "praise" negates self-trust and self-knowledge (Batya, 2019). One undergraduate interviewee who also teaches ballet noted,

I want to encourage a kid. I want a kid to leave feeling, 'I did well in class ...' This doesn't mean that they're going to stop working if you tell them they're doing a good job. I think that's such a weird and wrong assumption to say, 'If I tell a dancer they're doing well, they're going to stop working hard.' Where did we get that?

Every ballet student we interviewed recalled authoritarianism in their training (we define authoritarianism as the silencing or censorship of students' views). Students shared illuminating anecdotes about this approach:

In a ballet pedagogy class focused on instructors' language, I commented, "When a teacher uses the word 'tummy' instead of torso or abdomen I feel uncomfortable because it sounds infantilising and anatomically unsound." The pedagogy teacher responded, "Well, I say that all the time, and I think that's fine. I don't think that's on us, the teachers, to take responsibility for how that impacts you." So bringing up anything with this teacher turns into, "Well you're wrong and I have more experience than you, so I'm right."

Multiple students related being penalised for expressing critical thinking or asking clarifying questions. One interviewee related an interaction with a tenured professor during a *corps de ballet* rehearsal:

¹ Pedagogical practices that emphasise students' 'self-sovereignty' include asking for students' perspectives and navigating and building consensus around engagement and/ or protocols.

I asked, “Can you please clarify what you mean by ‘split this mark with my partner’? Because I’m having a hard time understanding.” He screamed at me, said, “I don’t care what you have to say about it. I never would’ve told you that. I gave you the information. You should know what you’re doing.” And wouldn’t answer my question. To me, that was so damaging.

This student described this interaction as verbally abusive and detrimental to a learning environment that depends on coordination and interdependence – a *corps de ballet* (Mattingly and Young, 2020). For university students, behaviour-policing generates embitterment, as dancers perceive the teacher as dismissive, unpredictable, and denying their ability to problem-solve (Znoj et al., 2016). One student stated succinctly, “I feel disempowered by an authoritarian teacher.” In our Discussion we rename such authoritarian approaches ‘pedagogies of domination’ since they rely on a teacher establishing power by demeaning and devaluing others.

Interviewees also described authoritarian teaching in science and writing courses. We noticed a through-line among their examples: a reliance on an ideal ‘outcome’ be it a perfect test, dancer, or essay, which necessitates a teacher’s approval, and a success/failure binary. Carol Dweck (2007) has theorised this reliance on ‘success’ and ‘fear of failure’ as a “fixed” mindset, making success the affirmation of inherent intelligence. A growth mindset shifts the priority from outcome/success to process/learning. Most literature on ballet pedagogy, as well as experiences of our interviewees, associate ballet training with a success/failure binary. Several interviewees noted that their early training environments felt nurturing, playful, and inclusive, while pre-professional programmes were characterised by fear, trauma, and competition. If these are the norms, there are also exceptions.

Among the ballet pedagogues who embrace dancing and writing practices, Maurya Kerr (personal communication, February 15, 2021) describes dance as “making poetry with the body.” Kerr, a dancer for 12 years with the company called Alonzo King LINES Ballet, is now a faculty member for the LINES Ballet Bachelor of Fine Arts Program and LINES Training Program, a choreographer, and a published poet. Kerr says:

Ballet is sensation-based and it’s imagery-based. Alonzo often says that everything is like something else. High fifth, what is high fifth like? It’s like the sun. It’s like the moon. It’s like the sunset. You know what I mean? You’re not embodying these vacant shapes, that you are becoming the sun, you are becoming the sunset. I feel like to have a relationship with poetry is super important ... because we are making poetry with the body.

Kerr’s investment in the creative possibilities of language started in childhood when she wrote poems for family members. Kerr states, “I’m not limited by my body when I write.” If our physical bodies have limitations in terms of coordination, flexibility, and strength, writing and words, for Kerr, are boundless. Kerr grounds her pedagogy in honouring our bodies as sites of liberation, which takes on added necessity for women, queer, gay, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities. Kerr says:

I take and teach ballet in a way that is about freedom, not about law... The body is a site of liberation, it can be and it should be, so how can we get there through a ballet practice? How can we get free in our daily ballet class? ... I’m like, if you are deep in sensation, you are going to connect with enjoyment.

Kerr's teaching explicitly dismantles the patriarchal structures that keep women – notably women of colour – in subservient positions in ballet. Kerr further connects the dominance of white supremacy (interlocking systems of racism and sexism) in ballet to the idealised body:

Ballet has so figured it out. In that, if you make women starve, they can't think. You cannot critically think when you're hungry. It effectively mutes idea, dissent, creativity. Everybody loses out when people are starving in a bigger scale and also in this microscale privilege: we choose to starve ourselves.

In another interview, a dance department administrator who studied ballet extensively also described ballet's patriarchal structure and methods for re-configuring pedagogies:

[Ballet] becomes the exemplar of hierarchical thinking and subordination and notions of discipline that are related to white supremacy and notions of perfectionism and idealisation and all these sorts of things. So I think that if we can start to attune ourselves to ballet as a practice, as a vehicle through which we can come to understand things about our bodies, it has formal properties like other forms, and could be seen alongside those forms.

Context

In Autumn 2020 we began our pedagogical collaboration through discussions that focused on the questions: *What pedagogies contribute to students' and teacher' self-knowledge? Where are the generative intersections of teaching ballet and writing within university settings? How does a multimodal pedagogical approach that engages writers and dancers in writing and kinaesthetic practices inform and enrich learning for teachers and students?* We realised that together we were going against the grain in engaging in this research, which is the first project that recognises movement technique, writing, self-reflective practices, and historical study as interconnected parts of ballet pedagogy. We selected readings and discussion prompts to use during the Spring semester within our higher education courses and, following Kerr's insights, espoused how encouraging self-knowledge could challenge systemic exclusions.

In Marrs's ballet classes, students engaged in both studio practice and online 'conversations.' Most students attended class in person, although due to the flexibility needed during the Covid-19 pandemic students were also able to engage synchronously or asynchronously via Zoom. Online conversations were designed to authentically draw students into collaborative conversation with us and classmates by posing the question "how do you experience ballet?" with reference to historical and cultural norms in ballet teaching, learning, and choreography. Students reflected on types of instruction they find beneficial, the experience of being female in ballet, their sense of self-sovereignty, confidence, and body image. These conversations in turn fed Marrs's pedagogical choices in the studio. Over the course of the semester, she inserted choreographic and improvisational movement prompts based on the dancers' feedback and designed toward helping dancers shape their experience of ballet class, as opposed to being shaped by the instructor.

In Mattingly's history and dance studies courses, students read articles, watched videos, and wrote reflection notes and online discussion posts. The history course was designed around the questions, "How is history written?" and "Who decides which artists are 'great'?" Weekly topics included patriarchy and ballet, cultural appropriation in ballet, feminist ballet, the Africanist roots of ballet,

post-neoclassical ballet, and choreographer Dada Masilo.² In Dance Studies, topics included wellness for ballet dancers, dancing as healing, dancing and sexuality, kinaesthesia, screendance, and Butoh. Both classes culminated with student-designed research projects and a choice of project formats (a paper, a PowerPoint, or video). Final projects were developed over three stages and shared with classmates during the last weeks of the course. Our goal was to honour generative capacities of writing, to illuminate their alignments with dancing, and to create a space where writing practices are accessible, iterative, and inspiring. Students engaged with one another's research through online discussions, posing questions and sharing what they learned, appreciated, and at times disagreed with. Although ballet pedagogy was not a specific topic in either course, 47 of the 54 projects in Mattingly's courses included discussion of damaging ballet pedagogies.

Methods

Planning ballet and writing courses during Covid-19 necessitated shifts in how we fostered self-knowledge through written and kinaesthetic practices. We invested in three priorities for the Spring semester: 1. creating community while adhering to distancing protocols, 2. nurturing students' wellness, and 3. sharing honestly our perspectives on uncertainty and self-doubt. Our project's research methods reflected this constitutive approach: we were developing our findings through the process of teaching and reflecting on these approaches as we were collaborating on discussion prompts and assessment methods, while meeting regularly to check in and support one another. In other words, our collaborative teaching is our collaborative research, which is similar to how dancers conduct research in a ballet class. Our methods foreground process and indeterminacy rather than set outcomes and expectations. Alongside teaching our courses, we conducted 10 interviews with colleagues, an administrator, and students (interview questions are available in the Appendix).

The history and dance studies courses were designed to be inclusive and accessible for asynchronous online learning. Each week began with a 'flipped approach': rather than asking students to start by reading or viewing video, a PowerPoint was created that introduced the week's topics, defined key terms and any potentially unfamiliar vocabulary, and gave an overview of the authors' backgrounds. Readings included research by Phil Chan, Ivy Chow, Clare Croft, J Dellecave, Philip Deloria, Rainy Demerson, Courtney Escoyne, Susan Foster, Pai-Lin Hunnibell, and Jessica Zeller. Videos included work by Kyle Abraham, Jennifer Archibald, Rena Butler, and Sarah Friedland, as well as a YouTube video by Kathryn Morgan, an Instagram post by Kimberly Marie Olivier and the documentary *When the Moors Ruled in Europe*. Students accessed the PowerPoints in their own time and moved through the assignments at their own pace. Mattingly's assignments were chosen to illuminate dancers as authors and as women of colour, emphasising the importance of representation in university syllabi, and also the value of dancers' voices and insights (De La Torre, 2018). The readings highlighted research and writing as forms of exploration and play, through a variety of different approaches and methodologies, and shared a through-line of self-generating praxes, meaning outcomes are indeterminate and enriching, similar to students' experiences in technique classes. One of the readings, Ivy Chow's *Grace and Scarcity*, was also shared by Marrs with her ballet students.

Mattingly teaches in a conservatory-model ballet programme. Each semester begins with a discussion of why reading and writing may be valuable to ballet dancers and teachers. Time is spent dismantling notions of a 'strong writer' or a 'good reader,' which students describe as phrases used in high school, and opening possibilities for a wide spectrum of writing styles. Marrs adds that when

² For the history course, students were given the option to read chronological texts about ballet history in lieu of suggested material, although no students in the course selected this option.

beginning a new ballet class, she describes to students how she challenges the traditional concept of a 'good' ballet dancer, with reference to typical expectations of body, personality, gender, race, and technique. This emphasis reinforced our commitment to collaboration in the widest sense: cognitive, emotional, embodied, and social.

Burns, Sinfield and Abegglen (2018) note similar "attitudes to formal academic writing" found in students in their case study: "[T]hey are told repeatedly not to plagiarise and that their spelling, punctuation and grammar – like their deficit selves – are not quite good enough" (p. 183). Mattingly notes that these feelings of 'deficit selves' may be amplified in conservatory-style degree programmes where some students pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degree in Ballet to avoid writing and reading-based courses. In light of students' hesitations, discussion posts were offered as short 'low-stakes' assignments, in which grammar and spelling were not graded. The accumulation of posts was multifaceted and insightful, and students were motivated to find ways of adding to the 'conversation' without repeating ideas. The depth of perspectives generated by the class was on par with a graduate-level seminar. Students also submitted weekly Reflection Notes, slightly longer and more formalised reflective writings. By the last month of the semester, all students possessed a rich archive of writing which they could draw upon and expand in their self-designed Final Projects. The low-stakes assignments provided seeds and springboards for later work; this was vital to defining writing as an emergent strategy.

Online conversations in Marrs's ballet technique classes were similarly 'low-stakes;' neither the content nor the writing style were graded. She also considered how to make ballet class a 'low-stakes' environment, in which experimentation and process are valued over perfecting a particular movement. Students became accustomed to incorporating their choreography and artistic choices in set movement material (small, low-stakes assignments) and eventually progressed to developing an entire class they collaboratively taught as a group project. Over the course of the semester, written reflections and in-class participation helped the students assert agency and develop a library of movement material from which they could draw for their culminating project.

Academic language can be challenging for undergraduate students, and we encouraged students to approach reading as an embodied practice. Mattingly asks students to notice what they feel as they encounter different passages, and to notice what their mind or abdomen is 'saying.' Mattingly shares with students her belief in the inseparability of embodied knowledge and critical thinking, adding that ballet dancers' subtle attunement to sensation, balance, and coordination may inform their reading and writing experiences. To quote Sara Ahmed (2017), "Ideas might be how we work with as well as on our hunches, those senses that something is amiss, not quite right, which are part of ordinary living and a starting point for so much critical work" (p. 12). We advocate for Ahmed's approach of amplifying voices that are undervalued in university settings and dismantling assumptions about the presumed superiority of white, male, cisgender scholars. We find that our collaborative pedagogy – listening to students, honouring concerns and questions, and being honest about our own shortcomings – creates a conducive environment for Ahmed's approach. It is helpful for students to hear that their instructors are 'slow' readers or thinkers; Mattingly often reads passages multiple times and emphasises that there are no 'points' given to fast readers. Marrs similarly uses repetition of movement material over multiple ballet classes, allowing students to learn the material at a slower pace, and to deepen their embodied understanding of the movement phrases. Individuals read and retain ideas/dance combinations at different speeds, just as each person brings a unique perspective on the felt-experience of dancing and critical thinking.

MARRS's ballet classes are taught within the context of a liberal arts college: students are frequently double majors with diverse career aspirations, and their backgrounds include ballet conservatories as well as competition dance studios. Although dancers share time and space in a ballet class, they can nonetheless be encouraged to approach the material on their own terms, making individualised artistic and technical choices within a given movement phrase. In Spring 2021, MARRS frequently guided peer-to-peer feedback in which dancers worked with partners or small groups, observed each other in movement, and gave voice to the creative choices they witnessed in fellow dancers. Classes ended by asking students to describe to a partner something they excelled at or that piqued their interest that day, thus giving students the opportunity to verbalise their personal strengths. These in-class conversations happened in parallel with online conversations about confidence, body image, and gender roles in the studio. The course was predicated on the idea that dialogue fosters greater insights than unidirectional flow from teacher to student, and that offering students a platform to cultivate and articulate personal values and research interests will benefit ballet as an art-form. This collaborative discussion among students, as well as between students and MARRS, overturns pedagogical approaches that rely on competition, individualism, and paternalism.

In Mattingly's teaching, reading and writing as embodied experiences segues into discussions of context and positionality. By offering explanations for why reading and writing assignments are selected and what may resonate differently with each of us, we also signal how learning ballet technique is a personal somatic experience. As educators, being explicit about our choices invites students to be self-reflective about their own experiences and choices. We ask students to notice when their bodies respond with joy, curiosity, or frustration to a reading or ballet combination. Emphasising awareness and creativity, we define learning as playful and indeterminate. We suggest that co-existing with our differences is more instructive than subsuming different points of view to one interpretation. One unplanned outcome of this approach, which we address under Discussion, is the connection between our teaching methods and faculty discussions of equity and diversity that emerged during the semester.

Results

During the Spring of 2021, we were influenced by an unpredictable and violent domestic landscape: a global pandemic, a riot at the US Capitol in January, racialised violence against Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, and the George Floyd murder trial. These events increased students' concerns about safety and the future. Students shared that they found their ballet and writing practices to be reassuring, illuminating, even incantatory, meaning capable of shifting their sense of possibility and potentiality (Solnit, 2020), rather than increasing their insecurity and fear. There is extensive discourse in dance studies scholarship about the ways embodied practices transform a dancer's sense of self and others' perceptions of their capacities. Our study revealed that dancers experienced a similar relationship with their writing practices, an important insight given centuries of training methods that discourage dancers, especially female-identifying dancers, from thinking, articulating ideas, and sharing insights.

One interviewee described how writing prompts that called attention to patriarchal structures and cultural appropriation in ballet inspired her to ask:

How was I impacted by this? Which is actually so beneficial because I can understand where I am now and why certain things have happened. For me the written form is a kind of processing, and the most beneficial thing for me is the open-ended nature of these assignments. The prompts are like, "What'd you think?" It's good practice as humans to

learn how to talk about issues, even in a written sense, to put our thoughts together because we have all the thoughts rolling around in our heads all the time. To be able to externalise them in some way is important because it provokes critical thinking, and builds critical thinking skills on a really deep, higher education level.

In multiple interviews, students noted that critical thinking, writing, and communicating are beneficial, although not ‘easy’ or comfortable.

Other interviewees noted that opportunities to engage in writing exercises during our courses inspired verbal ‘check-ins’ when they teach ballet to younger dancers. One student shared the anecdote:

I ask students, “What were you thinking about during that combination?” Because maybe they're thinking about rotation from their hips and it looks like they're completely not, but I have no idea. Shifting that culture of authoritarianism is about encouraging students to be individual, autonomous humans. If I say, “What are you thinking about?” And they're like, “Dinner later?” I'm like, “Great, let's talk about turnout.”

These check-ins foreground students’ roles as active decision-makers and creators of their artistic expression, something that is rare in ballet pedagogy.

Another dancer described the epiphany he had when he began studying ballet in a university and was encouraged by instructor Pablo Piantino to bring the sense of empowerment he felt onstage – “where I could make dancing my own” – into studio classes. Piantino emphasises dancers’ distinct traits as human beings and the diversity of creative expression. The interviewee described how Piantino “encouraged [me] to be a dancer and not just fit into a mold, to explore artistry and what my body has to offer and what I can do.” We highlight the connection between the student’s self-sovereignty and empowerment, and note this is a male-identifying student. Female-identifying dancers in university courses who were interviewed for this study rarely spoke about teachers encouraging them to break out of ‘a mold.’

An interview with a colleague who had an extensive performing career offered a different perspective. She described her success as a young dancer, and the subsequent challenges she faced:

I think I was given a lot of attention very young ... because of my facility and probably my passion. I showed promise very, very early. So, it could have also just been that I was given that confidence... I would even say I could remember myself even being a little arrogant at that age, when you're being given so much attention.

I was given full scholarships a lot to schools. So it was probably a little bit of an ego thing... I wonder if I wasn't getting that kind of attention or if I didn't have the same sort of facility, if I would have had the same drive for it. I don't know. It's an interesting thought. If it was just my ego, or that this is confidence building because everybody's telling me I'm good.

Certainly in my profession, once I became professional and I was working with choreographers and directors, yeah, then it was a whole different story. That competition was hard and the directors and other dancers were trying to shoot down my confidence.

As educators, we find it compelling that this interviewee describes her ‘ego’ empowered as a young person, but that this confidence stems from how easily she conformed to the traditional ballet mold. This same professor noted that she found ballet aesthetics capable of fostering dancers’ distinct capacities and self-belief: “*Épaulement* is a very commanding feeling...ballet just in its structural positions can teach females to stand up strong in the world.”³ This exemplifies how ballet technique can be empowering in and of itself, yet our interviews reveal that this is generally not how female-identifying dancers in university settings experience ballet classes.

Traditional writing and ballet pedagogies suggest ‘the teacher knows best’; the instructor is the arbiter of success or failure. We explored ways to foster students’ self-inquiry and self-assessment and agree with Brannon and Knoblauch (1982): “[T]here are two types of paternalism: conservative and liberal. The conservative teacher underestimates the student’s competence; whereas, the liberal teacher exaggerates the student’s competence” (p. 159). Both types are equally destructive. In course assessments, students frequently request more individualised corrections: dancers appreciate the expertise of the faculty and want to know how to improve. At the same time, we see no reason to ‘hold out’ on giving *positive* feedback to students. Marrs both honoured student competence and shared her perspectives in her ballet students’ assessment processes; given that several students in her Spring 2021 ballet classes frequently took class via Zoom and were less visible for feedback, Marrs opted to have her students self-assess using her Department’s rubric for ballet technique. Students wrote short essays offering qualitative and quantitative appraisals in areas such as artistry and movement vocabulary, and also discussed their progress in one-on-one conferences with the instructor. Positioning ourselves as facilitators of student learning, we find that language choices are crucial in providing meaningful feedback. We take inspiration from John Bean (2011), “The best kind of commentary enhances the writer’s feeling of dignity” (p. 317). Substituting ‘dancer’ for ‘writer,’ we find the statement aligns with our teaching: “The best kind of commentary enhances the dancer’s feeling of dignity.”

In final projects for history and dance studies courses, multiple students focused on how language affects students’ confidence in ballet pedagogy. One undergraduate research project, a paper entitled *An Examination of Uniforms, Mirrors, and Language in Ballet on Body Satisfaction in Ballet Dancers*, collected responses from 65 students attending the University of Utah and University of California, Irvine:

Language, in particular, affects how dancers view themselves and their bodies, in both positive and negative manners. Telling a dancer to look in the mirror to tell the teacher what is wrong may illuminate the issue the teacher is aiming at, but the student may also begin to unknowingly correlate their body image in the mirror with the word, “wrong.” The statement to suck in your tummies associates “tummy” with a negative connotation, which exacerbates messages young females see in every form of media telling them “to not have a tummy.” Finally, being told that something did not look good without explanation as to why or how to improve is not helpful to the dancer. Each of these phrases dampens dancers’ spirits, whether or not this is the instructor’s intention. Language matters; we are told as children to be careful with our words, to think before we speak, so why is that suddenly thrown out the window when it comes to words in the ballet studio? ... More than uniforms or mirrors, it was how we are spoken to, and what words are used, that appeared to affect how dancers thought of themselves.

³ *Épaulement* is translated as “shouldering” and in ballet terminology refers to the functional and aesthetic relationship of the head, shoulders, and back.

Throughout this study, we found language and communication influence students' motivation and curiosity. One student suggested that when an instructor learns that their words are damaging, they respond, "I'm sorry that you felt that way. I can promise to be more attentive to checking in with you and to seeing how you are doing.' I really don't see why that's so hard: it is something that we do as humans and as adults." Although teachers may be reluctant to admit error in order to sustain an image, they unwittingly suffer the loss of students' insights and of their own learning.

It is particularly important in studio settings, where dancers have been taught to remain silent, that teachers seek out students' perspectives. A multimodal approach in which students verbalise their experiences, witness their peers dancing, speak through choreography and improvisation, and reflect on their movement in writing – enables teachers to facilitate an environment in which all students can thrive and share the myriad perspectives we bring to ballet. One male-identifying colleague, who teaches a predominantly female student population, offered this helpful approach for encouraging students' perspectives:

When I'm interested in questions, I avoid the phrase, "Do you have any questions?" Instead, I ask, "What questions do you have?" which experience has shown me people are more likely to speak up in response to. "Do you have any questions risks" sounding like, "Which one of you wants to self-identify as falling behind and waste everyone's time?" It can be self-defeating to my goal as a teacher. If I am trying to elicit student questions, (which is not all moments – sometimes pacing makes questions not ideal), I'll say specifically, "What questions do you have?" and then wait (sometimes a long time) until I hear someone's voice.

Ultimately, we see students' ability to pose questions and formulate opinions as an essential part of a democratic society. We are not only instructing students in ballet and writing, we are also facilitating the confidence and skills to be informed citizens (Elbow, 2007). With this mindset, it becomes clear that authoritarian teachers replicate a society where 'teacher/leader knows best' while our courses encourage dialogue among a multiplicity of individuals.

Discussion

While we advocate for pedagogies that centre ballet and writing as incantatory practices, we are also aware that our courses exist in institutional settings and societies that are gendered, classed, racialised, and ableist. We are concerned that female students expose themselves to potential harm when they self-advocate. One of the most devastating interviews conducted for this study involved a student recounting a ballet pedagogy class where a scripted exercise progressed toward unwelcome pelvis-to-pelvis contact between the male-identifying teacher and the student. The student recalled, "This was with a specific teacher, and my questions and my critical thinking about what he had said, were not welcome." The physical contact was, in her words, abusive and invasive, and stemmed from a question she posed about a statement the teacher had made in a prior class. She added, "My autonomy was not honoured. There was no recognition that I even might have autonomy or my own ideas of what I want to do with my body or where I want to put my body."

Another student interviewee commented on a benefit for ballet students during Covid-19: ballet teachers have been forced to reckon with the use of touch. In settings where touch is not an option, we have had to use language in explicit ways to help students discover movement potential. Although Marrs is an advocate for the use of skilled touch with student consent, this interviewee

described her hope that all teachers would return to the practice of touch with greater conscientiousness post-pandemic.

As teachers and researchers invested in liberatory practices, we find that abusive use of touch underscores a vital element of this study: while authoritarian and ‘audit-and-surveillance’ approaches are about controlling the bodies and minds of others, they also mask insecurities, lack of knowledge, and flawed leadership. Leaders may also use authoritarian approaches under the auspices of protecting ballet’s history and culture. A university dance administrator described her perspective on ballet professionals who wish to contain ballet and their students:

I think that where the problems come in too just have to do with a kind of rigidity around protecting ballet in whatever ways folks feel they need to. Maybe that has as much to do with those folks as it does about the ballet itself in terms of thinking about this form as a vehicle for somebody's own elevations, sort of self-making. And what happens if things change or it loses its stature or it becomes one among many things that we do to get better dancers?

Once we identify and challenge leadership styles that prioritise ‘self-making’, we can effectively foreground students’ – and especially women’s – voices, movement, writing, and ideas.

The disproportionate mistreatment that women in academia encounter is well-documented, and evident across all major career benchmarks: grants and funding, publishing and citations, service, professional development, and leadership opportunities (Allen et al., 2021). Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) writes:

Student empowerment has been defined in the broadest possible humanist terms, and becomes a ‘capacity to act effectively’ in a way that fails to challenge any identifiable social or political position, institution, or group. The contortions of logic and rhetoric that characterise these attempts to define ‘empowerment’ testify to the failure of critical educators to come to terms with the essentially paternalistic project of traditional education. (p. 307)

Taking Ellsworth’s critique seriously we examined the ways our pedagogies address and dismantle the systemic inequities prevalent in institutional settings. While our students consistently contributed thought-provoking posts to our online discussions, especially noting sexism and the censorship of women in ballet settings, we grappled with sexist microaggressions in our own departments.

A student who attended a faculty meeting during the Spring 2021 semester noted that despite the equal representation of male and female professors, male voices were the loudest and spoke the longest. She asked us to consider what the faculty are modelling, and to recognise that these relational dynamics can pervade a learning environment despite our best efforts in a classroom or studio. In another faculty meeting, one of the authors was asked not to say the word ‘patriarchy’ when describing her research and teaching because it made a male-identifying colleague uncomfortable. University settings can replicate audit-and-surveillance dynamics of authoritarian pedagogies: a department chair refusing to discuss research, teaching, and service before inserting criticisms into annual reviews of a faculty member, an administrator who did not respond to requests for an interview about policies that empower students and faculty members. In these moments, we observe how harmful practices that deny self-belief are reinforced by working environments.

While hierarchy is entrenched in university systems, it is possible to facilitate the growth and success of faculty through mentorship, research sharing, collaboration, and instructional freedom. Marrs notes that her department is within a college of liberal arts and guided by a departmental chair who explicitly champions the intersections of theory and practice and the value of diverse bodies in dance. This sets the tone for faculty, staff, and students, and the departmental community is engaged in conversations about evolving technical instruction beyond values that cater to white concert dance. During the 2020-2021 academic year, Black dance artists and Master of Fine Arts alumni were invited to monthly ‘Town Hall’ meetings. A departmental administrator described the intention behind and benefits of these conversations:

The desire to have an MFA alum lecture series through these Town Halls came about through the conversations about the department's anti-Black racism initiatives. So last summer as a faculty, when we wrote our statement against Black racism, and we vowed and committed to doing a number of things in the department this year to address these issues as they pertain to departmental practices. [We were] looking ahead and thinking, “What do we want our department to be?” [and] this series was something that I thought of ...

I think we have at least a third of our faculty who are people who identify as under-represented minorities ... As diverse as we are, there still are folks who are holding onto ideas that are aligned with certain kinds of hierarchical notions and other features of supremacist thinking – in terms of rigor, discipline, and a kind of perfectionism not necessarily valuing the process by which we get somewhere. They value the product. So it's one thing to tell people, “We need to rethink these things. These ways of thinking are wrong.” And it's another thing to have people who are very familiar to the faculty, such as MFA alums, come in and talk with us about the ways that they've moved through the world since finishing degrees at [this university], the epiphanies they've had, and the leadership that they've provided to the field as leaders of colour, as Black dance artist leaders. When you start talking to other people who are outside of the department but related to the department, we can start to see our problems better. I feel like over the course of this year, we really transformed ourselves and that the faculty from a variety of different vantage points were also bringing in a lot of information too.

These transformations are admittedly incomplete and change within university settings is slow. Nevertheless, these conversations are essential to nurturing liberal arts education and educators, and underscore the value of multimodal approaches and collaboration. While one author engaged with a departmental leader who said they are “excited to partner with the faculty to think through these issues,” the other author’s requests for interviews with leaders were ignored or declined. We see parallels between educators’/administrators’ willingness to engage students/faculty in dialogue about self-advocacy and self-sovereignty, and departmental investment in issues of equity and justice: one department sought out conversations with alumni about “our problems” while the other department grapples with issues of paternalism, defensiveness, and retaliation, similar to experiences of students with authoritarian instructors.

Conclusion

Reflecting on our year-long collaboration we found alignments between our definitions of play and the value of collaborative practices in ballet and writing courses. Just as pedagogical approaches that foreground play emphasise the ‘how’ of doing over the outcomes, so collaboration also

emphasises process over result. During a semester when we encountered numerous obstacles due to Covid-19, especially the depleting impact of isolation, we noticed that making a priority of community-building led to remarkable results. By making space for low-stakes, peer-to-peer feedback and discussions around feeling “not quite good enough,” we acknowledged the ubiquity of self-doubt among teachers and students alike. This honesty relinquished expectations of teachers as expert authorities, and our classes evolved based on students’ concerns and questions. As anathema as this approach may be to the long histories of authoritarian teaching in ballet and writing, our courses were thought-provoking and efficacious, while requiring less labour. As authors, collaborating and sharing anecdotes and inquiries dissipated the pressures of ‘solving’ pedagogical quandaries in isolation. Even though we work in well-staffed and well-funded departments, this project is the first time we have ever discussed our teaching and shared ideas and readings across technique, dance studies, and history courses.

Our collaboration integrated embodied and discursive practices and released us from the unrealistic pursuit of an idealised dancer, essay, or class. By emphasising self-reflective practices, we made space for multiple ways of engaging with movement and language. Our pedagogies fostered inclusivity, allowing students to comfortably communicate their ideas in writing, conversation, and movement, thus generating nuanced understandings of ballet technique. In the research and writing courses, approaching ballet history by embracing a wide range of individuals and cultures allowed students to see themselves in the formation and perpetuation of the art form.

During her interview, Maurya Kerr quoted Alice Walker, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, “Activism is my rent for living on the planet.” Pedagogies of play and empowerment similarly require interdependence; they insist we relinquish authoritarianism, and celebrate ballet and writing as incantatory. We see collaboration as intimately connected to these pedagogies, as well as to our own well-being and sustainability as researchers and educators.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Why did you start taking ballet? How old were you?
2. Have you ever felt empowered when dancing, meaning feeling a sense of confidence, agency, and/or possibilities? Why or why not?
3. Were there certain teachers who encouraged a sense of individuality, creativity, and/or collaboration in ballet class?
4. Have you ever experienced authoritarian teaching in ballet, which means the teacher is the only authority and students are expected to be docile, silent, and/or obedient?
5. Have you experienced authoritarian teaching in other subjects or pursuits?
6. Do you feel empowered in settings that rely on authoritarian methods? Why or why not?
7. Have you ever noticed different expectations and/or treatment for female-identifying and male-identifying dancers in ballet training? How or why?
8. Have you ever been encouraged in a ballet class to share feedback and observations of yourself or others?
9. Have you ever used journaling or writing to process emotional feelings and/or develop a sense of your own identities or values?
10. For teachers: what are your priorities when teaching ballet in university settings?
11. For administrators: how do you encourage and promote empowerment for female-identifying dancers in higher education?
12. For directors: what are your priorities in overseeing dancers, faculty, and/or recruiting dancers?
13. For all: have self-reflective practices influenced or informed your dancing/teaching/directing and/or administrative work? If yes, how and why?
14. For all: How has Covid-19 required shifts in both teaching and learning outcomes that are beneficial and conducive to greater well-being for students and faculty?
15. For teachers/directors/administrators, what practices do you use to ensure that female-identifying dancers feel heard, seen, and empowered in ballet settings?
16. For students and teachers: has collaboration among students and faculty in ballet training contributed to students' and teachers' self-knowledge and self-belief? If yes, how and why?
17. For students: have you experienced interdependent models of pedagogy that foreground collaboration and the development of self-knowledge? If yes, did these models dismantle or mitigate feelings of being surveyed or judged? Why or how?