FINDING THE EDGE: THE ROLE OF PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY IN ELITE DANCE TRAINING

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It is generally accepted that there are ever-increasing physical demands placed on today's dancers. The psychological and emotional requirements of dancing can also be taxing. Increasingly, there is a body of practice concerned with the provision of psychological skills training for professional and pre-professional performers.

Psychological skills training refers to the systematic practice of mental skills such as imagery and goal setting, amongst many others, with the aim of enhancing performance and optimising the dancer's wellbeing. Research in sport confirms that the employment of psychological skills can lead to better performance; indeed, research suggests that successful sportspeople exhibit more developed psychological skills usage than their less successful counterparts.

Good examples of this in training establishments can be seen at Dance UK members Elmhurst School for Dance and The Royal Ballet Lower School, where colleagues are embedding psychological skills into their training through targeted workshops for students and professional development for staff in the psychological requirements of learning and performing in dance. The broad aim of these programmes is to support young dancers to fulfill their objectives, whatever they may be. More specifically, performance psychology offers skills which can support dancers' confidence as more self-motivated performers.

Robert Parker, Artistic Director of Elmhurst School for Dance, emphasises that success at the school is measured by producing "well rounded, autonomous, free-thinking and intelligent human beings". Dance psychology services at Elmhurst are led by Professor Joan Duda from the University of Birmingham, a founding partner of the National Institute of Dance Medicine and Science.

The services offered include workshops for small groups of students and staff members as well as one-to-one consultations, which have been delivered by Dr Charlotte Woodcock, former doctoral student at the University of Birmingham and now Lecturer at the University of Staffordshire. Joan and her team are working with school staff members to begin seamlessly embedding mental (and life skills) training in the daily curriculum. In this way, students will not see their development in psychological skills as separate from their overall development as young people, students and budding professionals.

Joan confirms: "It is possible and desirable to promote high levels of performance as well as health and optimal functioning in dancers, at all levels including vocational schools. We should be working to ensure we meet these important and complementary..."
goals in all of our interactions with and training of dancers. Having young dancers developing competence in regulating their thoughts and emotions is a good starting point.”

Misha Botting, Performance Psychology Consultant at The Royal Ballet Lower School, impressed that the work aims to help students develop a greater understanding of themselves. “It’s about optimising performance through building dancers’ self-awareness that they are unique and that their response to any situation is individual to them. We need to equip them with the skills to cope, manage and feel good about dancing.”

Central to the programmes at The Royal Ballet Lower School and Elmhurst School for Dance is enabling the dancers to maintain a sense of control over what they are doing. At the former, students identify factors in their performance over which they can exert control. They are then encouraged to place their attention on these factors, rather than being distracted by what other people are doing or what teachers might think of them. For example, in audition preparation coaching, students are supported to focus on the execution of ballet skills which contribute to their performance, rather than worrying about what the panel may think or comparing themselves to other candidates.

This focus on promoting feelings of personal control is also extended to teaching staff – encouraging them not to feel responsible for students’ failures or successes, but rather for providing a student-centered environment in which young dancers take responsibility for themselves. In both schools, teachers are given ongoing professional development training in optimising performance through mental skills training, with the aim that they are able to transfer these skills directly into their interactions with students.

Workshops at The Royal Ballet Lower School are grounded in students’ experiences and consider problem-solving for the very real and tangible issues they encounter. In this way, the material covered in the workshops is owned by the students themselves and they can build confidence in realising they have the resources to overcome challenges faced.

Students also learn to take control of their own ways of coping and so are better able to manage the everyday anxiety often associated with elite training. For example, in supporting students with injury, Misha works closely with the school physiotherapy team to help students set realistic and achievable goals in returning to training. By directing attention towards the goals that need to be achieved, there is an attempt to normalise what can be a very isolating experience for the dancer. The goal setting exercise becomes a coping strategy for the student and a psychological skill that they can draw on again in future.

Injury management at Elmhurst School for Dance also includes the dancer in a pro-active approach to maintain motivation, especially when the injury may be long-term. Dance psychology sessions at Elmhurst focus on systematically and progressively developing dancers’ abilities to regulate their thoughts, emotions and behaviour. Students are given the opportunity to develop mental skills and techniques that they can apply effectively in class, rehearsals and performances as well as other contexts and settings, such as when they are facing rehabilitation for injury.

As part of Elmhurst’s joined-up approach, students experiencing long-term injury are asked what they would like to do, to continue their learning and range of experiences whilst in training. In the past, students have been able to take advantage of work experience at Birmingham Royal Ballet, shadowing members of the administrative and technical teams. These new skills are drawn on in self-initiated performance projects back at the school. Robert Parker suggests that by treating the students as adults, enabling and valuing their ideas and increasing opportunities for them to experience more than dancing alone, the students are able to realise their potential as growing and evolving young people.

Feedback from students at Elmhurst is overwhelmingly positive, underlining this aspect of training as a vital element of the curriculum. Students have been able to discern which skills work and do not work for them, and which skills they use on a regular basis and why. The increased awareness of the psychological impact of teaching and learning has also resulted in a warm and friendly environment in which to train. Students are genuinely supportive of each other, applauding accomplishments, helping with choreography and providing peer feedback for one another.

Paramount to the dance psychology provision at Elmhurst is that it is truly evidence-based and is continuously evaluated in terms of its efficacy, to understand what works, when and how. Professor Joan Duda and colleagues Dr Eleanor Quested and Dr Charlotte Woodcock recently carried out a study which found that vocational dance students who regularly used psychological techniques and exhibited mental strengths (such as being able to effectively regulate their emotions) exhibited greater wellbeing and more autonomous motivation. They also found that the motivational climate created by vocational dance staff was an important predictor of how likely it was that students were characterised by systematic mental skill use and proficiency. Creating more adaptive motivational climates within school activities is another focus of the work led by the University of Birmingham at Elmhurst.

And so, with the research-based evidence for the inclusion of performance psychology in dance training developing its voice, there is also increasing practice-based evidence of the relevance of mental skills in supporting elite dance students’ successful and happy progression towards finding the edge in their career.

References

With thanks to Professor Joan Duda, Misha Botting and Robert Parker in the compilation of this article.

As well as being the MSc Dance Science Programme Coordinator at Trinity Laban, Elsa Urnston is also Dance Health Educator at the DanceEast Centre for Advanced Training and Education Committee Member for the International Association of Dance Medicine and Science.

Elsa spoke at Dance UK’s Beyond the Body conference in November 2013. Her presentation, on positive psychology in dance education, can be viewed free on Dance UK TV at www.danceuktv.com.