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Relational Innovation in Aotearoa / New Zealand

Contemporary Dance Training

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Abstract (245 words)

In the developing economies of the 21st Century where creativity is an essential skillset, understanding how group interactions can be organised into collaborative and creative endeavours is a significant matter. This has implications for artistic, economic, social, political, and cultural growth. From an embodied perspective, the relationships between dance students, dance lecturers, choreographers, and associated creative practitioners impact the dance works created as well as the people creating them. Relational and situational pedagogies that draw on innovation are central to this initiative.

Within New Zealand, we respond to evolving industry demands with particular practices that include artistic responsibility, creative intelligence, and bicultural approaches, all underpinned by an approach that seeks to unearth the unique individual artistic voice. The Unitec Dance Programme features a distinctive teaching philosophy that activates key 21st century skills with particular focus on creativity and collaborative art making practices. Within the programme, the mastery of discipline-specific, critical, creative, imaginative, and collaborative literacies sits alongside the application of high-level practical and interpersonal skills.

Unitec's approach to pedagogical practice is coupled with the unique creative context of New Zealand's location as a multicultural arts hub within the Pacific. This provides an unparalleled environment in which to advance innovative, creative, and rigorous new dance practices. We advocate that to flourish, and for students' creative outcomes to evolve and sustain in inimitable ways, it is important to design creative conditions that cultivate deep personal and professional investment and belonging. We call this approach Relational Innovation. This paper draws on 30 years of Contemporary Dance training experience at Unitec.

Introduction

Tena koutou katoa

Thank you for the invitation to speak today, and congratulations on the significant anniversary we are celebrating this weekend. It is an honour to be here on behalf of Unitec Dance from Auckland, New Zealand.

Unitec is the largest performing arts school in NZ and for 30 years we have trained some of our countries leading contemporary dancers. We believe it is our job to teach the body, mind, soul, and senses of an individual to be consciously and actively creative in their chosen craft.

Our training at Unitec centres learning on the student in a collaborative context. Today I will talk about our pedagogical approach called 'Relational Innovation'. We encourage our students to take responsibility for their creativity in a bicultural context; this means the 'ability to respond' in creative *partnership with* their teachers and peers.

1. **What is Relational Innovation?**

Sub heading 1: What is creativity?

All humans have the capacity to be creative; to imagine and shape something new. However, some of us have the ability to be exemplary in our manifestation of this unique human capability. Contemporary dance education can bring an advanced capacity to be both innovative and creative, and at Unitec we aim to 'educate' through facilitating the birth of something 'new'. The choreographer Twyla Tharp refers to creativity as a 'habit' that is teachable through daily rigour and discipline, and for us at Unitec, creativity is the ability to connect the unconnected, to tune up what is already there but unseen, to produce something new and unique, in diverse ways.

Subheading 2: What is **Relational Innovation**?

At Unitec we teach creativity through a process we call **Relational Innovation**, a pedagogy that employs a student-centred paradigm engaging the dancer as an individual within a particular interpersonal and social context in the pursuit of something new that is firmly rooted in tradition. Our approach highlights the value of the *people* involved by ensuring the

dance student is at the core of the dance-making relationship. We take this approach because it assists in solving choreographic challenges, building creative dexterity, while promoting innovative thought, alongside promoting esteem, trustworthiness, accountability, and authentic relationships between people.³

Relational Innovation guides the student to explore their choreographic vision and dance training in dynamic, rigorous, and 'critical' relationship with their peers, lecturers, and industry professionals. Our approach has enormous merit because it encourages brilliance and ignites the flame, the 'duende', to occur. It also provides opportunity for student self-actualisation, which assists a student to innovate, act autonomously, and gather experience as well as codify morale, in alignment with Maslow's hierarchy of needs where self-actualisation sits at the top of the pyramid of desired existence.

2. How do we provide for Relational Innovation to occur?

In order for **Relational Innovation** to occur, a student must be engaged in an optimal learning experience; this occurs when a student is provided a space to demonstrate their skills, whilst still being challenged to reach beyond their current capabilities. This creates an amalgamation of "action and awareness" where deep focus prohibits unnecessary thinking/emotion, intelligible critique, and explicit objectives. This may result in a loss of the participant's inhibition or self-conscious behaviour, and most significantly, means that they may be so invested in their learning, they cannot differentiate themselves from it. This has been referred to as 'Deep Play'.

A dancer's unique voice develops dependent upon whom it touches

We assert that a dancer's individual expressive voice is not necessarily a pre-determined entity, but arises through a medley of personal history and physical practices. Unitec's technical training and choreographic practice encourage, challenge and support dancers in forging their unique personal dance identity. This emerging dance persona will always be a work in process, a desire that will never quite be fulfilled, but the goal is to awaken within each dancer the realisation that this unique dance identity is in their own hands, and is the work of themselves as a self-creating artist.

Freedom is extended more to third year students

Unitec Dance supports dancers' creative expression at every level of their education, but it is a particular focus of the third and final year, when the students have much greater liberty in shaping their own course of study. Student dancers thus find that even more than the

foundational training they have had acquired that enables them to participate, contribute to and sustain themselves in any number of dance communities with discipline, rigour, and structure, the greatest accomplishment of their time at Unitec is the realisation that they themselves are the masters of their lifelong journey in dance.

3. **What does this look like for Dance?**

Unitec is integral in NZ dance

Unitec Dance finds itself playing an integral role in the Contemporary Dance scene of New Zealand. This is the result of both the ongoing relationship that it has with the changing arts and cultural climate, and in its responsiveness to the needs of the local dance community. Unitec Dance sees itself in a partnership with the New Zealand dance community and responding to its changing conditions rather than maintaining a position of elite distance.

We have many student success stories

The relational aspect of Unitec Dance is also reflected in our ongoing commitment to develop relationships with the wider dance culture and communities in New Zealand and internationally. The Dance programme is specifically oriented towards the vibrant contemporary dance community that exists in New Zealand which includes not only the numerous professional dance companies, choreographic collectives and the freelance dance community, but also the various fields of community dance, dance education, and the dance production agencies and festivals. One only needs to do a quick survey of all these strands of the New Zealand Dance community to discover that Unitec Dance is achieving success across all of these disciplines.

We celebrate our relationship with BDA

Further to this we look forward to celebrating the outstanding achievements of the inaugural cohort of Beijing Dance Academy students concluding their 18-month study with us in December as part of our institutional double-degree partnership. We have gained a huge amount from this exchange in sharing knowledge and information between China and New Zealand. This partnership is a potent example of relational innovation at work between institutions and people.

Our lecturers are expert practitioners

A majority of the teachers at Unitec Dance are practicing dancers and choreographers. As learners they are involved in the very same process as the students with whom they share their class: exploring new modes of dancing and of using movement to discover and invent

new ways of relating to the world. The continuation of a thriving dance culture can only take place if our artistic pedagogical practice remains 'in touch' with the lives and concerns of young dancers.

Our student body is diverse

Additionally, Unitec Dance is unique in providing opportunities for those who demonstrate a clear talent for the form, many of whom have a diverse understanding of dance practice in relation to culture and world views. We have particularly identified Maori and Pacific populations as representing an incredibly rich cultural resource that, although not necessarily familiar to the world of contemporary dance, embodies the form in both a revelatory and empowering way. The relational approach to dance education therefore is not restricted to the studio, but extends to many dimensions of our shared cultural lives.

Our approach explores a bicultural framework

New Zealand exists with a unique indigenous culture- the Tangata Whenua, or 'People of the Land', Maori. We as citizens of Aotearoa have an obligation to respect and understand that Maori were the first inhabitants of our lands, and as such, the foundations belong to them. We have a two-way or bicultural relationship that is based in the foundations of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), and this informs how we approach education and art practice in New Zealand.

Unitec strives to create an equal platform for all students to co-exist upon. When making dance, we encourage a reciprocal, dichotomous framework to exist in a rehearsal room. Student and teacher, thought and action, tradition and invention, death and creation, for example, are bicultural and symbiotic creative processes. They are nevertheless led by 'kaupapa' in Maori, or the right way to do things in a traditional and ethical context. This means that we have a legitimate framework to define the dance studio as a bicultural environment where all these principles are practised as core values.

4. **Why is this important?**

It allows new creative voices to emerge

Relational Innovation is important because it encourages new creative voices to be unearthed in innovative ways, it informs societal social identity, challenges traditional perceptions of creativity, and drives financial progression. The dance industry in New Zealand and internationally depends upon rigorous interrelationships within the workforce to inspire innovation. As such, a re-visioning of the roles and responsibilities within dance

making to involve a **Relational Innovation** approach, provides an opportunity to re-position notions of power, dominance, and hierarchy to ethically represent New Zealand's bi-cultural and multi-cultural society.

It informs society's social identity

When Unitec students engage with dance-making in all its myriad forms we provide a site for them to inform our society's ever-changing social identity. **Relational Innovation** progresses our understandings around how identity may be formed and negotiated through constructing choreography. In the 21st century, contemporary art adds perspective to our societal social identity, and at Unitec Dance **Relational Innovation** is our way of provoking and encouraging this within the student population for external and public audiences.

Our approach challenges the 'old guard'

This approach radically challenges the notion of a 'sole-genius' teacher/choreographer, and instead recognises that creativity can thrive through collaborative means. Thus, **Relational Innovation** allows creativity to be 'held' collectively by the entire dance-making team through a process that we call **Collaborative Creativity**.

Creative Industries are progressively said to drive the financial economy

Because the creative industries are progressively said to drive the financial economy, the Unitec Dance approach to collaboration meets national and international trends towards diversity within creative output. Dance-making may be viewed under a progressive economic lens because research into the 'microeconomy' of dance-making contributes to growing understandings around the financial structures of performing arts. Creative industries impact on innovation, creativity, productivity, and workplace wellbeing. Relational innovation advances the ability for individuals to have more agency and ownership over their creative output. We see that they are more likely to invest themselves whole-heartedly in the process as a result.

Relational Innovation drives innovation in multiple contexts

For companies and organizations, creative Intelligence is about fostering the ability to come up with smart and innovative solutions to the challenges they are facing. It is not only about new products or services, but also the ability to confront situations in new creative ways. People with trained Creative Intelligence have the ability to move in a direction that appears unconventional in order to come up with efficient solutions.

Creativity is an important 21st century skill set

Creativity has been rated the second-most important skillset by the World Economic Forum. It makes us adaptive, flexible, able to work in a 'flow' situation, and most of all, to be capable of invention. In the developing economies of the 21st Century, creativity is an essential skillset. This has huge implications for artistic, economic, social, political, and cultural growth. Creativity is important for employability as it's crucial to making work, and because creativity helps to find innovative solutions. International Festival director and New Zealander Carla van Zon says, 'Those who have art and creativity in their lives are much better able to work in business or in any other fields. They can take risks...You don't have to be an artist — you can still be an accountant and do all those things.'⁷

Our philosophies may contribute to research in wider fields than just dance

The teaching philosophies at Unitec dance may also contribute to discussions around innovation and creativity within the arts, community arts practices, and participatory or experiential research. In addition, team-working arts methodologies, and innovative management within an economic context might benefit from our approaches. Our approach to choreographic leadership methodologies reflect and highlight the fluidity of the dance making process, and the myriad of ways a dancer may experience all stages of the dance making or training process.

5. What are the implications of Relational Innovation?

Relational innovation encourages positive experiences for our students

Relational Innovation has implications on the way *people* experience dance training at Unitec. At its core, **Relational Innovation**, engages a person-centred paradigm, which provides a site for student self-actualisation, and optimal learning experiences to occur. Unitec Dance foregrounds our students' 'world view' and places importance on the creative desires of these individuals. Our job as lecturers becomes about how to provoke, challenge, and extend our students' dance training in relationship with our key expertise.

Unitec's approach has implications on a dancer's sense of belonging

One final point here is: we advocate that to flourish, and for students' creative outcomes to evolve and sustain in inimitable ways, it is important to design *creative conditions* that cultivate deep personal and professional investment and belonging. Unitec Dance is celebrated for the incredible family environment that saturates every aspect of the course. 'Whakawhanaungatanga' is the Maori term for the process of establishing relationships,

and relating well to others. For most of the students in the programme the studio becomes their home for the three years they attend. This is a consequence of both the collegiality that arises from the practice of dance but also the specific emphasis that we place on the theme of 'Belonging'.

Our Dance undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes are made particularly rich by socio-economic variety and the diversity of ethnicities. The calling to dance is not always accompanied by immediate family support and Unitec Dance goes to great length to provide a welcoming community supported by a rigorous pastoral care system to ensure that students are in the most propitious environment for their period of study. For some student dancers *Belonging* becomes the focus of their programme of study, with many graduates having progressed to work in community dance, dance education and dance in the environment projects.

The 21st anniversary celebration of Unitec Dance took as its title *A Life Between Us*, and we continue to acknowledge that dance occurs between bodies, between persons, between worlds.

6. Concluding thoughts

This paper draws on Unitec Dance's process of Relational Innovation developed over 30 years of Contemporary Dance training. There is much that I haven't had time to foreground, so please feel free to talk with me further about our approach to dance training at any time. For all of us, the future of dance is full of more creative transformation, and more exciting possibilities that will surely bring prosperity.

Whakatauki: Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou ka ora ai te iwi

With your food basket and my food basket the people will thrive

Kia ora koutou katoa
