

Assessment in dance education – an intersubjective setting for assessment

Ninnie Andersson, Luleå University of Technology
ninnie.andersson@ltu.se

Abstract

This paper will present a study concerning teachers' assessments of dance knowledge. The aim is to explore and analyse the phenomenon of assessment of dance knowledge in Swedish upper secondary schools from a teacher's perspective. What goals for knowledge development, and thereby assessment, appear? What value assessments could be seen? In what ways do teachers motivate their choices of assessment?

A starting point for life-world phenomenology is to be adherent to the phenomenon. To be able to grasp the phenomenon material was gathered through observations of grading conversations and one teacher's written reflections. The observations took place during dance education and separate grading conversations in the course *Dance techniques 1*. The method used for analysis was inspired by Spiegelberg's stages of analysis. In the analytical process the phenomenon was seen and broadened out, varied and condensed, aiming to find the essence of the phenomenon.

Assessment in dance can be seen as a complex phenomenon where embodied dance knowledge constitutes the basis for what should be assessed. Two dimensions in assessment will be presented. It is necessary for the teacher and student to be in agreement about the meaning of the assessment, though the communication has implicit meanings, goals and intentions.

Keyword: dance education, assessment, upper secondary school

Introduction

This paper will present a study concerning teachers' assessment practices in dance education. The aim of the study is to explore and analyse in what ways the phenomenon, assessment of dance knowledge, is constituted in Swedish upper secondary school from a teacher's perspective. The paper will start with a brief presentation of how dance knowledge appears, based on formulations in dance syllabuses. Research of assessment practices including both formative assessments in dance education as well as assessments in grading conversations will be presented and discussed. What goals for knowledge development and thereby assessment appears? How is the assessment practice made visible in dance education? In what ways do teachers motivate their choices of assessment?

Dance knowledge in the Swedish upper secondary school

Dance in upper secondary schools in Sweden was introduced in 1994 as a part of the art program (Styrke, 2013). The school system was reformed in 2011, including a new curriculum Gy11, new syllabuses in all subjects as well as a new scale of grading. In Gy11 dance continued to be a part of the art program with a new orientation in dance including specific syllabuses within the subjects; *Dance interpretation*, *Dance techniques* and *Dance theory* (The National Agency for Education, 2013). Dance knowledge as a phenomenon will be presented based on a study of how dance knowledge is made visible in the syllabuses from the present curriculum Gy11 (Andersson & Ferm Thorgersen, submitted). The courses that have been analysed from Gy11 were *Dance interpretation 1-2*, *Dance techniques 1-2*, *Dance theory* and a description of the subject's aim. A change is seen in Gy11, from a more dualistic way of formulating the domain dance knowledge with a separation between in and about dance knowledge to a more compound and holistic view of the domain. Dance knowledge, in Gy11, is made visible as an artistic expression that can be acquired through three different roles; performer, choreographer and audience. These roles handle dance knowledge such as; dance qualities, approach/attitude, performance, analysis and technique. In the analysis generic abilities appeared including; discovery, training, interpretation, reflection, communication, choreography, investigation and discussion. All the different dance knowledge areas can be seen in relation to each of the three roles and can be combined with generic abilities. These generic abilities are intertwined and dependent on each other and can, in turn, be seen as required and necessary to develop specific dance knowledge. The performer can for example acquire the specific knowledge and dance qualities in their own performance, the choreographer can acquire knowledge through the creation of a dance composition and it can be analysed by the audience – allowing them to acquire knowledge. These three professional roles are formulated in the syllabuses as part of knowledge in dance knowledge.

Background

Assessment is a complex social phenomenon that involves some kind of appreciation regarding values of knowledge (Gipps 1999; The foundation SAF, 2010). According to Sadler (2009) validity of the assessment can challenge appreciation regarding values of knowledge. Whether stimulation to further learning has been achieved as a consequence is one way to look at validity in formative assessment (Stobart, 2012). The significance of validity has expanded to a wider meaning, from a theoretical view to a more operational view (Kane, 2006). The concept now comprises the entire assessment process, incorporating

consequences, soundness and the trustworthiness of an assessment (Cronbach, 1971; Messick, 1993). Standardised papers or tests are rare in dance education and artifacts as a support in the assessment practice are also exceptional. Tasks can require open responses and not a right and wrong answer (Sadler, 2009), such as dance performance. Butler (2011) argues that it is important for the teachers to look at their own practices to improve the students' achievement. Torrance (2007) discusses if the assessment practice has become too narrow and criteria-based. The consequence could be less independence for the student and could challenge to what degree he/she is dependent on the teacher. The focus is on understanding the criteria and to check off the criteria, not the area of knowledge as an entirety. There is a risk that too narrow perspective on criteria and assessment becomes fragmented, which moves away from a wider understanding of the specific knowledge (Sadler, 2007). The curricula have been through several reforms and according to Lundahl (2011) the assessment practice has not been changing at the same pace as the change regarding view of knowledge. In present curriculum, assessments are supposed to embrace a holistic grading.

Educational assessment can be divided into summative and formative assessment or assessment of learning and assessment for learning (Gardner, 2012). Assessment for learning are presented by the Assessment Reform Group (2002) as

...the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there (p. 2).

I have chosen to use the concept of formative assessment in this paper, as the Swedish Ministry of Education uses the concept formative assessment. For the student formative assessment can be used to move forward with their learning process (Gardner, 2012). In the assessment practice it is important to have explicit goals for the education (Butler, 2011; Hattie, 2009; Stobart, 2012), awareness of the students' achievement in relation to the course goals, and of how students can improve their achievement on the course (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Sadler (2009) emphasised that explicit criteria can make the assessment practice more transparent by facilitating the student's understanding of the given assessment. The Swedish curriculum stresses the student's own responsibility for their studies and the important presupposition of clear goals for education, content and working forms (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013). Klapp Lekholm (2010) argues that implicit criteria can affect the assessment practice and that this possible affect needs to be taken into account. According to Sadler (1989) formative assessment can be seen as the use of judgement as it is intended to shape and improve the student's proficiency. Evidence and decisions are, according to Black and Wiliam (2009), linked to each other in classroom practice:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited.

(Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 9)

The concept of feedback is commonly brought to the forefront regarding formulations that relate to formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Klapp Lekholm, 2008; Sadler, 1989), for example as a central act in formative assessment by using interactive feedback (Gardner, 2012). Both informational content as well as the consequence can be involved in feedback (Sadler, 1989). Feedback can describe the gap between the levels of knowledge the students currently have and a referenced level. Depending on the teacher, student, context, and quality of feedback it can be used to decrease this gap. In Sweden, grading conversation is one setting for feedback. Earlier research regarding Swedish grading conversations has had a focus on compulsory school and is rare in the Upper secondary school (Rinne, 2013). According to the existing research the content in the conversation has focused more on personal qualities more than knowledge related qualities. Several researchers point out the importance of the student's involvement in the assessment practice (Dancer 2005; Daniel, 2001; Dochy, 1999; Lan, 2005; Lundahl, 2011; Rinne, 2013). Rinne (2013) describes how a teacher's action in an observed grading conversation can be interpreted as a way to obscure negative notification. The teacher referred her assessments to knowledge requirements that both teacher and student perceived as abstract and seemed to make it even more confusing. The content in the conversations did not initially focus on reasoning concerning knowledge.

Theory and methodology of life-world phenomenology

The study is based on life-world phenomenological philosophy where human beings are inter-subjectively linked with and within the world. According to this theory there is no distinguishing between body-mind-soul, though they form an entirety of the bodily subject. The bodily subject inhabits the world and therefore cannot be separated from it. To describe this intertwining Merleau-Ponty uses the concept *chair*, which has been translated into *flesh* in English. Dahlberg (2011) argues that there is agreement about Merleau-Ponty's concept "chair" between researchers that focus on his theory. Hence, the word could be seen as a translation of *leib*ⁱ and the concept's meaning involves more than the human body. Flesh can be seen as a way of understanding our relationship to the world. Dahlberg (2011, s.94, author's translation) writes "The sustained of flesh creates the world as we know it, that is as a place where everything, all times and rooms can relate to each other". Flesh can be understood as a weave that intertwines us within the world. Merleau-Ponty and Lefort (1968, s.239) describe the concept flesh as "a presence to the world through the body and to the body through the world, being *flesh*". This could be understood as a coexistence of subject-world, which means that it is hard to separate these two and even harder to distinguish them by putting the word "and" between the words. Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasised that the only way to gain insight of the world is through human experience of it. A basic rule and the starting point for research is to turn towards the things themselves and to be adherent to the things.

To be able to grasp the phenomenon, material was gathered through observations of dance education and grading conversations that are documented using field notes, video documentation, teachers' notes and conversations with teachers about their reflections upon assessment of dance. The observations of dance education took place over two semesters and involved 5 different teachers. Observations of grading conversations were made as a case study of one teacher and ten separate grading conversations between one teacher and students on the course *Dance techniques 1*. In the first conversation that took place in the middle of the semester between teacher and student, both parties had filled out a rubric made by the

teacher including the different levels of grading. At the end of the semester the second conversation took place and the student received information about their final grade in the course. The different methods will constitute a base for the analysis of the study and create the unity of purpose and an opportunity to capture different perspectives of the phenomenon. The method used for analysis was inspired by Spiegelberg's (1994) stages of phenomenological analysis. In the analytical process the phenomenon was seen and broadened out, varied and then condensed, aiming to find the essence of the phenomenon.

Two dimensions of assessment in dance knowledge

Assessment in dance knowledge will be presented regarding two dimensions; formative assessment in dance education and assessment in grading conversations.

The phenomenon formative assessment in dance education

Based on observations of teachers, the phenomenon formative assessment in dance education was researched (Andersson, submitted). These expressions of the phenomenon involved the ingredients necessary for formative assessment in dance education to be constituted. They are intertwined with each other and are able to combine in various ways. Meaning making within the phenomenon, formative assessment, appears in the weave of intertwining themes and their aspects.

The teacher's actions in the formative assessment practice elucidated the goals of the teaching without explicitly communicating that referring to the formulated goals in the syllabus, but rather by implicitly expressing the goals in various ways. Students' achievements on the course were related to these goals and constituted an aspect where the teacher made this achievement explicit. Communication regarding how the student could improve these achievements could also be seen in this dimension. Some of this feedback was not constructive, though the feedback was not expressing what the communication was regarding. As, for example, non-constructive feedback could be expressed by the teachers' verbal communication "good". Teachers' diverse expressions of communication emerged in the observations in form of: significance of sound, body contact and visual communication. The significance of sound encompassed verbal communication through words, rhythmical sound as well as body sounds such as claps. The meaning expressed in these sounds differs due to intonation, force and volume. By combining these differences in sound the teacher can communicate various movement qualities and emphasise movements' different significance. The teachers also use body contact as a mode of communication between teacher and student. This body contact appeared as change of the students' posture both by the teacher moving body parts as well as contiguity with difference in force and pressure. Through various gradations in force and pressure this body contact has different meanings. The teachers were combining verbal communication with body contact and therefore the meaning could be communicated multi-modal. In dance the body is a condition for expression of dance knowledge and is also seen as part of visual communication. Teachers' embodied actions, pictures and video recordings of dance performance were central in demonstration positions, patterns, movements and movement qualities.

In the communication with the student it was obvious that the teacher paid attention to dance related content as well as what was appraised within the course. Dance related knowledge that appeared was: Ability to embody dance technique, Nuances of movement, Physical science in dance, Relation to music in dance, Conventions in the classroom of dance,

and Reflection in and about dance performance. Apart from conventions in the classroom of dance all other aspects relate to the students' dance performance.

The phenomenon conceptions of quality regarding dance knowledge in grading conversations

The phenomenon conceptions of quality regarding dance knowledge were illuminated based on observations of grading conversations (Andersson, forthcoming). All the conversations had the same structure. No tests were used during the course and specific moments of assessments were never communicated during the classes. The conceptions of quality involved expressed abilities and progression of dance knowledge. This was seen through the teacher's expressed verbal communication as well as expressed embodied actions. In both the first and the second conversation the grade level of the students' achievement was communicated.

A tendency that is seen in the gathered material is that choices of focused abilities involved both dance abilities and process related abilities. By choosing to focus on various abilities the teacher's conceptions of quality is seen, both verbally and embodied in the communication as well as formulations in the rubric. Dance abilities that showed conceptions of quality were qualities and idioms in movement, control over movement in performance, connection of movements, consciousness in the embodied actions that incorporated spatial ability. Placement and technique in positions and movement could also be seen. These choices emerged both in verbal and embodied communication as well as in a rubric made by the teacher. According to the analysis it was obvious the meaning of the formulations in the rubric was not clear to the students. The teacher explained that they never talk about the rubric and the formulated goals, which could be the reason why the students did not understand the meaning of them. The conceptions of quality showed that a focus within dance related abilities was solely revolving around modern dance tradition even though it is formulated in the syllabus that the dance knowledge should relate to two genres. This was, for example, possible to see in expressed qualities of movement involving flow, weight and floor technique. This appeared verbally when the teacher said "Flow, work with that to save energy and to tie-up" and at the same time gave meaning to the sentence by embodied communication. Through the teacher's expression process related abilities appeared as conceptions of qualities that embraced the student's work and effort during the education and the process during class. The student's memorisation of movement and difference in copying and working with movements was for example seen in the teachers through this expression:

Practice a little outside of the classroom ... You are finding fast and copying. Sometimes hard to know if you are working right or if you are copying.

Process related abilities also incorporated communication such as "You are working really nicely with your body ... You are a beautiful dancer ... You have made a long journey". Conceptions of quality were not linked to any specific ability, but the students' effort in dance education. These abilities were not seen in the syllabus of the course although the quotations show what the teacher valued based on her conceptions of quality.

The teacher's conceptions of quality also appeared when verifying the students' achievement in accordance with a certain level of knowledge. These appreciations regarding values of knowledge involved different level placement of knowledge achievement and how they related to the students. Level placement of knowledge was seen within the abilities and

were expressed differently in a low respective a high achievement level. In lower achievement level appreciations regarding values of knowledge were expressed as acknowledgement of abilities, while it in a higher achievement level were expressed as how the abilities was used in the performance. According to the completed rubric, the teachers assessed the students higher than the students did themselves, it was seen that the students had high demands on their own achievements. The conceptions of quality appeared in how the teachers valued the progression in dance knowledge as well as how progression in dance knowledge was seen in accordance with the students' conceptions of quality.

Summary of the two dimensions of assessment in dance

The assessment practice in dance can be seen as a complex phenomenon where embodied dance knowledge constitutes the base for what should be assessed. Communication regarding the student's achievement was seen as multimodal both during the education as well as in grading conversations. Accordance of the meaning in assessment between the teacher and student is necessary, though the communication has implicit meanings, goals and intentions. When an assessment is made is not specified for the students and an understanding of the goals of the course did obviously not exist. The teacher's conceptions of quality could be seen through focused abilities both regarding dance and the process. Conceptions of quality were also made visible through how a low respective a high achievement level in dance were assessed and communicated.

Discussion

Formative assessment occurred continuously in the observed dance education and no tests or specific moments for assessment were explicit. Students are therefore always being assessed without specific material, goals, or abilities to concentrate on. This means that the student never has moments in their education where they can explore and challenge themselves without being assessed. Both the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011) and Sadler (2009) emphasise the student's involvement in the assessment practice. I believe this affects the learning process and does not contribute to transparency in the assessment practice.

The importance of making the students aware of the goals of the education and what a successful education can be is emphasised in research about assessment and seen as an ingredient in formative assessment (Butler, 2011; Hattie, 2009; Klapp Lekholm, 2010; Stobart, 2012). In the observations it was seen that the goals of the course were not referred to or explicitly communicated, but were comprehended through the teacher's visual performance and verbal communication of the dance material. In the rubric used in the grading conversation it was clear that the student did not have an understanding of the goals. Torrance (2007) emphasised that a criteria-based education can have negative effects. So how do you find a balance in this practice? It is seen that the observed dance teachers' teaching is not strictly controlled by the goals, but they are visible in the education. Maybe a complement to this work would be to have discussions and reflections upon focused abilities in the education and about what a successful performance could be. I feel that awareness and discussions between teachers about these issues are important factors to develop and to adhere to the social phenomenon assessment.

How explicit should the goals of the course be? When does it become a clarification of what is assessed and when does it become counterproductive? It is seen in the observations that the criteria were part of the teachers' understanding based of the content in the education. They were not explicitly referred to or communicated with the student. In the grading

conversation the students were expected to assess themselves based on the formulations in the syllabus through a rubric. I believe that because the students did not understand the formulations and had not actively analysed them, it was hard to translate their own achievements to the rubric. This did not fulfil the intention with the assignment concerning self-assessment, but with discussions and agreement it could fulfil a function and contribute to transparency in the assessment practice. There has to be some sort of accordance between the student and teacher about the meaning of the course goals, feedback and assessment. There were abilities that included other dimensions than formulations in the knowledge requirement and were not related to the dance knowledge in the course. An example was about the student effort in class. These communicated abilities could also be explained by being a way to play down negative response (Klapp Lekholm, 2010). By saying that the student is working great in class the teacher is communicating something positive that is part of their conceptions of quality. Because there was no explicit criteria for grading visible in either of the two observation studies, an important ability for the students is to figure out the teacher's conceptions of quality and thereafter analyse what knowledge the teacher and context requires. In the observed conversations, it is clear that the teacher focused on the modern dance tradition in her assessment. In the syllabus it is stated that at least two genres should be taught, but in this case the assessment was based on how the student acquires the goals in relation to modern dance, which was based on the teacher's conceptions of quality. There is a need for discussion about the validity issues in their own assessment practice. How can a teacher create prerequisites for a valid assessment? What is assessed, how do I collect this information and in what way, and has the student the opportunity to show his/her achievement on the course? How can I work with criteria and awareness about the syllabuses and knowledge requirements without becoming too criteria-based, and using assessment as learning? The need for further discussions and prerequisites for assessment in dance are topical and necessary.

References

- Andersson, N (submitted). Assessing dance - A phenomenological study of formative assessment in dance education. Submitted to *Nordic journal of art and research*. october, 2013.
- Andersson, N (forthcoming). Grading conversations – an intersubjective setting for value assessment. Abstrakt accepted to *Educare*.
- Andersson, N & Ferm Thorgersen (submitted). A phenomenological study of dance knowledge, seen through syllabuses in upper secondary schools in Sweden. Submitted to *Journal of Dance Education*. February, 2014.
- Assessment Reform Group (2002). Assessment for learning: 10 principles. Research-based principles to guide classroom practice. 13th of October, 2013, Assessment Reform Group. http://assessmentreformgroup.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/10principles_english.pdf
- Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* (formerly *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*), 21(1), 5-31.

- Butler, S. M., & McMunn, N. D. (2011). *A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Assessment: Understanding and Using Assessment to Improve Student Learning (Electronic resource)*. (4th ed.) Hoboken: Jossey-Bass.
- Cronbach, L. J. (1971). Test Validation. In R. L. Thorndike (ed.), *Educational Measurement* (2nd ed., pp. 443-507). Washington: American Council on Education.
- Dahlberg, H. (2011). Vikten av kropp: frågan om kött och människa i Maurice Merleau-Pontys *Le visible et l'invisible*. [The weight of the Body. The Question of Flesh and Human Being in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Le visible et l'invisible*]. Diss. Göteborg : Göteborgs universitet, 2011. Göteborg.
- Dancer, D., & Kamvounias, P. (2005). Student involvement in assessment: a project designed to assess class participation fairly and reliably. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(4), 445-454.
- Daniel, R. (2001). Self-assessment in performance. *British Journal of Music Education*, 18(03), 215-226.
- Dochy, F. J. R. C., Segers, M., & Sluijsmans, D. (1999). The use of self-, peer and co-assessment in higher education: A review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 24(3), 331-350.
- Gardner, J. (ed.) (2011). *Assessment and learning*. SAGE Publications: Los Angeles.
- Gipps, C. (1999). Socio-cultural aspects of assessment. *Review of Research in Education*, 24, 355-392.
- Hattie, J. A. C. (2009). *Visible learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Kane, M. T. (2006). Validation. In R. L. Brennan (ed.), *Educational Measurement* (4th edition, pp. 17-64). Westport, CT: American Council on Education/Praeger Publishers.
- Klapp Lekholm, A. (2008). Grades and grade assignment: effects of student and school characteristics. Diss. Göteborg : Göteborgs universitet.
- Lan, W. (2005). Self-monitoring and its relationship with educational level and task importance. *Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 109-127.
- Lundahl, C. (2011). *Bedömning för lärande*. [Assessment for learning]. Stockholm: Norstedts.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. & Lefort, C. (1968). *The visible and the invisible: followed by working notes*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge; 1962.

Messick, S. A. (1989). Validity. In R. L. Linn (ed.), *Educational Measurement* (3rd ed., pp. 13-103). New York: American Council on Education/Macmillan.

Rinne, I. (2013). Att bedöma och bemöta – Förståelsen av betyg så som den visar sig i ett betygsamtal på gymnasiet [Assess and meet – The understanding of grade as it made visible in a grading conversation in upper secondary school]. *Nordic studies in Education* 33(03), 171-186.

Torrance, H. (2007). Assessment as learning? *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 14(3), 281-294.

Sadler, D.R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science*, 18(2), 119-144.

Sadler, D.R. (2007). Perils in the meticulous specification of goals and assessment criteria. *Assessment in education* 14(3), 387-392.

Sadler, R.D. (2009). Indeterminacy in the use of preset criteria for assessment and grading. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(2), 159–179.

Spiegelberg, H. (1994). *The Phenomenological Movement*. The Netherlands: The Kluwer academic Publisher. (Part V: The Essentials of the Phenomenological Method, s.677-719).

Stobart, G. (2012). Validity in Formative Assessment. In J. Gardner (ed.), *Assessment and Learning* (2nd ed., pp. 233-242). London: Sage Publications.

Styrke, B. (2013). *Dans, didaktik och lärande: om lärarens möjligheter och utmaningar inom gymnasieskolans estetiska program* [Dance, didactic and education: teachers' possibilities and challenges within the upper secondary school's the arts program]. Stockholm: Dans och Cirkushögskolan.

The foundation SAF & Swedish teachers' union. (2010). *Bedömning för lärande: - en grund för ökat kunnande* [Assessment for learning: - a basis for increased knowhow]. Stockholm: Foundation SAF in collaboration with Swedish teachers' union.

The Swedish National Agency for Education. (2011). Curriculum for the upper secondary school. Retrieved from <http://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=2705>

The Swedish National Agency for Education. (2013). Curriculum for the upper secondary school. Retrieved from <http://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=2975>

ⁱ Husserl's conception that include that the lived body can feel and be felt, in contrast to Körper which refer to the physical body.