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Carla Trim-Vamben & Jo Read

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Discussion

What a touchy subject! Discussions, reflections and thoughts about touch on the UEL BA (Hons) Dance: Urban Practice course

Carla Trim-Vamben and Jo Read

This short piece captures a collection of thoughts, discussions, and reflections about the theme of touch in a post-lockdown higher educational setting. In a small group discussion, we reflected on experiences of touch in relation to the teaching and learning of a diverse range of dance cultures, that are experienced on the BA (Hons) Dance: Urban Practice course at the University of East London (UEL). The group included current students, a graduate, a visiting lecturer and ourselves as co-lecturers. This piece documents a selection of short excerpts from the discussion, which we found to be thought-provoking and revealing in relation to the theme of touch.

Royona Mitra's (2021, 9) recent research into touch and 'unmaking contact', offers valuable insight into the multiple meanings of touch, and she highlights that dance practices from the Global North are usually the focus in research on this topic. In this piece, students and staff have made references to specific dance cultures from the course, which relate to their interests, skills and experiences. This includes popping, hip-hop, breaking, contemporary, capoeira, and house. During their degree, students also learn locking, bharatanatyam, dancehall and contemporary Afro dance. Consequently, they have wide ranging experiences when it comes to the theme of touch, which led to an engaging discussion.

The key below explains the different voices which are included. The ideas that emerge, present potential themes for future investigation. During an unsettling and challenging time in UK Higher Education, we attempt to reflect on post-lockdown teaching and learning experiences

with honesty, some insight, and a small touch (!) of humour. We intend this as a brief starting point, juxtaposing lecturer, student and graduate perspectives and considering our course's ethos and values in relation to this intriguing theme.

Key

Student: A quote from the discussion group from a current student.

Graduate: A quote from the discussion group from a graduate now working in the dance industry.

Visiting lecturer: A quote from the discussion group from a visiting lecturer.

Lesson plan prompts: Combined memories of the co-authors' internal dialogue at the time described in each quotation.

Reflection: The co-authors' combined brief reflective thoughts about the themes and ideas in the small group discussion, at the time of writing this piece.

Reflection: One-Way systems, constant sanitising and definitely NO touching! Covid forced a change in approach for the dance course at UEL. Summer planning 2021 focused on mitigating risk factors - TOUCHING; elaborate and overly organised schedules and rules which students followed well in class. This begs the question, are we great movement organisers or did we ever really touch much in our classes?

Lesson Plan Prompt: Obsess compulsively with keeping students in their two metre boxes as instructed, often to the detriment of your teaching material, and your sanity.

Current Student: A teacher would say something and be like, be careful enough to be in your own box, because we would have, set tape around to distance us. So, it would be said, but I think around us... we wouldn't take it in as much, I guess. [...] You know, it doesn't make sense for us. It doesn't make sense for you to be all the way there, because we are in one room learning the same thing. But yeah, I would say it didn't affect us as much.

Reflection: Is touch just physical or can it be an auditory experience? Students adapted to the lack of touch in class, keeping in those boxes was the struggle. We used more words to explain things online and in the studio but, did words fully replace the ways we touch...

Nudging, Lifting, Throwing, Catching, Pushing, Shoving, Tapping, Patting, Clapping, Leaning ... fundamental aspects of touch in the dance forms we practice.

Lesson Plan Prompt: Constantly find ways to discuss the similarities, differences, and requirements of studying these popular and social dance forms in a HE environment. TASK: Read the opening section of Royona Mitra's (2021) article and get into groups and discuss.

Current Student: so I wouldn't expect myself to ever go to a training setting where I'm in a classroom, in a lecture or in a dance studio, and then I'm learning Hip Hop, or Popping or Breaking [...], and then there's

some type of touch, that definitely doesn't happen. Then again, if it does happen, it's to do with some type of choreographic meaning behind it or, I don't know, some type of purpose in the movement that involves touch.

Reflection: Not all students have access to the social settings these dance forms come from. The intentional and planned way we facilitate classes can't ever replicate the impromptu moments of touch. How do we get students to understand the importance of touch and the subtleties in "original" environments for styles like Capoeira?

Visiting Lecturer: So, whether it's by agitating the other [person], just imagine you're pretending to be nice to me, but I know that that's not the truth. I may touch you to see, are you *really* that? So, I'm going to touch you in this specific way and vice versa. Or, there's something that is very genuine in me, that allows you to not be scared, also, to judge me. So, it's all about discovering the intentions of the other [person].

Near misses

Lesson Plan Prompt: The general perception is that Capoeira is a non-contact practice but you know you touch in the real world so, highlight possible places of touch students could have touched.

Visiting Lecturer: We're playing a game whereby you understand, and this is why it seems that there's no touching because, the practitioners, they understand the etiquette, or the hidden codex of - *actually*, that could have been a touch like this. So, you develop a sixth sense of the way that I *could* have touched you. So, it's not just me touching you, it's the way, hence the intention, it's the ego, it's very nuanced.

Reflection: Who and what are we protecting when we avoid the experience of touch?

Visiting Lecturer: In a battle, one person comes, does what they're doing right? Exits and the other person comes right? So imagine in the Capoeira context where you're both there and touching can happen at any point, that it's like, it's almost like a cauldron ready to explode... In some places... people are right by each other, and you can already feel, this person knows I'm there, because I'm touching them, but ... they want to go in next, there's no budging from there. ... I was in some place, I actually had to go through people's legs, literally, through the legs because people were physically, they wanted to take up such space to pronounce that, I AM here. ... I looked in between the person's legs and I saw the teacher on the other side, and then he saw me and then I went through the legs and that way I was next to get in.

Reflection: Can we truly understand Capoeira, or any form based on what could have been, and not seeing what is?

Touchy subject

Lesson Plan Prompt: Dance battles have a 'no violent touching rule which is agreed upon around the globe. However, depending on where you go, it's also possible that this one goes all the way to no touching at all' (Adelekun 2022). Make sure to stress this in class.

Student: The battles that happened in the beginning were breakers, it was very militant, you were really battling for your status. And now since it's more in an organisational form, I think that touch will always be interpreted that way, because you are someone that is going up against someone. And once we've already marked that line, I'm going to show what I have on the left-hand side, and you're going to show it on the right. If you do come up to me, it's you saying something to me, *that* touch, it's the only way that people interpret it as, oh okay you *really* like going against me.

Lesson Plan Prompt: Identify underconfident battlers and know you will have to metaphorically hold their hand. Nerves might result in tears, and you will have to manage anxieties, excitement and egos in one room - everyone might need an air hug at some point!

Graduate: There's the natural element of it, everyone's in a cypher, or you've got a Bboy or Bgirl that just runs around the circle, so you instantly just move back. So there's the gesture of it, or if they want you to come in closer, because that's what they want for their freestyle.

Reflection: Confidence and being self-assured is important in battles so you can carve your space and make your mark. It is very individualistic until the end when you have tried so hard not to touch, you hug or spud your opponent to congratulate them!

Feeling myself

Graduate: If I was in class, I'd rather keep to my own little space, and then I'll just figure it out in my own time.

Student: And you can definitely see someone has turned themselves away, they've turned their back away from the circle. That's definitely their way of saying, I kind of want to be alone, I want to showcase myself right here.

Lesson Plan Prompt: Do not let the cypher go dead. If students are hesitant give them a nudge. Hone into the messages that nudge gives ... 1. student feeling unsure 2. student is good to go in 3. student is not ready at all.

Current Student: If I was to start freestyling, touch would not be something I would think about off the bat, it's not something that comes up quite naturally. Because I guess, when you are dancing with someone, ... I don't know what the other person is thinking, and whether they'd be

comfortable enough with me touching the shoulder, or like touching their head. If there is [touch], it's very, like, what's going on here? I'm not quite sure if this should be happening. I guess it stemmed from a lot of social settings like, hip hop, house, from a social setting of parties, clubs, and all of that, once it's moved into, like training, it becomes more structured. And so the things you would see in the clubs wouldn't be something you would necessarily see in the dance class.

Reflection: There are so many nuanced cultural requirements and perspectives to consider when approaching touch. The example highlights that the concept of touch is often implied yet not fully realised, and even imagined... The boundaries of touch in educational settings emphasise health and safety guidelines - too clinical? Too Fearful? It makes us consider; did we really use touch as much as we thought we did? It feels like touch is being stripped away by rules, and this started long before Covid!

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Jo Read is a Senior Lecturer in dance at UEL and is also training as an Integrative Counsellor and Psychotherapist.

Carla Trim-Vamben is a Director of Education and Experience and a Senior Lecturer in dance at UEL.