Questioning Values in the Delivery of Dance Practices at the University of East London

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> *What do you have in you? Why do you connect to that style? And I also feel like, when you do different things, even though you're not used to it… I think it shows you a lot about yourself, […] you notice how you learn, how you learn things, […] you're like okay, how do I be me in this style?*
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> (Focus Group, 2021, p.20)

Popping, contemporary, locking, house, bharatanatyam, kalaripayattu, modern Afro, capoeira, breaking, dancehall, hip-hop… These are the current dance and movement practices studied by students during their three-year journey on the University of East London (UEL) BA (Hons) Dance: Urban Practice course. This offering is part of an ongoing commitment to challenge the Eurocentric canon which dominates Higher Education (HE) dance training, and contributes to some of our success and reputation with our students and the wider dance community over the past fifteen years. Despite progress, we encounter many challenges as the course continues to develop, in our role as co-Lecturers who have worked collaboratively on the course since 2014. This leads us to important critical discussions about the ethical considerations and questions of value that other popular and social dance scholars (Amin, 2016; McCarthy-Brown, 2014; Dodds, 2011; Malnig, 2009) consider in their work. Consequently, these considerations are at the forefront of our delivery, which we are reflecting on in this chapter.

This research focuses on the teaching of diverse dance practices on the course, and how we prepare our students to enter into the creative industries by inviting them to confront a range of challenges and contradictions. Through a combination of textual analysis, discussion with students, studio-based class observations and experiences through programme leadership and teaching, we consider the value of the course, and how it translates to critical thinking and embodied skills for our students. Despite notable contributions to the field of Afro-diasporic dance forms and the discourse on Black British dance (Adesola Akinleye, 2018; Funmi Adewole, 2016; Sarahleigh Castelyn, 2018), there are limited sources that focus on a diverse dance curriculum delivered in the context of UK higher education. Consequently, we turn to valuable contributions by scholars such as Hyun Jung Chang and Azaria Hogans (2021), Takiyah Nur Amin (2016) and Nyama McCarthy-Brown (2014; 2009), whose research focuses on delivering Afro-diasporic dance forms in Undergraduate dance degrees in the USA. We acknowledge that there are many differences between the structure of USA and UK degrees, such as the credit weighting of foundational and elective courses (Raquel Monroe, 2011, p.38). We also recognise that when discussing Afro-diasporic dance practices, "Black British dance deserves explication on its own terms" (Thomas DeFrantz 2018: ix), which is made difficult when drawing from scholars who work outside of the UK. Therefore we felt it

was important to also draw from detailed studio examples and discussions with our current students, in order to capture aspects of their experience as a crucial part of this research.

As co-authors of this chapter, we share a wealth of experiences having worked together across several modules over the last eight years.[1] Despite areas of similarity and overlap through our shared interests and practice in the area of popular and social dance, our specific dance experiences and cultural backgrounds differ. Carla Trim-Vamben identifies as a British Mauritian, cis-gendered woman, whose current dance practices include house and waacking. Jo Read identifies as a white, British, queer, cis-gendered woman who currently trains in litefeet, along with a dance movement practice informed by past training in popping, hip-hop and contemporary dance. Blind spots and individual privileges impact on this research, often at the forefront of our conversations together, both professionally and personally within our friendship. To attempt to address this, we are committed to individual continuous reflection and critical conversations (Brookfield, 2017) on our practice. This involves evaluating and debating our biases which is supported by ongoing institutional and personal Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) activity and training, and listening to and centering the student voice wherever possible. We also understand that there are ethical issues connected to the delivery of popular, social, Afro-diasporic and Asian-diasporic dance practices within the context of UK higher education, which are far removed from their original roots, which we revisit later in this chapter. All of this also comes with an understanding and awareness that limitations, misjudgements, and areas of misunderstanding are inevitable within our work and practice, which we acknowledge as part of this research.

We begin this chapter by situating the programme within its geographic and historical context, highlighting key areas of practice that contribute to the overall ethos of the course. Following on from this, we focus on a critical discussion of aspects of the delivery of dance practices which feature on the curriculum. In addition to scholarly debate, our work is informed by a small focus group discussion, which took place in November 2021 with student representatives from first, second and third year on the course. Furthermore, due to the broad range of dance practices included on the course, the chapter focuses on one specific pairing of popping and contemporary dance, offered in tandem on the course. We chose to place more emphasis on this, because it is the entry point for our students at the beginning of their first year, and the initial dance practices that they learn in the first term. This part of the chapter is arranged in a series of key themes which encapsulate our thinking: Contradictory Principles and Points of Intersection, Inadequate Terminologies, Embodied Histories and Knowledge, and New Micro-Hierarchies. Through this work, we intend to begin an important discussion about the unique value of offering a broad range of dance practices on a UK degree course, and share some of our considerations as part of our ongoing quest to create equitable and ethical embodied dance experiences for our students.

Contextualising The Dance Course at UEL

In 2007, UEL validated The BA (Hons) Dance: Urban Practice degree course in partnership with a consortium of East London based leaders, lecturers, dancers, producers, and

[1] Carla Trim-Vamben has also been the Programme Leader of the course since 2015, and Jo Read joined her briefly as Co-Programme Leader for an interim period during the academic year of 2021-2022.

community advocates across dance, theatre, and New Vic college. The vision was to offer an undergraduate degree that reflected the diverse range of dance practices that were being offered in East London at the time. Furthermore, the programme aimed to challenge the Eurocentric dance canon of Ballet and Western Contemporary dance techniques, which permeated higher education dance training. Before the course's inception, the borough of Newham in East London historically funded many community dance activities, particularly through the work of East London Dance (East London Dance 2022). Dance companies such as Boy Blue (Boy Blue n.d) also delivered community hip-hop and 'street dance' classes and activities in the area.[2] As East London also had a high demographic of South Asian communities, South Asian dance classes were also taking place led by Akademi (previously known as the Academy of Indian Dance), in London (Akademi, 2019; SADAA, n.d).[3] Ballet and Western contemporary dance were not the predominant dance forms delivered in East London, and so the programme at UEL was designed to reflect this reality.

The historical and social context of East London has led to ongoing connections with local communities, as an important and ongoing part of the design and development of the course. Furthermore, UEL as an institution names "civic engagement" as part of its core aims, and is historically known as "the people's university" (University of East London 2022). Over the years, we have worked closely on various exchange and collaborative projects with East London Dance and Boy Blue, amongst other organisations, dance companies, local schools, colleges and communities to maintain this ethos as a core part of the course. Stratford, East London, where the course is mostly based, has also seen a huge amount of local change as a result of gentrification and regeneration since the London 2012 Olympics. The impact of these shifts is felt by the local population, leading to "displacement and the loss of a sense of place for local young residents" (Kennelly and Watt, 2012, pg.151). In response to this issue, the course centres the geographical and socio-political landscape of East London and the position of UEL within this.[4]

During fourteen years of delivery and two compulsory University-wide revalidation processes, the vision to raise the value of popular, social, Afro-Diasporic and Asian-Diasporic dance forms in Higher Education has always been withheld. The modular framework of the course is designed around four central pillars, which are embedded into three years of core study; dance practice and training, skills and employability, practice-led research and choreography and dance making. The course focuses on dance in various contexts such as stage, screen, studios, clubs and other community and social spaces. The modules and projects are designed sequentially through the years, and aim to cross subject content laterally. The course structure offers dedicated spaces for students to identify the cultural similarities and differences which underpin their learning, and time to consider what this means in their developing practice as emerging artists. Specific examples are discussed later in this chapter.

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[2]In the UK, although now used less frequently, 'street dance' was often used as an umbrella term to describe dance practices including but not limited to: popping, locking, house, hip-hop, breaking, waacking and krump.
[3]The organisation was set up in 1979, aiming to connect South Asian dance with the wider contemporary arts sector.
[4] This is explored in a second year project, "Hip-Hop and Digital Activism", led by Senior Lecturer Dr Claudia Brazzale.

The course was designed to include core training and study of a more equitable balance of dance forms, and a broader range of movement practices. All dance practices offered on the course are compulsory, and are also weighted equally in terms of assessment credit. This aspect is crucial, to avoid "making personal favorites the center of our programs, [and] perpetuating Eurocentric dance hierarchies" (McCarthy-Brown, 2014, p.128). Over the last fourteen years, the dance technique offering in UK higher education has slowly expanded, with multiple institutions now including a wider range of dance practices as a core part of study and training. Other courses which remain focused on contemporary dance practices have also become more inclusive, designing additional programmes and introducing new dance forms into the curriculum.[5] These ongoing shifts are underpinned by current threats to the position of dance within Higher and Further Education (Weale, 2021), as a result of governmental guidance to reprioritise Office for Students (OfS) HE funding toward provision of high-cost 'STEM' subjects, which are Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (Williamson, 2021). This has led to several UK dance course closures,[6] so there is a strong motivation for courses to stay current and relevant, with 'good' graduate outcomes.[7]

Where appropriate, the course rejects the idea of theory and practice as binary oppositions, and alternatively, students are encouraged to consider how their developing embodied knowledge informs their critical thinking skills, and vice versa. This is reinforced by the structure of learning in the studio, which usually features a combination of moving, doing, thinking, reading, writing, watching and discussion across all modules. This is echoed through wide ranging modes of assessment and innovative approaches to feedback, depending on the module or project. One assessment is a 2vs2 competitive battle event in house dance and popping, recently led by artists Clara Bajado and Vicky "Skytilz" Mantey. A team of visiting specialists deliver specific dance and movement forms on the programme each year, such as Baris Yazar teaching capoeira, Shelaine Prince teaching dancehall, and Kamala Devam teaching bharatanatyam and kalaripayattu. These modules use audio feedback in order to utilise a conversational approach, and practitioner-led terminology. These approaches, amongst others, underpin an antiracist pedagogic practice that we are constantly striving for, to decolonise approaches to the curriculum since the inception of the course in 2007.

Contradictory Principles and Points of Intersection

Our detailed studio examples are from a series of technique classes that we observed in the Autumn term of 2021, including popping classes taught by Senior Lecturer Fred "Realness"

[5] Examples include BA (Hons) Diverse Dance Styles at Irie Dance Theatre, BA (Hons) Dance at Kingston University, and BA (Hons) Professional and Commercial Dance at Shockout Arts. The Northern School of Contemporary Dance (NSCD) started a Cert HE in Cultural Dance Forms, and London Contemporary Dance School (LCDS) offer a broad range of dance forms on their BA (Hons) Contemporary Dance.

[6] Dance degree courses that have closed or suspended recruitment at the time of writing in the UK include the University of South Wales in 2019, University of Surrey in 2019 and University of Wolverhampton in 2022.

[7] 'Good' graduate outcomes, refers to those students who graduate with either 1st class (70% and above) or a 2:1 (60-69%) for their overall degree classification.

Folkes, and contemporary dance classes with influences from Graham, Cunningham and Release. The contemporary dance classes were taught by Senior Lecturer Robert Nicholson, and Visiting Lecturer Delene Gordon.[8] The classes are the technique starting point for our students during their first term on the course. It is important to note the typical entry points for students on the programme, as they often arrive with a varied knowledge base of popular, social, Afro-diasporic and Asian-diasporic forms of dance. Our students have a diverse range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, with many being the first in their family to attend University. Out of the 123 students for the academic year 2021-2022, 45% identified either as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds and 55% identified as white or from white European backgrounds. If students have had formal dance training at school or college, contemporary dance forms are inevitably part of this. Many of our students however, have had no formal dance training and have learnt popular dance styles informally through online platforms, community dance settings or in recreational dance studios.[9]

Hyun Jung Chang and Azaria Hogans note that when their students study West African dance and hip-hop dance, they struggle to adjust to key principles of the forms such as maintaining the "bounce" or to "ground and rebound continually to the beat" (2021, p.9). This implies that their students do not usually have previous experience of these dance cultures. For our students, the challenge is often the opposite, and we observed that many students struggled to adjust to key principles of Western contemporary dance such as "the erect body dictated by the straight, centred spine" (Gottschild, 1998, p.14). One student admitted that they found learning key principles of Western contemporary dance more "restrictive" and "fixed" (Focus Group, 2021, p.28). Another student noted that popping gave them more opportunity to implement their own personal style (Focus Group, 2021, p.14).

Students are encouraged to value and appreciate all forms of dance, whilst also acknowledging that the "Africanist aesthetic is often in direct opposition to Western Philosophical principles" (Osumare, 2016, p.26), with Western contemporary dance and ballet historically being privileged above other dance practices. One way to invite students to reflect on that opposition is through identifying intriguing points of similarity and difference between the movement principles and value systems of the techniques. For example, a central theme in both the popping and contemporary dance classes at UEL is contraction and release. Despite being the same overall principle, this is explored very differently in each dance form. One student describes this contrasting experience as follows, "in contemporary, it's a big contraction, then that extends to the rest of the body. And in popping it's loads of [small] contractions that make a big movement" (Focus Group, 2021, p.7). Simultaneously, students become aware of their need to shift, when moving from one dance practice or space of learning to another. One student commented, "if I have a hip-hop freestyle, then I need to change everything about myself, I need to change my clothes, I need to change my environment, I need to change the music…" (Focus Group, 2021, p.5). Consequently,

[8] Frederick Folkes is a dancer, choreographer and actor, who has been practising Popping since 1982 and has trained with the Electric Boogaloos. Robert Nicholson is a dance artist and researcher who trained at London Studio Centre, he is currently working on his PhD which focuses on the unwritten and oral histories of drag performers on the London scene. Delene Gordon is a dance artist who trained at Northern Contemporary Dance School, and also works as a massage therapist and trainee biodynamic psychotherapist.

[9] In the past we have had students enter the programme with their main dance practice as bone-breaking, krump and Salsa Caleña, as examples.

students begin to develop skills when analysing different movement practices, discovering parallels, compatible aspects, and aesthetic clashes that they may not have initially observed.

Understanding points of intersection and stark contradictions between dance cultures becomes crucial for students, when considering that many of the industry professional choreographers, choreographic platforms and projects are based on a combination of aesthetics from Afro-diasporic and contemporary dance forms. UK choreographers such as Botis Seva, Dickson Mbi and Julia Cheng all work with a combination of Afro-diasporic and contemporary dance practices, amongst other artistic influences. Frequent mentorship projects such as *Back to the Lab* and *Open Art Surgery* at Breakin' Convention also draw from different artistic practices, where emerging hip-hop dance theatre artists are paired with mentors from hip-hop dance theatre, contemporary dance and theatre directing.[10] At the end of the intensive project, the work-in-progress is presented at the Lilian Baylis Theatre (Breakin' Convention, n.d.) with opportunities for audience response and feedback. Making theatre-based choreographic works is a popular career path for our graduates, and it is notable that even when development opportunities are designed for hip-hop dance artists, they still draw influence from contemporary dance. Frequently, it often appears that the only way to be accepted or funded as a theatre choreographer working with dance practices outside of this canon, is to utilise and draw from Western theatre dance compositional and structuring devices as part of "tactical ways of working" (Adewole cited in DeFrantz, 2016, p.68). This is further emphasised through the many core textbooks that are published on choreographic practice, which are typically rooted in white Western theatre dance principles. It is important for us to prepare students for the reality of the industry, whilst also exploring ways to challenge traditions, and inform creative and choreographic decision making.[11]

Whilst training in popping and contemporary dance, first year students simultaneously undertake a choreography and dance making project. This is an example where contradictions emerge through major differences in where value is placed in the music-dance relationships for each dance practice, a theme explored in Jo Read's (2018; 2020) doctoral research and subsequent article focused on musicality. Popping has Afro-Diasporic roots and is characterised by a close, detailed music-dance relationship where "significant beats of the music" are emphasised (Miyakawa and Schloss, 2015, 340). The aim is to create an illusion that the dancer is causing the sound through their movements, and different sounds in the music (e.g. snare drum, hi-hat) often correspond to specific qualities and textures in the movement. Contemporary dance forms however, are often associated with a rejection of musicality (Banes, 2011, p.xxii), and the "non-relationship" became a conventional feature of modern dance, propelled by the famous collaborations between John Cage and Merce Cunningham (Jordan, 2007, p.12). Notably, it has since been established that the primary aim was not necessarily to disconnect music and dance (McMains and Thomas, 2013, p.199) in this example. A "righteous aesthetic high ground" (White, 2006, p.68) however, can sometimes prevail when working with popular dance forms in choreographic settings.

[10] E.g. Jonzi D, Jonathan Burrows and Anthony Ekundayo-Lennon.

[11] *Czerwone Korale* is an example of a piece choreographed by recent graduate Wiktoria Grzes on the course, inspired by both polish folk dances and hip-hop dance. Wiktoria was selected to be developed for *Open Art Surgery* at Breakin' Convention.

One example of this is in response to hip-hop dance company Boy Blue's work, *Blak Whyte Gray* (2017), with whom the dance course has regularly worked in collaboration. When opting for an abstract, episodic structure for this particular work, the work was praised as more "artful" (Roy, 2017) as a result of its contemporary influences. There are also many contemporary dance choreographers who are also well known for working with close and intricate relationships with music, such as Mark Morris, Matthew Bourne and Akram Khan. Nevertheless, considering the musical traditions and clashes in values of different dance practices creates space for dynamic debate and "creative problem solving" (Amin, 2016, p.22) for students. Students are invited to undertake their own creative tasks that often flex the boundaries of these musical traditions. A simple introductory task might involve playing with popping movement vocabulary, but working closely with a piece of classical or experimental music, or experimenting with abstract movement to hip-hop or other forms of popular music and evaluating how meaning is changed. Consequently, an "unusual synthesis of aesthetic influences" and values (Read, 2018, p.41) are explored in a creative context, as a result of the dance practices being studied by the students. Through engaging with critical discussion about musicality and musical choices, they are encouraged to think reflexively when making their own creative choices, as emerging choreographers and dance makers.

Inadequate Terminologies

> *If you go to a battle, no one says, "that was a great improvisation".*
> (Focus Group, 2021, p.3)

> *When we talk about improvisation in class, people are less shook than when we say freestyle.*
> (Clara Bajado, 2019)

Dance techniques, training, styles, forms and practices, are a few of the many terms in circulation on our course, used by staff and students to describe a serious and sustained commitment to their craft. As the programme spans the study of many dance cultures in a wide range of commercial, community, underground and educational contexts, we acknowledge that there are many different spaces that staff and students occupy to experience different dance cultures. Resultantly, and as the quote above alludes to, there are many instances when ideas of a shared common language and assumptions of the meaning of specific dance terminology is challenged in practice.

Frequent discussions about the course name itself, and the problems with the term 'urban' are constantly raised as part of our reflection on uses of terminology on the course. This was made all the more urgent in the aftermath of the tragic murder of George Floyd in 2020, which became a turning point for anti-racism and "the largest anti-racist demonstrations in Britain in the 21st or 20th Century" (Mohdin, Swann and Bannock, 2020). Hyun Jung Chang and Azaria Hogans discuss the problems with this term along with others, such as "global" and "world" dance (2021, p.7). We acknowledge the issues with the use of the term 'urban', and the negative impact it has on black cultures. Although it is likely that the course name will be changed, we have been hesitant about doing this in a performative or reactive

capacity, in order to firstly engage in full consultation with our current students, which is currently in process. Until this has been completed, the existing course name presents an opportunity to engage in critical debate with students, staff and our collaborators in the dance community.

As part of this discussion, we also invite critical reflection of other terms used on the course, such as 'technique', as it often implicitly indicates ballet and contemporary dance forms. Acknowledging Racquel Monroe's (2011) work on the meaning of the term 'technique', we notice a similar hierarchical pattern in our audition process for new applicants for the course. When engaging in small group discussion, we frequently overhear applicants state that they train in 'technical styles' but also do 'urban' or 'hip-hop styles'. When we ask about this, the 'technical styles' are usually contemporary and/or ballet forms, and applicants therefore insinuate that the other dance practices are not part of what they consider to be their dance technique. Monroe's work has been a successful access point to introduce technique as a "loaded term" (2011, p.52), and to bring about an expanded awareness of its meaning. Technique is a term that is still frequently used on the course, with a shared understanding that every dance practice on the course contributes to this equally.

Amongst UK practitioners, similar debates have taken place in relation to issues with the terms "Hip-Hop" and "Street Dance", along with discussion about which dance practices can be considered to be included under those terms (Moser-Kindler, 2018). This has been further complicated by (mis)representations of various dance practices in commercial contexts, such as reality television competitions (DanceMadnessTV, 2012) or social media viral trends. In these instances, although they make a positive contribution by dance becoming more widely accessible, the movement and vocabulary used by the practitioners for whom these dance practices are an integral part of their daily embodied and lived experience, is often misconstrued or absent entirely. We connect students with these debates early on in their journey on the course, through introducing practitioner-led sources such as *The Capsule*, which is a UK Street Dance Media Platform.[12]

Other terminology that is often used interchangeably, can also present opportunities for critical debate in class. Carla Trim-Vamben's research on Freestyle Practice in UK House Dance (2019), highlights problems with the difference in students' response to the terms 'improvisation' and 'freestyle' in practical house dance classes. This research, along with the Focus Group discussions (2021), focuses on the limitations and issues when using these terms to indicate the same meaning. Students describe a fear of the term freestyle, which is predominately used in dance cultures with Afro-diasporic origins, and tend to feel more at ease when the term improvisation is used in technique classes. This phenomenon is not synonymous to House dance, as we observe students grappling with this conflict on the course more generally, as most of the popular and social forms that are learnt have freestyle as a core part, such as popping, locking, breaking and hip-hop. Consequently, learning to freestyle and getting more comfortable with freestyling, is a fundamental part of many of the dance practices that are delivered as part of the technique strand of the course.

[12] This platform can be found on instagram using the tag @thecapsule.ldn and the weekly Podcast (*The Duke LDN Podcast*) is available on Youtube, Apple Podcasts, and other podcast platforms.

> *So, for me, when I think about improv, I always take it to the contemporary side. Very western very European.*
>
> (Focus Group, 2021, p.2)

Danielle Goldman (2010) and Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1998) discuss how European American improvisational practices have shaped the meaning of the term 'improvisation', which has roots in Afro-diasporic and Asian-diasporic cultural practices. This meaning is where improvisation is seen as having, "no outside set of rules to remember" (Blom and Chaplin, 1988, p.6) and where, "a spontaneous mode of creation…takes place without the aid of a manuscript or score" (Goldman, 2010, p.5). These general definitions have continued to shape the idea of improvisation in dance training spaces in various educational settings such as HE. Freestyle is not fully represented or visible in these definitions, as it is based on learning and mastering foundational codified movement and creating personal unique variations. The aim is to share and exchange with other dancers to inspire new pathways whilst dancing in synchronicity with the music (Trim-Vamben, 2019, p.30).

The difference in the meanings of these terms presents an ethical issue when enabling the use of them interchangeably, and the transmission of freestyle dance practice involves a clunky transmission into a white institutional space that is steeped in European aesthetics. Scholars such as Jacqui Malone (1996) and Jonathan Jackson (2001) offer definitions and frameworks to analyse improvisation in African American vernacular dances that supports the analysis of the British experience of popular and social dances in HE. The lack of acknowledgement of definitions through Afro-diasporic and Asian-diasporic lenses, also contributes to the misconceptions and cultural misunderstandings of freestyle dance practice (Trim-Vamben, 2019, p.28). Students sometimes misunderstood the importance of the use of music in freestyle, often dancing offbeat or at times not acknowledging the music at all. Students frequently did not understand, and at times did not value the importance of mastering and demonstrating the codified movement in sync with the music. In an approach to help students feel more at ease, the use of inadequate terminologies had created another layer of complex problems, which in turn created more fear and anxiety.

Delivering dance forms outside of the dominant canon in HE settings, inadvertently creates a hybrid conflict of meanings and values that needs more thought and attention. As a result of these findings, we have created supportive approaches to students' development in their technique classes. We guide students to raise their awareness of the differences, similarities and the possibilities of new frameworks when studying a broad range of dance practices. The Eurocentric interpretation of terminology holds value in dance practice, and we ask students to acknowledge that whilst questioning and giving space to frameworks from Afro-diasporic and Asian-diasporic dancing cultures. Engaging with the nuanced complexity of how HE institutions impact meaning in dance training, reminds us that students should not be viewed from a deficit model when their environment and prior learning has had an impact on their understanding of terminology.

Embodied Histories and Knowledge

The time allocated to contextualise the historical and sociocultural contexts of the movements being taught, varies according to different dance practices on the course. In the contemporary dance classes, there was a clear acknowledgement that vast documentation of theories, core principles, pioneers and histories were readily available in the library and through online archives for students to access. In popping classes however, the oral transmission of history through class discussion featured much more, partly due to the scarcity of historical and published documentation. Furthermore, there is also a history of distrust towards academics in university settings who have published material about hip-hop and other closely associated popular dance and music cultures. Craig and Kynard note that when this occurs, "these so-called experts are far removed from the everyday cultural production of hip-hop" (2017, p.146-147). Additionally, de Paor-Evans acknowledges the "marked difference between hip-hop artists and practitioners visiting academic institutions and academics developing hip-hop research from within academic institutions" (2018). This highlights the importance of practitioners who have lived experiences in these styles and those who have learnt first hand from leading pioneers to tell 'their stories'. Early representatives from the course identified this issue when it was first designed, and as a result the university sustains its commitment to employ practitioners who have a rich embodied knowledge to share with students.[13]

As popping teacher Fred 'Realness' Folkes has been taught directly by members of the Electric Boogaloos, students value learning from him enormously. The focus on the cultural context in technique classes on the programme enables students to connect with the movements in a deeper way. One first year student describes how Folkes offers context on why movements were created, and how and why they were used. They reflect that their prior knowledge of popping was more focused on copying the outline of the moves, rather than understanding their meaning (Focus Group, 2021, p.13). Folkes' focus on the socio-historical context of the dance practice clearly resonates with the students, as they describe Folkes' intricate explanations of different movements in class. He teaches specific social dances from decades earlier such as the 'Twist', which he then references by showing the students how traces are embodied and still visible within popping movement vocabularies. This emphasis on oral histories is also prevalent in the delivery of other dance and movement practices on the course, such as capoeira, locking and breaking.

The consequence of this approach is that students begin to develop an in-depth understanding of and appreciation for the different influences that inform their own dance practice and personal movement style. One student below reflects on their process of identifying the emerging influences in their own personal practice.

> *I do use a lot of influence from popping in my Hip-Hop. And, I do use a lot of Hip-Hop in my house. But because of this course, I kind of learned how to transform it or adapt it so people can see, oh there's the influence, for example, in my hip hop freestyle, but you don't say that that's popping, because it's deconstructed in a way that I take what I've learned in popping but I put it on myself.*
>
> (Focus Group, 2021, p.12).

[13] Popping and locking teacher Fred 'Realness' Folkes recently transitioned from a visiting lecturer to a permanent core team member and Senior Lecturer on the course at UEL.

This statement evidences the ways that students are able to grasp the crucial importance of referencing a range of movements' influence, in order to protect and share knowledge about dance practices that are historically excluded from the canon. In addition to this approach which is adopted in the technique aspect of the course, students are also encouraged to consider the ethics of their practice in other modules and projects. The careful handling of the embodied knowledge learnt when applied in other contexts, becomes a central focus in all course content. This ethos is sustained when working with students on making, teaching, leading, producing, managing and researching dance. One example is, during a project called "Border Crossings" led by Dr Sarahleigh Castelyn, where students engage in practice-led research to explore how dance forms and practices "rarely have pure roots or routes" (Castelyn, 2022). As part of this choreographic project, students learn how the dance practices "adapt to shifts in economies, the migration of bodies across geographies, and the exchange of values, politics and labour" (Castelyn, 2022). Students therefore "increase their capacity to learn cultural sensibility and responsibility" (Chang and Hogans, 2021, p.10) whether they eventually work as teachers, performers, dance makers, producers, or choose to transfer their skills to another area of work entirely.

New Micro-Hierarchies

Once the programme was established, we quickly came to realise that challenging the canon through a dance degree course in UK higher education had potential to create new problematic views, often in the form of an implicit 'anti-ballet' and/or an 'anti-postmodern dance' sentiment. This is fuelled by understandable student frustrations about the dismissal of their dance interests as serious topics of study in their previous schools, colleges or dance spaces, and consequent realisations about issues of erasure and appropriation. When reflecting on learning capoeira and bharatanatyam, one student commented "I didn't really realise until now how much release and contemporary has pinched and pinched from these styles" (Focus Group, 2021, p.9). Students are welcome to share their previous experience and voice their frustrations in a discussion context, as this may be the first time that they are in a space where their dance practices and experiences are deemed valuable and worthy of serious study. Simultaneously, students also begin to identify the new local value systems and micro-hierarchies that emerge when this resentment becomes collective, and shared amongst the student cohorts, and UEL dance community.

Encouraging students to reconnect with and appreciate ballet and contemporary dance practices helps to gently challenge this binary way of thinking. A particular focus on investigating professional companies who challenge stereotypes of race, gender and sexuality within their forms, such as Ballet Black (ballet black, 2020) and Ballez (Ballez, n.d), helps to add complexity and depth to the debates. For many, this increases relatability and provides an access point to connect with the appreciation of dance practices which students may have felt historically excluded from. As many of the dance practices that our students learn are often associated with freedom of expression and assumed as being more inclusive in terms of representation, this is also an opportunity to complicate the debate. Students are introduced to dance companies such as Ill Abilities (Ill Abilities, 2022), who challenge the ableist

structures within Breaking. In an article published for *Ink Cypher*, Emily Tisshaw asks the question, "where is disability in Hip Hop Dance?" (2021), as ableism is a hugely neglected area of research in relation to hip-hop dance and other popular and social dance practices. Students then have the opportunity to identify areas of ignorance, re-examine their personal prejudices, assumptions and value systems (Brookfield, 2017), whilst developing their skills and learning on the programme.

In our quest to challenge the canon and develop the course, predictable debates surface about which dance practices to include and omit from the curriculum. In these discussions, inevitable tensions emerge about how these choices construct "systems of classification and criterion of worth" (Dodds, 2011, p.99). Studying multiple dance forms also sometimes inadvertently leads to new micro-hierarchies within the programme, where specific dance practices (e.g. West African social dances to Afrobeats music)[14] become suddenly more favourable amongst some students due to the sudden rising popularity within popular culture transmitted through social media channels. There is of course space for personal preference, and self-discovery in relation to the dance practices that feel more or less comfortable for students is a crucial part of the journey through the programme. When one particular dance culture seems to be positioned as suddenly more valuable by a majority or a collective cohort however, it presents another opportunity to open up a debate. For the aforementioned example, we introduced our first-year students to a recent documentary in the *Netflix Explained* series, called 'Dance Crazes' (2021). This short episode draws attention to examples of Tik Tok's viral dance challenges, a phenomenon that allows for fast spreading of dance 'trends'. Crucially, it also highlights issues of appropriation by corporations, and explains how specific dances often made by black creators become sensationalised by white creators. After watching and relating this to other sources and reading material, students "face ambiguity" and "wrestle with diversity" (Amin, 2016, p.23), and the opportunity to think critically about the impact of the widespread popularity of some of the dances they enjoy most.

Conclusion

Students graduate from the BA (Hons) Dance: Urban Practice course with a broad range of embodied movement experiences, and a rich knowledge and awareness of dance cultures and practices. Many of our graduates go on to have exciting and varied careers in the industry, including but not limited to performing, making, directing, producing, teaching and managing dance. Often, graduate pathways reflect the ethos of the programme, as they continue to challenge stereotypes in dance through their entrepreneurship and artistry.[15] What happens in the technique strand of the course, becomes increasingly meaningful when this knowledge is

[14] This is a dance practice commonly referred to as 'Afro Dance', but there are many ongoing debates within this community about terminology and naming. For the academic year of 2021-2022, our teacher George 'Unkle TC' Dukz settled on 'Modern Afro Dance Styles', for the naming of his class.

[15] Examples include Tia Denton and her company Empowered Movement (@empowered.movement_ on Instagram), Charlie Blair and her company The Blair Academy (@theblairacademy on Instagram) and Karine Goudout who previously worked as the Coordinator at Breakin' Convention (www.breakinconvention.com), and has now joined the core dance team as a Lecturer at UEL.

applied in other contexts, and is given the necessary space for exploration and reflection during other projects on the course. Similarly, critical thinking skills that develop from other projects such as choreography and dance making, are applied in the technique classroom to inform and make a valuable contribution to embodied learning.

In this chapter, we have outlined some of the challenges that we confront when considering values and ethics in our delivery of a wide range of dance practices on the course. Encouraging students to consider contradictions and similarities in their learning, often allows for innovative exchanges and the creation of original dance work. Grappling with tricky terminologies presents many opportunities to question uses of language, and how meanings are impacted by wider socio-political issues, causing frequent shifts and ethical adjustments. Students learn the value and importance of documentation and oral histories, through the realisation that the learning materials for many of the dance practices are disproportionate to that of ballet and contemporary dance forms. Many of them go on to engage in research projects dedicated to this discovery in their final year, focusing on aspects of dance cultures that they find to be absent from scholarship. Finally, we revealed that challenging hierarchies that exist in dance practice and study can inadvertently create new ones, and there is a subsequent shared acceptance that this work will never be complete. Consequently, students have opportunities to develop a sustained commitment to critique and awareness of their own biases and value judgements, whilst still working as part of a collective effort to challenge the canon.

It is important that students develop the ability to consistently question and critically reflect on their practice. This ethos remains at the crux of our work on the course. It is only possible through openness and a willingness to challenge, both staff members and students. Often this involves honesty and frankness from staff members about the problems we encounter, and a clear acknowledgement that we do not have or hold all of the knowledge and the answers. This encourages a reflexive approach at the heart of all collaborative work, allowing for questions such as why am I doing what I'm doing? What kind of mover do I want to be? And what does this mean for me and for others? This is made possible because questions of value are embedded at the core of learning across all modules.

We are excited by the increasing numbers of dance degree courses in the UK who are continuing to expand and diversify the dance forms that they offer for practice and study, and widening the offering of dance technique classes led by expert practitioners acts as a useful starting point to consider the value of embodied history and knowledge in action. We believe strongly however, that if a wider range of dance practices are offered on a programme in terms of technique, the work does not end here. All areas of a dance programme need to shift, because if modules or projects aiming to develop skills in areas such as choreography, improvisation and critical thinking are still firmly rooted only in Western Theatre dance principles, the same problems around hierarchies of value are perpetuated. Thus, we have an ethical responsibility to not only continually review the institutional frameworks of Higher Education, but also to consider shifts in values which are created through changes in the curriculum by looking at the course as a whole.

Despite the inclusive approach that we strive for, we will continue to face challenges when working within UK Higher Education with a broad range of dance cultures and practices, and this is not always an ideal fit. The BA (Hons) Dance: Urban Practice course however, consistently presents a critical and crucial space to identify and challenge our personal and collective hierarchies of value, which continue to be inherently influenced by the Western dance principles that dominate Higher Educational practices in the UK. As the course continues to develop, we remain committed to ensure that the rich and diverse dance cultures that are practised in East London are celebrated as legitimate and serious contributions to dance technique and training.

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