ABSTRACT

In this paper I address practice-based research methods in context with my choreographic process. I link this research within the teaching/research nexus, which informs my current PhD research. I will examine the application of the video camera as a dance partner in the process of developing choreography.

The impetus for this studio-based research derives from five years of trial with Bachelor of Dance students at AUT University. The students and I play with methods in which the accessible video camera is used as a fellow dance partner, as an alternate method of investigating ways of ‘seeing’ choreography-in-progress. The relationship that students build with the cameras furthers their understanding of how digital and corporeal merge in the studio environment. The camera as a dance partner provides the students with perspectives on point of view and therefore ignites their inquiry around choreographic invention. The outcome may not necessarily combine the live with the digital; but the process does. One of the immediate responses is that students see movement determined by the screen, which results in varied perspectives on seeing, documenting and evaluating. The dancer/camera partnership facilitates encounters with diverse social, political and physiological realms.

My PhD studio methodology occurs in a cycle of practical workshops, writing and reflecting. Through a method of blended theoretical and practical discovery and reflections, I will clarify camera-related approaches to making dance/theatre that will inform my own and students’ studio processes.
In my teaching and research over the past few years, I have used artistic problem-solving within the teaching/research nexus, to introduce a range of dance-making approaches for Bachelor of Dance students at AUT.

The teaching/research nexus enables me as an artist, researcher and lecturer to sustain the continuum between studio inquiry, studio findings and my own practice. Many questions initiated in the classroom with undergrad students have become larger problem-solving structures, informing my PhD research.

The students are well aware of the teaching/research nexus within the Bachelor of Dance, as my colleague Linda Ashley and I established this multi-faceted model from the conception of the new BDance degree in 2005. This is just one example of the model.

A framework for artists to practice through research states Caroline Gray, as cited in Barrett and Bolt (2007) is a place; “where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using … specific methods familiar to us as practitioners” (p. 147).

My MFA research activated the creation of a hybrid dance/theatre lexicon to enhance similarities between actor and dancer objectives in creating dance/theatre performances. My Doctoral research links this previous practice into my current teaching/research nexus and inquiries around cameras as tools, in the dance-making process. I investigate similarities between choreographic and cinematic formal structures to invent methodologies for dance/theatre composition. The video camera attached to the moving dancer, or to the moving dancers, captures movement in real time. The footage and the immediate experience ignite further potential based on practical/theoretical discoveries.
Studio workshop #1 camera improvisation

Photographer: Larry Lavender, Camera-operator: Jennifer Nikolai, Dancer: Natalie Dowd

The impetus for my practice-based PhD research derives from working with BDance students, investigating methods in which the accessible video camera is used as a fellow dance partner, questioning ways of ‘seeing’ choreography-in-progress. Over the past five years I’ve developed through trial and error, a range of studio-based questions that fuel exercises with students in Dance Practice V, a level 7, core course in the undergraduate pathway.

Historically the filmmaker or video artist camera has its own practice as does the choreographer. I believe that histories and relationships between these forms can be combined when using both, equally in the dance-making process. Douglas Rosenberg (2000) highlights the relationship between dancer and camera as depending on a degree of trust. The two bodies should have an intimate egalitarian relationship, which takes time to develop; as is the case between scene partners.
The camera can be an intrusive presence, as it not only records but influences the dance and the moving dancer as well. When creating dance for the camera, collaborators have a tendency to assume a relationship based in a sort of hierarchy that places the camera in service to the choreography and is at odds with the very nature of collaboration (p. 6).

**Studio workshop #1 exercise: Vertically Challenged**

*Photographer: Larry Lavender*

The relationships students build with cameras furthers their understanding of how digital and corporeal can merge in the process of dance-making. The camera as a dance partner widens their perspectives on point of view (POV) and informs their approaches towards choreographic invention. The students do eventually shoot and edit videodance pieces in this paper, but it is in the stages of making movement decisions leading to the videodance outcome, storyboarding and writing about their choices, where they make links between live and digital tools for this and future works. In work-shopping formal cinematic concepts in the dance studio one of the immediate responses is that students see movement determined by the screen or the frame, again, questioning POV which results in varied responses to seeing, documenting and evaluating. The dancer/camera, live/digital partnerships facilitate encounters with diverse social, political and physiological realms.
Johannes Birringer (2004) articulates that choreography is the body moving in space and time. Its relationship with technology has ontological and epistemological implications for the discipline. These implications link with Etchells (1999) stating that contemporary performance “…must take account of how technology […] has rewritten and is rewriting bodies, changing our understanding of narratives and places, changing our relationships to culture, changing our understandings of presence” (p. 97).

Studio workshop #1 camera improvisation

*Photographer: Larry Lavender, Camera-operator: Lucy Turner*

The longer I teach and reflect on teaching, the deeper the connections between teaching this paper and my research questions become. In classroom teaching and research workshops, I base camera/dancer tasks around cinematic structures when developing approaches with dancers and cameras. I look for material that appears to be a direct consequence of the presence and the use of the camera(s). My PhD methodology occurs in stages of work-shopping with BDance alumni, as reflecting on each workshop stage and the questions arising from one workshop, informs the next.
I conducted workshop #1 over 7 days in June 2010. Workshop #2 will take place in December 2010, with new objectives that have been ignited by reflections of the first process. I'll begin to invite audiences into showings in February 2011. This is when many of our discoveries on showing or exhibiting to audiences will come into consideration. Showings will occur in an interactive or roaming exhibition format as opposed to a proscenium layout. Workshop stages will layer, as I continue to write and reflect on these stages of inquiry.

The dancers in my workshop #1 were alumni and therefore had experienced some of the cinematic structures I link with dance and camera as delivered in the Dance Practice V paper. In this workshop process my approaches differed from that in the paper delivery, yet paper content and approaches provided a foundation for concepts we collectively developed with this research.

I didn’t play a lecturing role in workshop #1. We instigated generations of new approaches in a collective creation model. I was a dancer, 5 alumni were dancers, as was my Secondary Supervisor, Larry Lavender. This statement exhibits Dr. Lavender’s summary of my approach.

Jennifer has set up conditions under which the group of dancers can create in a moment-to-moment manner with each other, using the camera as a central and/or peripheral focal point from one exercise to the next. The exercises using the camera are created by the members of the group individually or collaboratively, and then tried out and discussed. Initial explorations and basic instruction in the capabilities of the camera and in the nature of conventional kinds of camera shots led to the development by the group of a dozen or so "games" to play with the camera in and with movement.

(Lavender, personal communications, 2010)

For me, one of the most revealing “games” or tasks was “choreograph the camera" which reverses the usual dancer-to-camera power dynamic by locking the camera into a fixed, choreographed pathway therefore freeing the dancer to be captured or evade capture on video. Dancers manipulated what
the camera saw, as the camera’s set pathway restricted its ability to choose to shoot what was “beautiful” or “pleasing.”

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**Studio workshop #1 exercise: Choreograph the Camera**

*Photographer: Larry Lavender, Camera-operator: Jennifer Nikolai, Dancer: Natalie Dowd*

The task "repeat and report" obliged each dancer to create, perform, and describe in words their movement phrase, only when singled out by the camera lens. They improvised with free movement until the camera “found” them, setting the convention that they had to repeat their movement, articulating verbally what they were doing, for the camera’s capture. As soon as the camera “chose” to release them from the frame, they could return to open improvisation.
Studio workshop #1 exercise: Repeat and Report

Photographer: Larry Lavender, Camera-operator: Jennifer Nikolai, Dancer: Melisa Breckon

The task "negative space" freed the dancer from considerations of the camera's presence and asked the camera operator to privilege the non-materialized empty space between and around dancers rather than the space filled by their bodies. The cameras captured moments “in-between” and space that was under-utilized. This initiated potentiality of movement to fill the space, as well as potentiality of the lens to frame negative space through compositional choice.

Studio workshop #1 exercise: Vertically Challenged considering Negative Space

Photographer: Larry Lavender
The task “bound together” both restricted and freed camera operators’ choices as two cameras were bound by one thera-band. Being bound restricted their mobility as individuals, yet it also provided a sense of security. The camera operator capturing actions in one section of the studio, could rely on actions being captured by the second camera, elsewhere. The close distance of the cameras to each other would link the two frames and what might otherwise be de-segmented footage, providing a closer spatial and temporal relationship between the choreographed footage. This was particularly satisfying for dancers to watch retrospectively, in a split-screen format. For them, this exercise highlighted the range of perspectives available to the viewer or audience, when watching one piece of choreography.

Studio workshop #1 exercise: Bound Together

*Photographer: Larry Lavender, Dancers: Ben Rogers, Lucy Turner*
Studio workshop #1 exercise: Bound Together

Photographer: Larry Lavender, Camera-operators: Lucy Turner, Melissa Breckon

Immediate reflections on each task, spawned ideas to elaborate on these tasks or create new ones. Thus a central question of the research became: how does the use of the camera and reflections on its use lead to the invention of "what is next" to try in rehearsal? It is important to note that there is no actual dance or videodance being made at this stage, so the "what is next?" question is not bound to making a work for audiences. This is an emergent value process. Actions and reflections on what just happened, informs what is to happen next. There is no pre-existing idea or plan for a piece that is competing for control over the next stage of work.

In summary, my approach investigates the use of one or more video cameras, alongside the mover’s body as a tool in developing dance/theatre works with students or professional performers. I explore the use of the camera both as
instigator and documenter, looking for and at material that appears to be a direct consequence of the presence and the use of camera(s).

This research raises questions such as: how can the camera enhance the operations of making dance/theatre performance works? How does the use of the camera and reflections on its use inform the invention of "what is next" to try in rehearsal? Does potential disappear without the camera documentation or does it instigate material not otherwise “seen”? Do the roles of movers and capturing machines reverse, compliment each other or collide?

Through a method of blended theoretical and practical discovery and reflections, I explore camera-related approaches to making dance/theatre that will inform my own and students’ studio processes.

I’d like to think that while students are in the degree and once they’ve left, these choreographic approaches resonate, and that they continue to feel the impact of investigations such as these within the teaching/research nexus we practice in the Bachelor of Dance.
References


