

Dance and disability: the dancer, the viewer and the presumption of difference

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This paper aims to address two related themes. The first theme is the current provision for practical skill development for disabled dance students within Higher Education in the UK, and the extent to which inclusive pedagogical approaches challenge conceptions of the disabled body, both within and beyond dance. The second theme draws on the first as a basis for discussion and explores ways of seeing and interpreting the dance and in particular the different strategies and resources the viewer draws upon when viewing the disabled dance performer. These themes have emerged from a recently completed period of research, conducted with my own staff and students at Coventry University, which has focused predominantly on the experience of disabled dance students, the development of an inclusive curriculum framework and the different ways in which students learn dance techniques in class.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a welcome shift towards recognising and celebrating the contribution to dance by disabled dance performers. Several companies¹ have been instrumental in gaining status for dance artists with disabilities. These developments have benefited from discourses of and about the body within the field of social and cultural theory, particularly since the 1980s. Whilst it could be said that some dance companies that give legitimacy to the disabled dancer have now themselves become 'establishment', inviting a new kind of intervention into the mainstream, **training for the disabled dancer remains at the margins and therefore the disabled dance student is marginalised within a predominantly able-bodied community of learners; individuals with disabilities tend to be defined by their difference** (Schwyzer, 2005, p. 7). Traditional methods for teaching dance techniques are inclined to emphasise the development of bodily control and aesthetic virtuosity. This can easily negate the presence of the individual, creating a 'multipurpose hired body [that]

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subsumes and smoothes over differences' (Foster, 1997, p. 256). Despite low numbers of disabled dance students in higher education (HE) in the UK, **their participation provides the opportunity to reflect on and challenge these methods, and assumptions about the disabled body.**

The key purpose of this paper is to explore both why it is that disabled dance students find participation so difficult and the challenges faced by mainstream tutors in delivering dance techniques for disabled students. The first part of the paper discusses the outcomes of a research project funded by Coventry University to examine dance students' experience of learning dance techniques,² particularly the experience of disabled students. In writing up this research my aim is to give voice to the students, particularly disabled students who can so often feel silenced through their struggle to attempt to conform to normative representations of the dancing body. It is this discussion that establishes the first theme of the paper. A second theme then takes the discussion beyond the educational setting to offer a hypothesis or typology for the different ways in which disabled dance performance is viewed. Feedback from students made clear that they understood important connections between the technique class and performance—one being a preparation for the other. This raised questions about how the experience of learning and watching dance in the studio translated to the ways in which disabled dance performance is viewed. The research that underpins this paper is therefore informed by the students themselves, their teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs)³ and also by the insights provided by practitioners and writers in this field, principally Petra Koppers (2003), Ann Cooper Albright (1997, 2001), Adam Benjamin (2002) and British dance artist Louise Katerega, who has a long-standing relationship with Coventry University and a wealth of experience of working with disabled dance students and performers. The material that was gathered through my engagement with the students was guided by the developing theory. This dialectic link invited consideration of the cultural constructs that influence our attitudes toward bodies, particularly dancing bodies (Albright, 2001, p. 59) and hence the relationship between those who dance and those who view the dance. What this paper attempts to do therefore is provide another perspective on the discourses of disability in relation to dance.

Terminology and frame of reference

Disability is a contested term and can easily become an unhelpful or limiting social category. As Schwyzer points out in her article about the opportunities for disabled dancers in dance colleges and on degree programmes in Britain, the 'very term 'disability' emphasises a lack in relation to others, which in turn informs the kind of experience such an individual is bound to have in a mainstream context' (2005, p. 7). The term 'disability' is used within this paper with the intention of being inclusive but it is acknowledged that this is not a neutral term. I recognise that any term runs the risk of being seen to be reinforcing categories and boundaries that could be perceived as discriminatory or contradictory of the message in this paper. Moreover, my recent direct experience of working with disabled students is limited to those who

have physical disabilities, who dance for at least some of the time in their wheelchairs, and have support for their learning in class from an LSA, so many of the observations presented in this paper derive directly from this experience.

The project: methodology and the formal dance technique experience

Coventry University has a history of encouraging and collaborating with disabled dancers.⁴ Levels of expertise amongst the teaching team are growing to support the teaching and assessment of disabled dance students but there has been little opportunity prior to this project to examine the work within a wider context and reflect on teaching methodology. By building on the inherent ‘problem solving ethos’ (Benjamin, 2002, pp. 9–10) within the Department, a group of 15 female students from all year groups, aged between 18 and 26, including two students who are wheelchair users (although they may dance out of their chair for some if not most of the time) and their LSAs, volunteered to participate in a period of research to uncover more about how students learn in what are broadly described as ‘dance technique’ classes: those activities in the curriculum that focus on skills development and are usually led by a tutor taking students through a series of exercises, taught phrases and movement combinations, and which may have a particular style-focus. Whilst it is acknowledged that a ‘technique’ class is necessarily a fluid concept, a distinction is made between this experience and activities that focus principally on improvisational practices; distinctions that are reflected in class content, and at least to some extent in learning outcomes and assessment methods. This point is made because prior learning is often very different for the disabled student who may be unfamiliar with the structure of the relatively formal technique class and who may be a ‘beginner’ in comparison with other students in terms of muscle memory, knowledge of vocabulary and so on. Adam Benjamin contends that formal technique may not be appropriate for all (2002, p.9) and he draws principally on the improvisation workshop setting for discussion about dance and disability in his illuminating text, *Making an entrance; theory and practice for disabled and non-disabled dancers* (2002). By contrast, in selecting the formal technique setting in this project, the aim was to focus on the realities of different dancing bodies, to thereby encourage all students to see the benefits of an inclusive learning approach, enabling disabled students to stake a claim to their place in the dance technique class, and for non-disabled students to confront any resistance, prejudice or stereotypical views they may have about learning with students with disabilities.⁵

Students participated over nine months, reflecting on and reporting their experiences in class, by completing questionnaires and participating in open discussions. During this period, a number of classes and development activities for tutors were led by Katerega. To gain further insights into the challenges involved in providing an inclusive curriculum and learning environment I also visited students on *CandoCo*’s first dance foundation course and met with specialists in the field of dance and disability.

Goals for the project were established from the outset, which developed from the overall project aims and objectives. These were:

1. To develop good practice in facilitating and supporting individual students' learning and achievement in dance technique (particularly those who disclose a disability) by:
 - identifying and/or establishing student support mechanisms, including role models, buddies, mentors, action sets and learning beyond class;
 - examining, clarifying and supporting the role of the LSA via setting up mechanisms for dialogues and learning agreements, for preparation and follow-up, translation, and determining passive support versus intervention/manipulation;
 - considering entry to exit, including induction, determining individual needs, limitations, control issues etc, career preparation and the transition to work.
2. To question and examine traditional approaches to the acquisition of dance technique at undergraduate level by:
 - reviewing the effectiveness of the inclusive curriculum (philosophy, pedagogy, principles of care, role of dance technique, learning outcomes and assessment methods);
 - exploring different learning strategies and modes of learning including individual/group, peer and self evaluation, movement memory, order of learning (space, time, vocabulary).
3. To empower and increase the visibility of the disabled dance student by:
 - listening to the needs of the individual and acting on them where appropriate;
 - devising appropriate teaching strategies to develop confidence and self-esteem.
4. To facilitate debate and discussion around disability issues in relation to dance, raising awareness of the politics of difference and disability and challenging prejudicial and stereotypical attitudes by:
 - enhancing links between practice-based 'studio' modules and theoretical modules as well as enhancing the student's awareness of the interconnectedness between responsible practice, arts policy and career structures;
 - encouraging open dialogue about the performer/audience relationship.

To provide a wider context for the project, research was also conducted to establish levels of participation by disabled students in dance courses across the HE sector within the UK. Whilst it is acknowledged that the research, conducted during the 2004–05 academic year, could provide no more than a 'snap shot' view, the results were unsurprising although disappointing as it is now six years since the Department for Education and Skills provided funds to address what they noticed as a serious lack of formal dance training for disabled people in Britain.

Vocational Colleges, Universities and the Dance Schools within the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama⁶ were asked to respond to a series of questions enquiring about participation by students who had disclosed disabilities and specifically those that required studio support in some form, so included physical and sensory impairment (but not dyslexia). Based on the responses received, which represented just over 60%

of those approached, it was concluded that the number of disabled students on courses where dance represented at least 50% of the course of study totalled 13. However, comments from respondents revealed that most of this small number comprised students with sensory disabilities who did not require learning support for practical classes. This means that one student in just short of 200 students had disclosed one or more disabilities, or in other words, less than 0.5% of students studying dance at higher level for at least 50% of their course were disabled. Even fewer required and received one-to-one support in class. It is not possible to speculate about the 40% that did not respond but this percentage is likely to be considerably reduced if the survey included all dance students across the sector.

Most respondents expressed interest in finding out more about how to support students with disabilities and many were willing to admit to a lack of knowledge and expertise in how to accommodate disabled students. A smaller number expressed clear concern about such a challenge, acknowledging that course delivery would need adapting, beginning right at the beginning with student recruitment activities. It would seem that without clearly identified support mechanisms and the additional challenges brought about by increased recruitment targets and limited resources, tutors are nervous about how to provide for disabled dance students entering the mainstream.

Further research could compare the number of disabled students with numbers of disabled dance performers as a percentage of total number of dancers employed, but it is very difficult to get accurate figures because of the challenge of determining with any accuracy the professional status of all dancers, disabled or non-disabled. However, precisely because the pathway to performance work tends to be outside the traditional training routes, many may not identify themselves as professional dancers. There is no available data to indicate how many disabled dancers feel excluded from HE, but anecdotal evidence suggests that many perceive themselves as excluded and as Katerega reported recently, ‘many disabled dancers I know bemoan the fact that they cannot access training institutions or paper qualifications; that they train piecemeal and “on the job”’ (2005, p. 36).

The learner’s journey and feedback

A range of comments and other forms of feedback were received from students via the questionnaires and discussion forums. Many students discussed the challenge of ‘unlearning’ before being ready to learn afresh, and how this process encouraged them to be more aware of their own limitations, although none made the link between their own awareness of what were experienced as ‘limits’ in relation to other students. No one way of learning came out as being favoured, with students regarding watching, listening, reflecting, following the tutor and receiving and giving physical contact as all being equally important in improving technical ability and assimilating dance material. However, most regarded the use of imagery, provided initially by the tutor and then explored through individual ‘play’, as one of the most effective methods for learning. What emerged was therefore something of a tension between the desire for

Table 1. Disabled students in HE 2004–05

Institutions approached	48
Institutions that responded	29
Institutions that have students with physical and/or sensory disabilities on dance courses (of institutions that responded)	11
Institutions that do not have any students with physical and/or sensory disabilities on dance courses (of institutions that responded)	18
Students (estimated) on dance courses in institutions that responded (90 per course)	2520
Students on dance courses where dance represents more than 75% of the award with physical and/or sensory disabilities	11
Students on dance courses where dance represents 51% to 75% of the award with physical and/or sensory disabilities	2
Students on dance courses where dance represents less than 50% of the award with physical and/or sensory disabilities	2
Disabled students who have a facilitator in practical dance classes	3
Disabled students who do not have a facilitator in practical dance classes	12

Source: Body Realities: Strategies for Inclusion in Dance in HE (see note 2)

class to be principally an opportunity for the student to be instructed through a series of structured exercises and events, and the recognition of the value of class providing most time for individual exploration.

A recurrent theme amongst the non-disabled students was that learning was seen to be a way of identifying more ‘faults’, whereas disabled students talked generally about learning as liberating and skill-building, suggesting a differently perceived starting point and expectation from class work. Another distinction between the responses from disabled and non-disabled students emerged in discussing what was regarded as comfortable or uncomfortable in class. One student who dances for most of the time in her wheelchair described her lack of comfort in class and how she initially found the ‘whole concept of the technique class very threatening’ (January, 2005). Whilst the regular pattern of class was regarded as a good way of learning for many of the non-disabled students (because the repetition and familiarity allowed practice beyond class and a more effective way to chart individual progress), the disabled students preferred a freer approach to movement work, with more emphasis on imagery work, and less repetition. Discussions revealed that for the disabled students this was in part due to an unavoidable comparison between themselves and other students, who were seen by them to progress more quickly, but it was also acknowledged that the experience of physical discomfort may be different. Whilst non-disabled students regarded physical discomfort (muscle aches, sweating, breathlessness, etc.) and even moderate pain as a necessary part of the learning process and therefore a ‘positive’ indication of progress and achievement, the disabled students tended to associate physical discomfort with previous non-dance experiences; interventions to ‘normalise’ the student’s body usage by physiotherapists and other medical practitioners. Such a negative association meant that the experience was very far from the ‘release’ from pain in everyday life that the

students searched for and enjoyed when dancing. These differences in expectations are challenging for the tutors to reconcile.

Similarly, regarding the size of class, non-disabled students generally talked about the support they experienced from being in a group of learners, commenting for example, 'I tended to be kept safe in a big class' (March, 2005), although some acknowledged that this allowed them to 'hide' and work less hard. Disabled students however found that a big class size felt unsafe because it reinforced their sense of difference from the majority and their perceived 'struggle to keep up', using words such as 'frustrating' and 'unnerving'.

The experience and perception of sensation in relation to class work was another theme that students focused on. One of the disabled students described her frustration about 'not being able to move in a way that suggested it would be a positive sensation' and 'I can feel the sensation of the movement by watching the tutor or other students, but then I can't dance it' (March, 2005). This differently embodied sensation of movement and how the student recognised whether or not her dancing was 'it' or something else, led to students reflecting on what aspects of the task were an appropriate challenge and how they reflected on their own achievement and how they provided feedback to each other.

Most students commented on the way they valued the sense of 'group' and the positive learning environment that this engendered, although not all appreciated receiving peer feedback. Some described peer coaching⁷ and feedback as being unhelpful if the partner was too judgemental or seemed not to be properly engaged, responsible or respectful in giving feedback. All students identified individual tutor feedback as one of the most effective ways of learning and not receiving individualised feedback as being a disincentive to learn. Interestingly, all students preferred some feedback rather than none, even if it was sometimes clumsy or did not seem to acknowledge difference in an appropriate way. Most regarded the role and necessarily neutral and unbiased perspective of the tutor as paramount in class although it was acknowledged that an over-dependence on the tutor for continual individual feedback was unrealistic.

It became clear that whilst the project focused on the experiences of an identified group, similar feedback was received from other students via a variety of methods: informal tutorial feedback, journal entries, as well as more formal feedback (student committees and student module or course questionnaires). This suggested that the group not only was representative of the wider student population but may have had a role in influencing the experience of the wider group.

Outcomes and 'toolbox'

Based on the input from the students and development activities for the staff team led by Katerega, the project has led to a number of outcomes, all of which are subject to regular review. These include the creation of a role descriptor as well as support mechanisms for LSAs, who were previously under-valued⁸; a re-evaluation of the purpose, delivery and assessment of dance technique development within the curriculum, guidelines for students to help them learn how to learn in technique classes,

learning agreements between disabled students and LSAs, and more confident students and staff. There is also greater respect for the wheelchair in class. As a powerful signifier of disability (Albright, 1997, p. 83) the wheelchair is a source for discussion and re-evaluation. At first, non-disabled students who had not encountered wheelchair users in class before felt nervous about the presence of the wheelchair and understandably anxious about collisions, experiencing the wheelchair as an intrusion into a space that is for moving bodies. The impact on the dancers' experience of space and proximity to others within the space is not insignificant. At the same time, whilst dealing with how to navigate through a space filled with dancing bodies, the wheelchair users tended to regard the wheelchair as little more than a device to facilitate mobility. It takes time to explore the full potential of the wheelchair, how it can be an extension of the body and integrated into dancing. Thus the role of the wheelchair in class begins to take on new meaning and seems to chime with Albright's point that the wheelchair 'revises the cultural significance of the chair, expanding its legibility as a signal of the handicapped into a sign of embodiment' (1997, p. 83).

Importantly, attention has also been given to the needs of the non-disabled students who learn alongside disabled students, because the non-disabled students, though in the majority, have to make equally challenging adjustments when working alongside students who are disabled. Some students initially regarded the disabled students as incapable of attaining any level of ability or artistry. They were reluctant to acknowledge achievement and at best assumed that dance could be no more than a therapeutic experience for the disabled student. As co-learners in the class, this is more complicated than for the viewer. As Kupperts observes, the viewer sees disabled performance as therapeutic when they experience an unproblematic relationship between body and performance and therefore performance is an 'opportunity' for disabled people to discover themselves as 'whole' and 'able' (2003, p. 56). Simple techniques have been introduced to help overcome the often uncomfortable process of noticing difference. Expectations and preconceptions have been challenged.

A range of strategies for studio work have been explored and now form a 'toolbox' for staff and students when delivering technical teaching on the course and a basis for further discussion rather than a syllabus or manual of exercises. Ideas are provided on the following:

Role of the LSA

- **Communication:** regular dialogue between tutor, student and LSA to assist in translating feedback for the individual (coping with the 'clumsy').
- **Organisation:** disabled students to have studio time divided between group work and one-to-one work with the LSA.
- **Goal setting:** to establish an agreed set of modifications and a development plan to gradually add more to the repertoire.
- **Partnering work:** the student should not always partner the LSA. Partnering is to learn more about self, not to try and be like others.

- Observation: a physical impairment may mean there is also some learning disability associated with it, which may at first be unidentified or indiscernible but if detected can be supported in close one-to-one work.

Class structures

- Preparation and warm-up time prior to class: 20 minutes for half the group to stretch, half the group to massage, to openly discuss what is the most effective.
- A breakdown of constituent parts of class as preparation for the dancer's working day (i.e. warm-up, rehearsal, choreography, performance).
- Class format and management: the circle to connect and notice difference, then working side by side, opposite, behind (etc) to explore how individuals are challenged differently.
- Partnering, coaching, peer feedback and journal writing/mark-making⁹ time embedded within and at the end of class to give the tutor more time for individual feedback.

Class content and methods

- Communication: to create a supportive learning environment, to clarify aims and purpose of class and individual activities.
- Demonstration: to provide a clear basis for adaptation and interpretation. This may mean limiting choices and clarifying options, so students either do the same material but slower, or do the same material but less in total.
- Translation/adaptation: to provide the same or equally positive sensation, to focus on the anatomical purpose of the exercise or phrase rather than attempting to reproduce the same (visual) form and aesthetic outcome. Encouraging students to identify what an exercise is for, recognising that the information is the same (for example, 'lifting the belly') even if the felt sensation and physical outcome is different for each individual dancer, based as it is on each individual dancer's body.
- Repetition, where appropriate: to achieve excellence (remembering that the need for repetition, as well as aspects of class etiquette, may not be familiar or comfortable for all). Encouraging students to notice and avoid the tendency to work sub-maximally and too comfortably. Discovering what moves on its own, what can bear weight, how much and in what way (own weight/another's weight).
- Variation: to open up new possibilities, whilst retaining the sense of common purpose in class. Focusing on different body parts, including hands and wrists, not just legs and feet (so dominant in Western dance).

Some examples of class activities:

1. Exercise for warming-up the spine and articulating the spine

The exercise is set at four different spatial levels: standing, kneeling, sitting and lying on the back. Students perform one or more variations depending on mobility. The exercise builds strength and control whilst exploring how changes in the centre of balance and

centre of gravity affect balance, co-ordination and timing. Students are encouraged to work towards and beyond their own limits. The exercise combines visualisation and imagery to assist with the flow of movement, and students experience changing spatial levels, different contact with the floor and adaptations that can be applied to later tasks. Taken near the start of class, all students are encouraged to experience alternatives.

2. *Plié* exercise

The exercise is introduced to examine its purpose as a way of exploring the mechanics of weight-bearing joints and how the different joints in the legs and the rest of the body bear weight. Dancers also explore how to bear another's weight as well or instead of own weight. The principles of 'lifting and extending' are applied to each experience. Each student finds their own place to bear weight (either through the legs or arms, with the floor or with a partner) for a given number of counts, gradually reducing from eight counts to four, two and one count. The exercise develops alignment, strength and control through resistance and weight bearing in different body parts. The *plié* thereby continues to function as a foundation for many other activities in class.

3. Travel exercise across the floor

Working with a partner, one student travels forwards, the other backwards, with changes of direction in a combination of steps, gallops or manipulating the wheelchair to explore spatial orientation, patterns and how the momentum of the body propels movement. The aim is for students to find connections with their partners, to notice and lift each other's energy level. The exercise develops locomotion skills, focus, rhythmic understanding and partnering skills.

4. Jump pattern

A sequence of jumps is set with a change of fronts. The aim is for students to explore breath rhythm, to achieve rhythmical accuracy, clarity of alignment and a sense of vertical space. Non-disabled students perform the jumps, with the further aim to develop elevation skills. Disabled students perform the pattern without jumps, exploring the breath rhythm involved in the 'lift' and 'landing', incorporating new directional facings. The extent to which the feet and legs are involved in the action, to provide propulsion and/or resistance, will depend on the individual student.

Through careful goal setting and a focus on what will provide an appropriate challenge for each student, practical skill levels are developed and sustained. Tutors adopt a less prescriptive approach to class, and students are encouraged to notice difference in terms of emerging vocabulary, based on a shared exploration and understanding of the initiation of movement. Class is organised so that students move through structured exercises towards longer phrases of movement to develop performance skills including aspects of musicality and dancing with others. Disabled students will have particular aspects to work on within each activity, which is agreed between student, tutor and LSA, and which is then discussed regularly to assess progress towards reaching the learning outcomes.

Significantly, in developing a more inclusive curriculum framework, the development of methods for the teaching, learning and assessment of dance practices, as informed through the accommodation of and participation by disabled dance students, however small a minority, have proved to be transferable to establish better

practices for all dance students, and this is acknowledged by the students themselves. This seems to confirm Benjamin's view that 'in terms of teaching methodology, an integrated workshop or class can function perfectly well without the presence of disabled student'; it simply doesn't miss a beat when a disabled person joins it' (2002, p.16). Any modification or adjustment that has been made to accommodate the disabled students has, in most cases, been adopted as best practice for all students. For example, phrases of material that are constructed by tutors are now routinely explored in a variety of ways by all students. Students explore different aspects of the phrase at the same time, depending on individual goals (for example, lower body alone, arms alone, adapting to working on knees, varying timing) and then come together to share versions and individual responses. Importantly, the aim of the exercise needs to be clear so adaptations are sufficiently demanding and avoid simple imitation. The learning outcomes and associated criteria remain applicable to all students within each module. Alternative methods for delivery are equally valid for non-disabled as disabled students.

Table 2. The Dance Technique Class: a framework for delivery

	Disabled students	Non-disabled students
Student learning experiences	Skill-building by adaptation, modification and translation to move forward. Discomfort in class viewed as negative (reminded of medical interventions). Less repetition preferred (to avoid comparisons with others in class). 'Unsafe' in big class, always very visible.	Skill-building by initially 'unlearning' and identifying faults/habits to move forward. Discomfort viewed as positive (signalling progress, achievement). Regularity and repetition viewed as positive. 'Safe' in big class (though opportunity to 'hide').
Support structures	Connections between sensation and form more challenging. LSA: Role Descriptor Learning Agreement between LSA and student	Connections between sensation and form more easily achievable.
Delivery mechanisms	Guidelines: How to learn Toolbox: Class structures Class content and methods	Guidelines: How to learn Toolbox: Class structures Class content and methods
Assessment methods	Goals set at regular intervals with LSA to determine learning programme and review progress towards achieving learning outcomes. Formative assessment of progress towards achieving learning outcomes. Achievement measured against learning outcomes for the module.	Formative assessment of progress towards achieving learning outcomes. Achievement measured against learning outcomes for the module.

Strategies for viewing

Giving close attention to the needs of disabled dance students in HE leads to considering career possibilities and routes into performance for these same students. Entering into the public domain of the performance means revisiting the audience's preconceptions and expectations about dance and disability, and draws attention to the complex relationships between audience and viewer inherent in all performance, but it has particular resonances and implications when it involves disabled performers. Because disabled dancers are the exception in performance, the viewer is likely to be aware that the programme includes disabled dancers; mention of disability acts, according to Benjamin, as a 'road sign' (2002, p.15) so the viewer is already bringing certain expectations, preconceptions about 'difference' or 'otherness' and a particular perspective to the work.

Take for example Katerega's viewing strategy in this observation of her own response to observing disabled dancers:

Do I stare now? A bit. I'd say I've got it down to about 15 seconds—but I stare at non-disabled dancers for that long when they first come on stage too, take time to register height, shape, hair colour, costume. In a disability performance I register wheelchair, crutches, absent limb, physical manifestations suggesting learning disability... And they really have the same significance to me as... height, shape, hair colour, costume. (2005, p. 33)

Katerega refers to 'disability performance'. What she looks for and notices is difference. What I shall refer to as a 'presumption of difference' exists even before the performance begins. The viewer's frame of reference, though never neutral, will be influenced by the presumption of difference, thereby influencing the viewer's viewing strategies, directing the viewer's attention to what to register as well as to expectations to do with artistry, virtuosity and perhaps even subject matter and thematic content. And yet, as Katerega goes on to explain in response to her experience of viewing *CandoCo*:

If anything, disability was just a stimulus to creativity, good dancing and choreography. Those were my expectations from a professional dance performance and I got them. (2005, p. 33)

Katerega's viewing strategies are shaped by and result at least to some extent from her considerable experience of working with and viewing disabled dance performers.

In common with many dance students in HE, Coventry students regularly take part in performance projects and participate in lively discussion about how the dance is viewed, what is noticed and what is valued. The connection between the mechanics of the movement and the image that is created is a source for debate, as well as how this is read by both the performer and the viewer. Students now engage more readily with the debates surrounding the legitimate body in dance and are more open to how their own somatic engagement with the dance is dependent on their own individual abilities, limitations and impairments. But unlike the harsher world of professional dance performance, student performances are frequently situated within a relatively 'safe' environment so the transition to the professional context needs great care and preparation, particularly for disabled dancers.

Discussing with students their responses to disability performance has led to an analysis of viewing strategies and the extent to which a 'presumption of difference', whether conscious or not, plays into and reinforces dualistic thinking and attention on embodied binary oppositions: valid/invalid, classical/grotesque, deviant/ideal and so on. Dance, by focusing on the body, has for some time provided theorists with the opportunity to challenge the Western philosophical emphasis on such binaries in which the hierarchical separation places value on the first, over and above its negative counterpart. Viewing and dancing with disabled dancers offers up further challenges to this separation and the assumption that bodies have clear boundaries and fixed identities.¹⁰

Both Koppers and Albright, though with different emphases, point out the tensions and dualist tendencies inherent in the relationship between viewer and performer in performances by disabled (dance) performers and how these performances reflect the broader discourses surrounding the body in culture. In Koppers' examination of the impact of disabled performers in performance she draws a distinction between 'performing' and 'being' in how the public evaluate performance. She describes how on one hand the focus is inwards:

aimed at the disabled person doing the performing, not the wider community. The performance is 'authentic': it connects to the 'true being' of the performer. Then on the other side the performance is seen as a political intervention, aimed at the whole community. The disabled performance can be seen *as* performance: challenging dominant notions about 'suitable bodies', challenging ideas about the hierarchy between (led) disabled people and (leading) non-disabled people. (Koppers, 2003, p. 61)

These strategies that Koppers outlines point to how the viewer may engage differently with the same performance: one strategy reinforces 'otherness', or difference; the other celebrates the possibilities of change because of difference.

Similarly, Albright, who like Koppers is speaking from her own direct experience, albeit temporarily, of performing as a disabled dancer, reflects on the impact on the individual viewer when viewing disabled bodies in performance. She reminds us that 'watching disabled bodies dancing forces us to see with a double vision, and helps us to recognize that while a dance performance is grounded in the physical capacities of a dancer, it is not limited by them' (Albright, 2001, p. 58). Albright's message is that watching disabled bodies is not, or at least should not be, a passive experience, and engagement with disabled bodies acts on the viewer in a way that explicitly illuminates the physicality of the performer, whether disabled or non-disabled and implicitly an awareness of the viewer's own bodily experience and somatic engagement. Double vision means seeing the disability and the dance, which may mean suspending values and beliefs. To notice the disability is therefore important, in Albright's view, but not so as to impose unhelpful assumptions about the limitations of the disabled dancing body. Discussions with the students suggested that disabled students readily understood and supported the notion of 'double vision', whereas non-disabled students found the concept more difficult until they were more at ease with their own embodied experience of difference in the studio, recognising it as liberating rather than limiting.

It seems to be the case that a ‘presumption of difference’ calls on different, culturally inscribed viewing strategies, which lead to various interpretations and evaluations of the dance and which may themselves call for new ways of reflecting upon and writing about the dance. What is proposed here is that whilst viewing strategies are not necessarily fixed and may shift as engagement with the performance progresses, these strategies, if categorised, can be a means to determine the extent to which each either upholds or challenges conceptions of what dance is and what bodies are supposed to do in dance. It is not intended, however, that the categories prescribe a singular relationship between the production and reception of a dance; neither should they be regarded as limiting to how the dance can or should be viewed. Of course any one dance may be viewed differently by each viewer. Indeed, as Kupperts observes, ‘our performance language of physicality is constantly under threat from the binaries that structure cultural meaning-making... The delicate play on the borders of agency and passivity, of positioning/being positioned, is always in flux, and cannot easily be pinned down into clear political statements’ (2003, p. 61).

The dialectic that has characterised my work with the students suggests an emergent framework of five viewing strategies. I arrived at these strategies through the process of working with the students, discussing their responses to dance both in class and in performance, and exploring published views of others who view and participate in dance. I have identified five viewing strategies, which I have termed as follows:

1. Passive Oppressive
2. Passive Conservative
3. Post-Passive
4. Active Witness
5. Immersion

The first, the *passive oppressive*, and is when the viewer takes a voyeuristic stance. The body is seen as being on display, and whilst it is undeniable that Katerega’s initial ‘staring’ is something many viewers find hard to avoid, the staring persists. Experienced as ‘spectacle’, this mode of viewing preserves and reinforces the sense of ‘otherness’ and assumes a lack of agency by the disabled dancer, as evident in this early comment by one of the Coventry students:

She must have found it really painful being asked to do that when she clearly doesn’t have any control... I don’t think she should be doing that because it’s obviously really hard for her and means that I was only interested in what she could do that was the same as the others and how different it was going to be because she can’t stand up... I felt really sorry for her. (January, 2005)

Perceived as ‘victim art’, judgement and interpretation is oppressive (Albright, 1997, p. 73). The viewer looks for difference and is curious about what can and cannot be achieved. The curiosity can all too easily result in admiration, sympathy, pity and prejudice. At one extreme, this patronising and uncritical stance reaffirms notions of the unable or the grotesque, in the Bakhtinian sense, and assumes that, based on fear of contagion, what happens to an(other) will happen to self (Albright, 1997, p. 91).

As Koppers observes, this position ‘exposes histories of ‘looking at the disabled’ (2003, p. 47). She continues:

The history of the freak show, medical theatre and so on, colours any engagement with disability on stage; with audience addresses, stares and gazes. (2003, p. 48)

The second strategy, the *passive conservative*, is a position where the viewer views from and with an internalized expectation of the classical aesthetic perspective. What Albright describes as ‘the ablist gaze’ (Albright, 1997, p. 80) reinforces the distance between the dancer and the viewer. Confrontation is therefore avoided. The danger here, as observed by Albright in response to *CandoCo*’s work (1997, p. 83), is that the disabled performer/choreographer may have to take some responsibility in this situation. The choreographer may not be covering over disability but is nonetheless making work that is still informed by an ethos that reinstates the classical body within the disabled one. As she points out, a conservative aesthetic can reinforce rather than disrupt the negative connotations of disability. Benjamin seems to concur and lets the viewer ‘off the hook’ by stating that the ‘dissatisfaction felt by the audiences is aesthetic, but its roots lie in the failure to confront either mentally or physically challenging material or issues; a reflection of the ethics of those who lead the group’ (2002, p. 47). It may be that the responsibility for the audience’s response lies with the choreographer or director but it does not necessarily follow that little can be done to alter the audience’s preconceptions and presumptions. Indeed, a number of choreographers have found imaginative ways to help audiences discern new patterns of movement and to deal with notions of beauty and alternative ways of communicating about space, time and balance. But if a ‘presumption of difference’ means that there is no attempt by the viewer to revalue their own position in relation to the work, any judgement and interpretation of the dance is likely to be inappropriate and irrelevant, as this early comment by a student indicates:

She’ll never be able to perform those arm lines and hold a balance so there isn’t much point aiming for that in that section... It’s never going to look right... It just creates a false situation... You need at least some technique to do the phrase properly. (January, 2005)

Also passive in nature is the third strategy, the *post-passive*. Here the viewer approaches the performance by looking for how the dancers transcend any disability, effectively discounting or even erasing the disability in the viewing. This tends to render the disability invisible in any judgement and interpretation. As one student commented:

She sort of rolled and slithered with this convulsive rhythm, appearing to set up a rhythm that everyone followed, like she really understood what it meant to be a dancer. (April, 2005)

Albright takes up the challenge to this stance when she warns that to not mention disability or features of the disabled dancer attempts to make the disability disappear and yet misses the chance to show how the bodily presence of the disabled dancer can radically reconfigure the very category of dancer itself. Denying difference is to ignore the opportunity that disability dance provides to conceive and organise bodies

(differently) (2001, p.60). The denial of difference means that the presumption of difference is 'placed to one side' and only selective referents within the dance are drawn upon as a basis for interpretation. Because dance, unlike the other arts, makes the body visible within the representation itself (Albright, 2001, p. 59), if the disability is erased, so too is the dancer.

The fourth position disrupts an oppressive position and enables the viewer to engage with the performance more actively. This *active witness* strategy means that the viewer allows for disability to open up new ways of seeing and new ways of interpreting the body in dance, thereby enabling a radical shift in aesthetic and a less judgemental view of their own and others' bodies. Many more of the comments from students seemed to align with this approach, as these responses seemed to show:

Watching... has meant that I have been able to watch lots of different bodies moving and has helped me to understand movement more. I can see new connections. (May, 2005)

I hadn't thought about how many different ways you can lift someone and be carried by someone. It made me realise how many different ideas and stories you can tell by the way in which dancers take weight, whether it is the whole body, just a part of the body or with a [wheel] chair. (May, 2005)

I noticed moments that I could apply to my own dances, which I wasn't expecting. (May, 2005)

Disability becomes 'ordinary', one more bodily possibility, yet also a potential force for change. But Kupperts sees that the responsibility for creating the 'audience as witness' lies not only with the viewer's willingness to be open to see and experience difference but with the performer's desire to create a particular kind of viewer (2003, pp. 133–4).

Finally, the *immersion* strategy, finds the viewer attending to the dancers' ongoing experience, to engage with the 'how' and not the 'what'. A presumption of difference is used generatively to enable the viewer to experience their own 'becoming' through the experience of engagement, which is highly active and represents a move towards suspending categorisation. As Kupperts observes:

the spectator's attention is focused on the manifestations of encounters and intensities that create coherences across, inside, and within bodies. The spectator's body is no longer removed from the performer's body... activating different ways of experiencing oneself as embodied and paying attention to the specificity of corporeal feeling can break down the ossified representational structures that keep performers and spectators apart. (1993, p.128)

As with the *active witness* strategy, this is a more familiar strategy for dancers, as evidenced by these examples of comments by students:

as she reached over towards the floor and... I felt really freed in my own torso and that excitement I get from watching dance made me feel really giddy and I wanted to get up and join them... but I did go home and get some great ideas for my next piece. (May, 2005)

I felt lighter and able to feel differently about my speed of movement and how the space I take up can be really expressive and without worrying about getting in the way. (May, 2005)

It may be that different dances invite particular strategies so there is a more dynamic relationship between performer and viewer. For example, as the *immersion* strategy depends upon the viewer acknowledging and experiencing process rather than a pre-determined outcome or expectation, a relationship between this strategy and improvised performances may be more likely. Moreover, the *immersion* strategy may only be experienced by those who have an embodied understanding of dance, and if improvised, the improvisation process. Proximity and setting, as well as the viewer's prior experience will have a bearing on the stance taken. Furthermore, disabled dance performers and choreographers themselves find strategies to overcome and challenge unhelpful categorisation. Devices are introduced to break down the public's eagerness to retain barriers, to challenge the viewer to investigate the familiar, to confuse expectations of what dance can be and what bodies are supposed to do (Kuppers, 1993, p. 68). Or as Albright sets out:

I believe that the disruption of the real that disability symbolizes can provoke us to think differently about the relationship between representation and the actual history of bodies. (1997, p.75)

Companies such as *CandoCo* have used such devices from time to time. The choreographer's presumption that the audience brings a presumption of difference to the viewing is subverted, and the staring is directed outwards to the audience. The audience/performer relationship and the acknowledgement of difference become both subject matter and choreographic device. Katerega's admission of staring referred to earlier is confronted head-on to celebrate difference and the discursive nature of the body. Such devices bear out Benjamin's view that the responsibility for changing audience perceptions lies with the performer/choreographer, as captured in his claim that:

The issues, in the end, are not about the nature or the degree of the disability or the classicism or otherness of a performer's body; rather, they are about the intention of the choreographer/performer and how they address themselves to the art of communication with the audience. (2002, p.75)

Relatively few comments by students conformed to the first three modes of viewing,¹¹ but even so, by the end of the project, students had moved much further towards the adopting the *active witness* and *immersion* viewing strategies, indicating that new ways of engaging with the dance and particularly with disability dance were opening up. Although the focus was on their experiences in class, students were very aware that whilst class was a time for personal work it was always a preparation for performance. Students recognised that interpersonal relationships in class—between students, and between tutor and student, and LSA and student—translated to them thinking about their understanding of the relationship between the performer and the viewer.

Conclusions

My aim in this paper has been to draw attention to some of the challenges of providing a meaningful dance experience to disabled students in HE and to examine how disabled

Table 3. A 'Presumption of Difference': strategies for viewing

Passive Oppressive	Voyeur Sense of 'otherness' Fear of contagion Interpretation is oppressive
Passive Conservative	Ablist gaze Avoids confrontation Interpretation is inappropriate (based on classical aesthetic)
Post-Passive	Looks for transcendence of disability Discounts the disability Interpretation is selective; disability is erased in judgement Disrupts oppressive position
Active Witness	Active engagement with the dance Disability is 'ordinary' Interpretation is open, allows for radical shift in aesthetic
Immersion	The 'how' not the 'what' Viewer experiences their own becoming through viewing Active engagement Interpretation is based on experience of own embodiment

dance performers are viewed and how their work is judged. The link between training and the professional context for disabled dancers needs examining, because whilst disabled dance students continue to have little presence in HE in Britain, they have fewer opportunities to perform, which reinforces their position of being 'other'. With few exceptions (e.g. DV8 Physical Theatre) disabled dancers perform only with recognised integrated or disabled dance companies. As Benjamin observed, writing in 2002:

It is likely that the first mainstream established companies to work with disabled performers will make many mistakes. They may not have the long-term understanding that evolves in the established 'integrated' companies and which allows for more vital and organic connections to be made between performers. They may even be accused of jumping on the bandwagon, to which I can only say 'Jump!' We may then, however, rightfully enquire how the company is considering and addressing training and access opportunities for minority groups. Jumping does, after all, have its consequences. (2002, p.17)

But it is important to take note of what Marc Brew, dancer with *CandoCo* Dance Company, observes: 'disability might diminish opportunity but not talent' (cited in Scott, 2005, p. 7). Viewing disabled performers may be disconcerting for audiences committed to an aesthetic of ideal beauty, but if more disabled dancers participated in HE then aesthetic priorities might change and, as Albright observes, the traditionally voyeuristic gaze can be both fractured and reconstructed by looking at bodies that radically question the ideal image of a dancer's physique (1997, p. 57). Indeed, the contrast between the grotesque and classical body is a cultural construct that deeply influences our attitudes towards bodies (Albright, 1997, p. 63). The dialogue that results takes place all the time with dance, and is brought to the foreground in integrated dance.

Because, as Koppers points out, dance emphasises embodiment and communality so well, disabled dancers are able to go beyond freakishness, providing that the

audience is prepared to let go of boundaries (2003, p. 68). I would argue that a similar letting go of boundaries in the studio brings about open dialogue on embodiment—between disabled and non-disabled dance students as well as their tutors—and a celebration of communality. But Albright's message is an important one when she states that disability does make a big difference and assuming otherwise limits the difference that disability can make in radically refiguring how we look at bodies in the twenty-first century (2001, p. 60). As the project grew to a close, many of the students commented on how their own perceptions of disability had changed and had encouraged them to re-evaluate dance as an art form as well as those who dance.

The approach to the delivery and assessment of dance techniques at Coventry University continues to evolve and be influenced by our students, both disabled and non-disabled. The practice established so far is empowering students to take more responsibility for their own learning, which can be challenging for both students and tutors, depending on expectations and prior experiences. Changing the class culture where a preoccupation with imitation and prescription is replaced by an emphasis on curiosity and individual achievement is in many ways radical and challenging to established practices within the mainstream, but it is necessary for the general health of dance and the future of our dance profession. A 'presumption of difference' that shapes the viewing strategies of dance audiences as proposed here can similarly be a force for change, enabling dancers and those who view dance to contemplate and celebrate difference.

The project that has provided a basis for this paper is really just a beginning. I am not proposing that inclusion works for all disabled students. Indeed, when talking to CandoCo's first Foundation group of students as they were completing their course in the summer of 2005, opinion was divided about whether or not they would rather have learnt alongside non-disabled students. Neither am I proposing that solving some of the challenges with one disabled student means finding a solution for all. Every student brings their own very different and particular needs. Moreover, it is unlikely, at least in the short term, that any existing HE course will establish an integrated group of students. It is more likely that the disabled dance student will continue to be in a very small minority. There is much more to be done, but my hope is that this paper will at least prompt further discussion about difference and diversity in dance whilst reinforcing the position of dance as a radical and dynamic site for debates surrounding the disabled body.

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Notes

1. CandoCo is probably the best-known company in the UK but there are several other companies with a national profile, including Common Ground Sign Dance Theatre, a company rooted in Deaf culture and committed to integrating sign language into performance, and Anjali Dance Company, who employs dancers with learning disabilities.
2. The title of the project was *Body Realities: Strategies for Inclusion in Dance in HE*. 'Body Realities' was derived from Albright who, in describing her own performance, created whilst temporarily a wheelchair user, stated that 'the work was a conscious attempt to both deconstruct the representational codes of dance production and communicate an "other" bodily reality' (2001, 56).
3. The Learning Support Assistant at Coventry has generally been described as 'Facilitator', but both titles are used from time to time by those in the role. The recently adopted guidelines for those in this role are one way of clarifying the nature of the role as well as the title.
4. Coventry University has a long-standing relationship with Hereward College in Coventry, the National College for students with disabilities. Several students participated in *Swell*, Coventry's first adult community dance group, directed by Cecilia Macfarlane and based at Coventry University, and have progressed to further training in the Performing Arts. It is partly this relationship that has attracted disabled students to Coventry University to study dance. Cecilia Macfarlane, who is Associate Senior Lecturer in Community Arts at Coventry University, has many years of experience in the field of disability dance and integrated dance.
5. The aims of the project were partly motivated by Albright's observations and descriptions of her experience whilst a wheelchair user (2001).
6. These Schools include London Contemporary Dance School, Northern School of Contemporary Dance, Central School of Ballet and Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance. The Conservatoire for Dance and Drama was founded in 2001 to protect and promote some of the best schools in the UK offering vocational training in dance, drama and circus arts. See <http://www.cdd.ac.uk/aboutcdd.html>.
7. The term 'coaching' refers to the activities when students are asked to observe and provide feedback (either through commentary or 'hands-on' work) to fellow students. As part of their development as reflective practitioners, students are encouraged, through coaching, to increase observational skills, critical ability and encourage peer support.
8. One of the biggest challenges for our own disabled students has been finding an LSA to work with. The teaching team provides what support it can and often recommends LSAs from its own pool of recent graduates who not only have relevant dance experience but have an interest in pursuing work in this field. Whilst there is Institutional support and recognition for those who provide academic support for students with disabilities, there is no equivalent support structure for those who take on the LSA role in practical class activity. The project has revealed

the need to extend ways to accredit training and acknowledge the experience of those in this role, and thereby improve recognition for this important work.

9. Within class time, students are asked to reflect on their experiences. Students are encouraged to record in words and also in pictures, sketches and other visual forms, collectively termed 'mark-making'.
10. Dualism, in which the *more valued* 'mind' has been associated with the masculine whilst the *meaningless* 'body' has been associated with the feminine has often been cited as a reason why dance has been marginalised as a legitimate subject for enquiry until relatively recently. There are many writers who provide extensive discussions on this theme but for the relevance to the discussion in this paper I would recommend Briginshaw (2001), Grosz (1994), and Young (1990).
11. It is acknowledged that by participating in the project and by already having an understanding of some of the issues of dance and disability, and the politics surrounding dance and disability, students were perhaps checking their own comments that they were making to me. Furthermore, it is likely that those who volunteered were also students who had some direct interest in inclusive practices.

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