



Performance enhancement: A whole of person approach to first year Dance students' transition into tertiary training



Avril Huddy

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The transition into university presents very particular challenges for students. The First Year Experience (FYE) is a transitional liminal phase, fraught with uncertainty, ripe with potential. The complexity inherent in this initial phase of tertiary education is well documented and continues to be interrogated. Providing timely and effective support and interventions for potentially at-risk first year students as they transition into tertiary study is a key priority for universities across the globe (Gale et al., 2015). This article outlines the evolution of an established and highly successful Transitional Training Program (TTP) for first year tertiary dance students, with particular reference to the 2015 iteration of the program. TTP design embraces three dimensions: physical training in transition, learning in transition, and teaching for transition, with an emphasis on developing and encouraging a mindset that enables information to be transferred into alternative settings for practice and learning throughout life. The aim of the 2015 TTP was to drive substantial change in first year Dance students' satisfaction, connectedness, and overall performance within the Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) Dance course, through the development and delivery of innovative curriculum and pedagogical practices that promote the successful transition of dance students into their first year of university. The program targeted first year BFA Dance students through the integration of specific career guidance; performance psychology; academic skills support; practical dance skills support; and specialized curricula and pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

The transition into university presents very particular challenges for students. The First Year Experience (FYE) is a transitional liminal phase, fraught with uncertainty, ripe with potential. The complexity inherent in this initial phase of tertiary education is well documented (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Kift, 2009; Kochanowska & Johnston, 2008; Krause & Coates, 2008; Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding, & Rose, 2010; Mehdinezhad, 2011; Nutt & Calderon, 2009; see also Kift & Field, 2009; Kift, 2008) and continues to be interrogated. Providing timely and effective support and interventions for potentially at-risk first year students as they transition into tertiary study is a key priority for universities across the globe (Gale, Ooms, Newcombe, & Marks-Maran, 2015).

This article discusses the evolution of an established and highly successful Transitional Training Program (TTP) for first year tertiary dance students, with particular reference to the 2015 iteration of the program. Designed in response to consistent and sustained staff

observations of first year student engagement, an examination of first year student results, and student feedback, this latest version of TTP draws from current research and thinking around FYE programs, emphasizing sustained and holistic approaches to student transition into tertiary study.

Students looking to study dance at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) have the choice of two very different courses: the Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) Dance Performance course and the BFA Dance course. The BFA Dance Performance course prepares students for performance based careers and as such, this prescriptive course provides a clear trajectory for students. The BFA Dance course is far less defined, providing exciting opportunities for students to move into and create, diverse dance-based careers. Without the same clear career focus that the Performance course offers, some first year students struggle to find relevance and meaning within the BFA Dance course, leading to a general dissatisfaction with the course and higher levels of attrition. QUT Dance lecturer, Avril Huddy, developed the recent iteration of TTP to address first year student engagement and retention issues within the BFA Dance course.

TTP design principles embrace three dimensions: physical training in transition, learning in transition, and teaching for transition,

E-mail address: a.huddy@qut.edu.au

with an emphasis on developing and encouraging a mindset that will enable information to be transferred into alternative settings for practice and learning throughout life. These key design principles are privileged in this latest version of TTP which has been extended from its traditional format of four weeks, to a semester long program, facilitating the integration of key TTP themes, activities and approaches within all semester one Dance units.

This current program targeted first year BFA Dance students through the integration of specific career guidance; performance psychology; academic skills support; practical dance skills support; and specialized curricula and pedagogy. The aim of this program was to drive substantial change in first year Dance students' satisfaction, connectedness, and overall performance within the BFA Dance course, through the development and delivery of innovative curriculum and pedagogical practices that promote the successful transition of dance students into their first year of university.

2. Research methodology

In shaping this research, an interpretive paradigm with a bifocal viewpoint was implemented, to investigate the efficacy of an extended TTP as a vehicle for effortless transition into tertiary dance training, and to hear the participants' unique voices and experiences within the Program. Furthermore, it was informed by the multiplicity of previous studies in the field that have explored the FYE (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2008, 2009; Kift & Field, 2009; Kift et al., 2010).

This research project embraced a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, celebrating the diversity of experience, knowing and difference amongst the participants acknowledging that

'...learning is a process of individual construction of personal knowledge, rather than an assumption that the teacher's knowledge of a subject can somehow be transferred or copied into the minds of the students in a class.' (Taber, 2011:118)

The research utilized evidence-based qualitative and quantitative research methodologies including questionnaires, focus groups and ongoing reflection by the researcher and teaching team to measure the impact of the project upon student learning and performance.

Twenty-six female first year BFA Dance students, between the ages of 17 and 22, volunteered for this study. Data was collected using two mechanisms: a questionnaire and a focus group. The Student Engagement Questionnaire was utilized in this study because it provides insight into not only students' perception of the teaching and learning environment but also their perception of the influence of this environment on the development of eight generic capabilities: critical thinking, creative thinking, self-managed learning, adaptability, problem solving, communication skills, interpersonal skills and group work, and computer literacy (Kember & Leung, 2009).

Student participants completed the questionnaire at the end of week four of semester one, and again in week ten of semester one, just prior to sitting their exams. The questionnaire was completed at the end of week four as this marked the end point of the traditional four-week intensive program and signaled the beginning of the trial to expand TTP across the entire semester. Of the twenty-six students involved in this study, fourteen students volunteered to participate in the focus group at the conclusion of the study. All twenty-six participants provided signed informed consent in accordance with the institutional Human Ethics Research Committee's approval for this study.

3. The first year Dance student transition

3.1. Background

QUT Dance courses were established in the early 1980s utilizing traditional tertiary dance models from the UK and USA. The philosophies and practices embedded by staff during these formative years underpin the current innovative courses and practices, ensuring QUT's position as a leader in tertiary dance training in Australia (Boughen & Huddy, 2009).

As a boutique area of study, QUT Dance courses operate with small numbers of students and demanding teaching and learning schedules. Low student to staff ratios, high contact hours, and face-to-face delivery formats afford very particular and intimate teaching and learning environments. Within QUT, these conditions are specific to the Dance, Acting and Technical Production disciplines and replicate the industry conditions and protocols within which the students will work. Although these conditions also duplicate in-part, the students prior dance training, where typically they are one of few students in a class, participate in many hours of extracurricular dance training per week, and develop a reasonably intimate relationship with their dance teacher, the transition into full-time tertiary dance training is difficult for many.

Entry into the tertiary dance training environment marks, for many dance students, a shift from amateur dancer to professional dance artist. The prospect of translating hopes and dreams into the realm of possibility is laden with excitement, pressure and anxiety. Key to this shift of focus and approach is a re-evaluation and understanding of dance studio practice. The dance studio is the creative meeting place for dance artists. Within this professional space autonomy, creativity, problem-solving skills, and high-level verbal and non-verbal communication, negotiation and analytical skills are prized and considered integral to the success of the choreographic process within a creative ensemble (Crampton, 2005). These skills are nurtured within the university environment and across the entire undergraduate Dance degree, through a unique and considered approach to the design, delivery and integration of dance theory, practical dance activities and assessment.

Although tertiary dance training occurs within similar structures and settings as those experienced in pre-vocational contexts, the experience of the dance student is often very different. Difficulties arise for those first year Dance students transitioning into tertiary training who are primarily extrinsically motivated. These students are often passive learners schooled in the traditional autocratic approach to dance teaching. Here, class goals, expectations, progress, pace and focus, are teacher directed and group oriented. Curriculum is prescribed with very little consideration for individual learning styles or needs. This approach to dance training is widespread and fails to prepare the dancer to successfully meet either the current physical and intellectual demands of tertiary training or those of a professional dance artist. Without an understanding of self-reflective practice and autonomous learning, many first year Dance students find the complex ecosystem of the tertiary dance studio difficult to negotiate.

3.2. Student transition: a holistic approach

Dance student wellbeing has long been a QUT Dance departmental priority with specific approaches and activities integrated at both a whole of course and unit level. Within individual units, Dance staff implement many activities to support student participation and success. These include a focus on the development of a community of practice, nurturing a sense of belonging within the students as individuals and as important members of their cohort; providing multiple opportunities for feedback and feed-forward;

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