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Emotions and Feelings in a Collaborative Dance-Making Process

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Abstract

This paper looks into the significance emotions and feelings can have in a collaborative dance-making process. This is done by introducing a narrative based on a dance pedagogy student's writings. They contain observations of her experiences on being the facilitating choreographer in a dance-making process involving a cross-artistic group of students in the performing arts. The narrative we constructed highlights especially the emotional challenges and insights that the student wrote about. In discussing the narrative, we underline that creating collaboratively can be an emotionally and personally deeply meaningful process – involving the construction of subjectivities, relationships, ideas and outcomes. Emotions play an important part in social communication but they likewise have a part to play in making aesthetic and artistic judgments. As a conclusion, we argue that emotional literacy plays an important part in artistic collaboration as does understanding the diverse

roles one assumes and relates to the other artistic collaborators with. Owing to the open-ended nature of artistic work, in collaboration, understanding the significance of enacted emotions entails a process of learning, as well.

Introduction

For the past few years we have been interested in exploring collaborative creativity in the field of European contemporary dance. In this realm, dance making has increasingly come to mean an open-ended and collaborative artistic process (Albright & Gere, 2003; Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez-Colberg, 2002). Instead of being about more pre-determined cooperation, truly collaborative undertakings are by their very nature open-ended and involve a shared manner of solving problems as well as moving forward with the work itself. Collaboration in dance often follows the incentives of so-called ‘devising methods’ that originated in the theatre arts (Butterworth, 2009). In devised performance processes the approach to the act of working and its content derive from the interests and interaction of the group. In this manner, the approach underlines collectiveness and shared leadership (Sauer, 2005, p. 73). Such devising methods include probing into and working with the “process (finding the ways and means to share an artistic journey together), collaboration (working with others), multivision (integrating various views, beliefs, life experiences, and attitudes to changing world events), and the creation of an artistic product” (Oddey, 1994, p. 3).

Through conversations with our dance colleagues, we have learned that what motivates many dance artists to work collaboratively is the chance to produce something novel, the opportunity to explore new ways of working as well as the possibility of sharing the inherent uncertainty of the creative process with others. Creating collaboratively can be an emotionally charged and deeply meaningful personal process (Littleton & Miell, 2004). It involves the construction of subjectivities and relationships as well as ideas and artefacts. According to educational theorists Moran and John-Steiner, creativity not only transforms objective materials into creative products, it also transforms the creator (Moran & John-Steiner, 2004). Over time, creative collaboration can become a vehicle for identity development. However, successful collaboration is challenging and requires skill to be accomplished fruitfully.

In this paper we are especially interested in exploring the emotional engagement and feelings that can arise in meeting the challenges of collaborative work in the performing arts. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999) argues that consciousness and emotion are not separate and that they are inherently embodied processes. Emotions are automatic, partly unconsciously occurring, patterned chemical and neural responses that have a regulatory role to play in maintaining the life of an organism. Feeling our emotions offers information on how we engage with our environment in the present moment and

helps us orient ourselves in beneficial ways. Even if we are not permanently under the spell of a so-called primary emotion, such as joy or anger, or a secondary social emotion, such as envy or shyness, we continuously entertain background emotions (Damasio, 1999, pp. 48, 51–53). Such background emotions are observable, for instance, in the speed and design of our movements, body posture and tone of voice. Their experiential dimension encompasses fatigue, energy, excitement, tension and the like. To a significant extent, feelings are reflections of body-state changes that influence the ways in which we sense, perceive and understand our life circumstances (Damasio 1999, p. 286). Recent research has shown that emotions exert a particular effect on three central cognitive processes: attention, memory, and decision-making (Nummenmaa 2010, pp. 114, 117). All three are important functions in creative processes in the performing arts.

In the following, we will explore our topic more specifically through a case study. During the autumn of 2009 and the spring of 2010 we observed the creative dance-making process of a group of cross-artistic students. The dance student in charge of the working process, whom we shall call Marja, was eager to experiment with a collaborative approach to constructing a dance performance. She was a second-year MA student in dance pedagogy at the Theatre Academy Helsinki. In her final artistic and pedagogical work she experiment with cross-artistic work that originated from the interests of the collaborating group members. She gathered together a cohort of three dancers, a sound designer, a lighting designer and a visual artist. Motivated by her own desire to learn, Marja began working on the project before the final group was assembled. Nonetheless, Marja aimed at advancing a movement-based process that brought the group together to explore movements and themes from their own perspectives. Although she already had a career as a dance professional behind her, she did not have much experience working in group-based projects or in improvisation, which was to become the group's principal working method. All in all, the artistic process that Marja initiated spanned over a period of four months.

We will discuss Marja's experiences by examining her teaching practice report (2010) and MA thesis paper (2011). These texts contain accounts that could be described as confessional tales (e.g. Van Maanen, 1988) on her views on and experiences of working with the group. In these texts she reflects on her own position and role(s) in the collaborative group and writes about related challenges, insights and emotions. As a form of narrative analysis we have constructed a short evocative story of selected excerpts from these materials that touch upon the theme of emotions. To tie the excerpts together we have added a number of connective words or sentences. In the following

narrative these phrases are written in italics.¹ With this approach we aim to convey a sense of Marja's self-reflection and to introduce some of the values, norms and meanings through which she constructed her identity and understood the process of the artistic group (Gergen, 2005; Heikkinen, 2001; Richardson, 1990). Simultaneously our intention is to demonstrate that emotions play an important role in collaborative artistic processes. After introducing the story, we will further discuss the role of emotions and feelings that inevitably arise in collaborative processes.

Marja's Story

Because of my own background, this particular creative process involved a process of letting go, of questioning my own history and background as a student and a dancer, of examining and exploring my passion for creating new things and recreating old, and through this to learn to accommodate change and deal with uncertainty, both within myself and in the other members of the group. *In fact*, as the leader of the group I was rather nervous about how people would commit themselves to my work and to our shared work. Uncertainty was, indeed, one matter that we openly discussed as a group and to which I gave a great deal of personal thought and reflection. Putting up with and living with uncertainty is something we experience, to a greater or lesser extent, in almost all artistic endeavours. My objective was to try out and maintain a number of new working methods, and at first this only served to strengthen my sense of uncertainty. *Yet despite this*, I still wished to be and feel what I was experiencing, to be present with any matters that might arise, to confront them head-on. I wanted to sense where we were heading, to recognise what the group needed and to understand the ways in which things truly developed after each of our sessions. *This did indeed happen, but there were also plenty of trials and tribulations that I had to confront along the way.*

There were as many different artistic perspectives as there were members of the group. Still, at the end of the day I was the one that took ultimate responsibility for our eventual decisions and answered for them, though our working method was and remained entirely group-based and collaborative. Perhaps as a way of saving time I retained the final decision-making power for myself. Was I afraid of losing control of my own work? I noticed that, as group leader, emotions arising as a result of our group work tended to focus on me. I was variously the object of much enthusiasm, disappointment, stress, uncertainty, frustration, the joy of success, numerous streams of thoughts and creativity, questions, and much more besides.

¹ We originally constructed the narrative in Finnish. We formulated the English version together with a professional translator.

Sometimes I was very tired. Perhaps I was tired because I was the leader of the group and took too emotional an approach to the ups and downs of the various group members. I could have let go of some of the responsibility or tried not to take things so seriously. But I found the work so interesting, so unique, important and new that I either could not or did not want to take on a lighter workload. At times I found myself caught up in the middle of the group's turmoil. I was unable to relate to what I experienced, to see it in perspective or work with it in any way other than by sorting things out either by myself or with the other group members.

By January and February the group's work seemed to have reached a different world altogether. Fatigue, nervousness and the pressures of the individuals' own work came to the fore on a daily basis. Perhaps this 'new' form of performance and working process had created extra pressures by virtue of its sheer unfamiliarity. Eventually these pressures became unbearable for some members of the group, which in turn began to poison the atmosphere of the group as a whole. These pressures, the conflicts: where did they really come from? Or was I the guilty party as group leader? I find that hard to believe. I always tried to lighten the atmosphere, to listen to everyone and support people as much as possible. Although I was in 'full' control of the pressures exerted on me, I noticed that the group began to react strongly in relation to me and other members of the group as the date of the première came closer. I listened to a lot of emotions and pressures from the members of my group.

Nonetheless, it was exciting to see my own 'child', as I called my initial idea, transferred into other people's hands. It was hard to watch the group members talking amongst themselves about our rehearsals and weighing up different options without my being directly involved. [...] Collaborative work comes with a certain amount of letting go, and coping with this can be hard. Perhaps there's an element of fear: what if these other people can realise my ideas better than I can? Will I be needed, will I be left out if I don't listen to what everybody says, if I don't react to everything that happens within the group? This was a new experience, a new emotion for me. [...] My fears may have been related to a question of authority. Perhaps I was afraid that I wasn't a strong enough group leader and that one of the other group members would start running the group with ideas of their own. On the other hand, it was wonderful to see the members of the group becoming so enthusiastic, and to watch this enthusiasm feeding into the others' creativity and making them really commit themselves to our shared project.

As group leader I learned about diplomacy and situational sensitivity in many respects, and realised that I must not allow things to upset me. You need the skill to stay calm and choose your words carefully, so that the whole project will not collapse – unless that is

what the group members want. I learned to keep my nerves in check, though at times I wanted to shout out loud.

Discussion

Emotions and feelings play an important part in the creation of art. Sensory experiences, perceptions and emotional reactions are needed to make aesthetic judgements. Emotions find their expressive form in dance, for instance, through the use of diverse movement dynamics. More generally, the expression of emotions is central to social communication. Observing emotional expression in the form of movement, posture and facial expressions and tone of voice helps us to understand the intentions and contents of the consciousness of others (Nummenmaa, 2010, p. 101). Other people's emotions are also contagious through the functions of empathy and sympathy. When we share moods with others we begin to observe and relate to the world in a similar manner to them and this can enhance positive interaction (see e.g. De Vignemont & Singer 2010; Nummenmaa, 2010, p. 132). Our own personal experience of relating to other people and matters can induce a sense of emotional connectedness. Emotion can transform abstract knowledge into concrete understanding (cf. Johnson, 2007, p. 61; Sauer, 2005, pp. 48, 52).

As posited in research into emotions and leadership, positive emotions and empathy foster good leadership. This research also implies that the group members' emotions are a part of the leadership process and that good management of group processes might influence performance (Sauer, 2005, p. 78). Positive mood has been linked not only to pro-social and helpful behaviour but also to improved creativity and performance. Yet achieving high levels of performance often presents us with challenging goals, the solving of which can lead to destructive negative emotions such as frustration (Sauer, 2005, p. 79; Parviainen, 2006). Creativity is understood to require psychological safety, freedom, high internal motivation, lack of external evaluation, surveillance, reward, competition and time pressure. That being said, creativity also requires a certain level of confrontation and group tensions. (Parviainen, 2006; Sauer, 2005, p. 80)

Marja's story reveals a number of expectations and emotions, both negative and positive, related to the artistic process. She writes about the anxiety brought about by the uncertainty of the open process. She also recounts issues of responsibility and leadership within the group. Jo Butterworth has discussed different approaches to the choreographer's role and posits that these extend from the choreographer being an author to her being an equal collaborator. Following this categorization model, Marja can be seen as having worked as a facilitating choreographer, rather than as a truly equal collaborator (Butterworth, 2009, p. 87). After all, she had created the collaborative

environment, worked on its themes in advance and ultimately reserved the power to have the final say on how the performance should be carried out.

Nonetheless, leadership is never created through the action of one person alone. It seems that, given the emotions, pressures and needs the group placed on Marja, they required her to assume a leading role, or at least anticipated that she would do so. This may stem from the manner in which Marja had set up the group's working conditions, or it may be affected by a variety of other factors, such as the fact that the group had come together to work for the first time and was therefore dependant on external instruction. In fact, feelings such as guilt, envy, frustration and anxiety are common as newly-formed groups negotiate working methods and establish their own dynamics. In these instances the group often expects the leader to take emotional responsibility for the atmosphere of the working environment. Like negative emotions, positive emotions including enthusiasm and motivation also have the propensity to spread and reproduce in a group (Perkka-Jortikka, 2001). This fact comes forth powerfully in Marja's account, as she describes the manner in which her own enthusiasm and that of the group fostered greater commitment from everyone involved. In the end, the collaborative work fostered flexible integration of individual effort and seems to have given the collaborators a sense of not being alone in our struggle to create. Together they shared the uncertainty of their open-ended endeavors (Moran & John-Steiner, 2004, pp. 16, 21).

Defining the rules of collaboration is simultaneously an act of defining leadership. Shared leadership is about making sense of a shared situation together – remaining alert to it and acting together (Sauer, 2005, pp. 86, 171). When a group reacts emotionally, it is not only the rules and practice governing the task at hand that must be negotiated; the feelings of the group members should be addressed to regulate the group's emotions in a constructive manner. To recognise and address emotions and feelings requires practice and situations in which such feelings can be brought out, isolated and named. Suppressing emotions and feelings wastes energy and may hinder our ability to process important learning experiences. Conversely, the ability to recognise, name, and deal with our own emotions turns those very emotions into useful resources.

The ability to express and regulate emotions is a basic requirement for our being able to engage in interactive activities. Nonetheless, we cannot fully suppress automated changes that occur within our bodies. In general, the regulation of emotions is easier the earlier such regulation of developing chains of emotions occurs (Nummenmaa, 2010, p. 155). Emotions can be regulated by learning to recognise our feelings, by selecting what kind of emotion-inducing situations to take part in, and by shaping these situations or shifting the focus of our attention in them. Concrete methods of realising these strategies and putting them into action can be found and explored within the group (Nummenmaa,

2010, pp. 154–163). In her account Marja points out that she addressed feelings together with the group. She also talks about her desire to feel what she is feeling. It seems that for her feelings are forces that can direct and instigate further action. (see Kiander, 2006). Yet, at some point in the process Marja was afraid of being excluded from the group because of her facilitating role.

For a well functioning group, it is important to foster empathy between the group members without threatening the members' individual identities. This allows members to share the moods of others in an accepting manner. In order for trust to grow, individuals need to be appreciated for their very differences. Creative processes thrive on a sufficient level of difference within the group. The more a group shares a mood or understanding of things, the easier they can produce material together. Conversely, the more homogeneous the group becomes, the fewer new themes, ideas or phenomena come to be included in or produced by the collaborative process (Parviainen, 2006, p. 178). In creative collaborative work it is paramount to learn to appreciate the differences between group members and the movement of emotions, changing roles and relationships as well as novel ways of working that the process fosters. The use of different perspectives feeds the growth of the group's understanding and gives it the opportunity to develop its own characteristic action. Difference in opinion can support questioning and overcoming of repetitive routines and customary behaviour of the group members. Indeed, once a constructive solution has been reached conflicts can strengthen the group, its understanding of itself and its members' commitment to their common objectives

It seems that Marja felt some tension in relation to the expectations the group projected on her and she on the group. As a facilitator of the process, she took the role of the leader, which both made the group trust her and express their needs to her, but also made her feel excluded in some respects. However, we would like to conclude that this tension in fact was productive. It demanded her to re-negotiate her own and the group members expectations in the midst of the artistic process. Change in roles and relationships happened as the group members became accustomed to working with each other and the artistic work proceeded. The success of the project was supported by the tolerance of emotions and an emotional literacy played an important part in the manner in which Marja reflected upon and made choice concerning her way of interacting with the group.

To learn is to become someone through active participation (Standal, 2009). Embedding artistic learning in a collaborative artistic process allows for learning that is shaped by participation. It is neither completely internalised nor externalised, but located in an ongoing inter-relational process of becoming between the subjectivity of the learner and the negotiative and meaningful constructive activity of the collaborators (Standal, 2009).

The group member becomes a skilful participant in the collaborative process. She expands her artistic knowledge and enhances her capacity to interact artistically (Räsänen, 2000). In fact, belonging to a group and participating in its work are valuable resources for learning and intellectual development. People adopt most powerfully and profoundly the things that allow them to participate in those communities that they hold in high regard (Hakkarainen & Paavola, 2006). Here we would like to suggest that Marja learned about the emotional entanglement involved in facilitating a collaborative artistic project.

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