# Teaching to perform

## The interplay of talk, gesture and bodily conduct in dance lessons

#### 1. Introduction

The paper focuses on the ways in which expert dancers present and *teach to perform* dance steps, and, more generally, movements' configurations, to absolute beginners. It is a pedagogic process during which movements are both told, narrated, and exhibited, shown in an exemplar manner. We will see in detail, through examples directly taken from the field, the interplay of bodily conduct, talk and gesture allowing the process itself.

After a brief description of the research and data on which it is based, the paper describes the institutional framework of a dance lesson and the framing activity, that I call *isolation*, enacted by the teacher within this context immediately before the exemplar exhibition, or *demonstration*, of the step. In fact, the teacher has to show dance movements in a way that separate them from the surrounding movements and gestures and that they could be most recognizable by the parties.

Then, the paper focuses on *demonstration*. As Charles Goodwin [2000] noted regarding hopscotch players and archaeologists, when a teacher presents configurations of movements to students in a dance class, different semiotic resources and sign systems are at stake: teacher makes use, on one side, of both verbal instructions and gesture (movements' properties description and prescription) and, on the other side, of bodily exemplar exhibitions (movements' properties exemplification). Starting from the analysis of a video recorded lesson piece taken from data, the paper looks at the ways in which the teacher frames steps' presentation with talk and gesture, describing

configuration of movements, thus embedding ways of looking to the movements themselves. At the same time, the paper explores four dimensions of the exemplar exhibition of dance steps, looking at them also in the light of what does it mean *teaching to perform* an activity.

Dimensions I identified are: *repetition* of the whole step/configuration and of its segments, a classical pedagogical feature; *emphasis*, or movements' accentuation, remarking a movement and underling its properties; *segmentation* of movements belonging to the same step/configuration; *slowdown*, or movements' speed reduction.

#### 1.1 The research: data and methods

The paper derives from broadly ethnographic research I conducted on the professional world of dancers. The purpose of the research was to examine the professional field, training, and trajectories within it; the ways in which knowledge and expertise are acquired, transmitted and deployed; the occupational culture; and everyday collective work practices. The aim was to grasp the everyday experience of the dancer as an organic and living whole and to describe it in terms of the culture of the practical and epistemic community to which the dancer belongs.

The data on which the research is based can be divided into three categories. There are first the data relative to the mapping of the field. These comprise, on the one hand, the basic structural data which define the quantitative dimensions of the profession and mark out the boundaries of the occupational community [Van Maanen and Barley, 1984], and, on the other hand, information more generally concerning the field of Italian dance, and comprising aspects such as the market of supply and demand, the agencies of recruitment and socialization, the ways in which activities, roles, hierarchies, etc., are organized. The second category consists of 25 in-depth interviews conducted with different types of professionals – dancers in musicals, television shows,

opera and ballet, as well as teachers, choreographers and maîtres de ballet – currently working in Italy. The last and broader category of data are those deriving from ethnographic fieldwork. I have spent prolonged periods of direct observation of the everyday activities of dance schools and companies: lessons, both of classic and modern-contemporary dance, rehearsals, performances, and so on.. I have also attended courses on modern and contemporary dance, and I have taken part in displays and shows, putting myself in the setting as an active participant, the purpose being to start from my personal bodily (and not only) experience<sup>1</sup> in order to understand what is meant by becoming and being a dancer, and to acquire the appetites and skills that make the diligent agent in the universe under consideration [Wacquant, 2000: 8]. In particular - besides participating in diverse festivals, fairs, competitions, and events generally connected with the world of dance – I have conducted my research at three main sites. 1. At the La Fourmie Scuola di Danza and the Trento company of the same name, I conducted 12 months of ethnography and 24 of active participant observation (attendance on modern dance courses). I collected around 70 hours of video recordings - subsequently transcribed according to the procedures of conversation analysis - of everyday work in the dance practice room. The paper is based, in particular, on about 40 hours of video recorded participant observation of my own dance class. 2. For 10 months I observed the Corpocorrente Company of Mantua and its MantovaDanza2008 festival – in which I also participated as a dancer and presenter. 3. Finally, I spent 8 months conducting active participant observation on the theatre-dance course run by Antonella Bertoni at the *Universidanza* association of Trento.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Several studies by Judith Okely have addressed the theme of the ethnographer's body in the field and as a knowledge-gathering tool. See e.g. Okely, 2007.

### 2. Isolation: framing the local context

A dance lesson constitutes a both institutional and situated context in which gesture and other forms of bodily conduct are critical to the ways in which participants accomplish, with talk too, the activity at hand. On the institutional side, lesson's framework is quite simple and recurrent. A part from some differences between dance styles and advancement levels, it is usually composed as follow.

A sequence of warm-up exercises, performed on the same music piece as for a choreography. Usually taught piece by piece in the first lessons of the year, it comes little by little learned by pupils and then performed by themselves.

One or more "study sequence" of academic step(s), as *pliè* and/or *tendù*, etc., performed on a music piece which only requirement is an apt rhythm. Usually, these sequences are kept the same for some time and then changed with another sequence of the same academic step. This lesson segment takes more time in ballet lessons – in which a study sequence is performed for almost each existing academic step – than in modern or contemporary ones.

Abdominal exercises, usually performed, with a surrounding boosting music piece, directly copying by the teacher and following his/her verbal instruction. This segment is not present in ballet lessons, while could also be inserted in the warm-up sequence in modern/contemporary ones.

Stretching exercises, usually performed, with a surrounding relaxing music piece, by pupils following the teacher or by themselves.

Diagonal(s), or sequences of academic step(s) which need to be done not "at bar" or "at centre", but exploiting all the length of the room. As for "study sequences", diagonals are usually performed on a music piece which only requirement is an apt rhythm.

Choreography, usually kept the same for some time and then changed with another one.

Given this institutional context, segments come collaboratively created and identified through the situated, culturally defined, asymmetric interaction which takes place in the dance practice room between teacher and pupils. First of all, the teacher defines the local frame and keys the context, suggesting what they are going to do, defining what's going on. She usually does so through a verbal action, simply mentioning the name of the academic step or exercise they are going to do and/or mentioning the relative position in the dance room space that they are going to take. In the context of a dance lesson, in fact, space positioning is a cultural marker of "what's going on", some lesson segments are always performed in the same area of the dance room: for instance, abdominal exercises are always performed "on ground", while "at bar" study sequences only, thus academic steps only, are usually performed.

Secondly, the teacher <u>positions</u> herself in the room space: when she is going to present a new configuration of movements or she is going to freshen up a known one, she positions herself in the middle of the dance room, laying ahead of students (usually a step forward), with her back facing them and with her front to the mirror<sup>2</sup>, in the middle in respect of pupils. Instead, when she is going to look at students' performing, she rests on the wall or on the bar along one of the dance room's sides. This is a second, stronger and situated, cultural marker of "what's going on"; moreover in this case it is

This is not the place to deal with this topic in detail. However, the mirror constitutes an indispensable object in the dance practice room: it is the bearer of the audience's point of view; it allows observation of one's own body in movement, so that its performance can be reflexively appraised; it also allows comparison to be made with the other bodies among which the dancer is moving, thereby giving it otherness together with them; finally it is a fundamental device for communication among dancers and the teacher/choreographer. See also Bassetti, 2009.

teacher's bodily conduct in relation to the space and the bodies present in it – and not teacher's verbal conduct – which indicates what's going to happen and, so what pupils have to do.

Teacher's bodily <u>posture</u> is a fundamental, situated cultural marker too. When the teacher is going to 'demonstrate' something, he/she takes a typical body posture, which has the function to call students' attention and to frame what will comes immediately after as "a dance step the teacher is going to show in an exemplar manner and that the students have to recognize, observe and learn-to-perform". This typical posture consists of keeping still, legs straight and arms along hips, for few seconds; sometimes also relaxing the body breathing out for a while. This last medium the teacher uses in order to frame the local context constitutes the core of what we called *isolation* and is aimed to interrupt the continuous flowing of action (movement, gesture, talk) and determining what counts as movement(s) to be recognized, observed, learned-to-perform and remembered.

Let's see an example of this process taken from videorecordings (Storyboard 1).

- 1. First, the teacher (see the red arrow) turns off the music which was still flowing from the precedent lesson segment, a *plié* 'study sequence'. Doing so, she has her back facing pupils and she says «Tendù», thus she mentions what's going to happen.
- 2. Then, she turns herself and starts walking toward the middle of the dance room.
- 3. When she is halfway keeping on walking toward the middle she says, rhetorically: «Do you remember it?», meaning the sequence of *tendù*. This verbal action serves as an anticipation of what is going to happen immediately after: the teacher in fact is going to freshen up a *tendù* 'study sequence'.
- 4. Then the teacher keeps on walking until she has reached the middle and positioned herself in her usual demonstrative place: laying a step forward her students, in the

- middle in respect of them, with her back facing them and with her front to the mirror.
- 5. Reached her position, the teacher during a pause in the talk take a particular and typical posture, in order to isolate what comes immediately after as "something she is going to show in an exemplar manner and students will have to learn". The teacher keeps still, legs straight and arms along hips, for two seconds.
- 6. Finally she begins her bodily *demonstration* of the *tendù* sequence.



Storyboard 1

3. Demonstration: the interplay of bodily conduct, gesture and talk

Teacher's task in the exemplar representation of a dance step is to show, mark, underline, make visible and recognizable the properties of a conglomeration of movements, so that pupils can then correctly perform it. We would like to analyze a very short piece from videorecordings. It is the moment of a lesson immediately after students performed a configuration which teacher was presenting them for the first time: she has just stopped music, she is coming back to centre, between pupils, and, after *isolation*, she tries to teach to perform a particular bodily configuration. It is an interesting and quite complex *demonstration* phase (Storyboard 2).

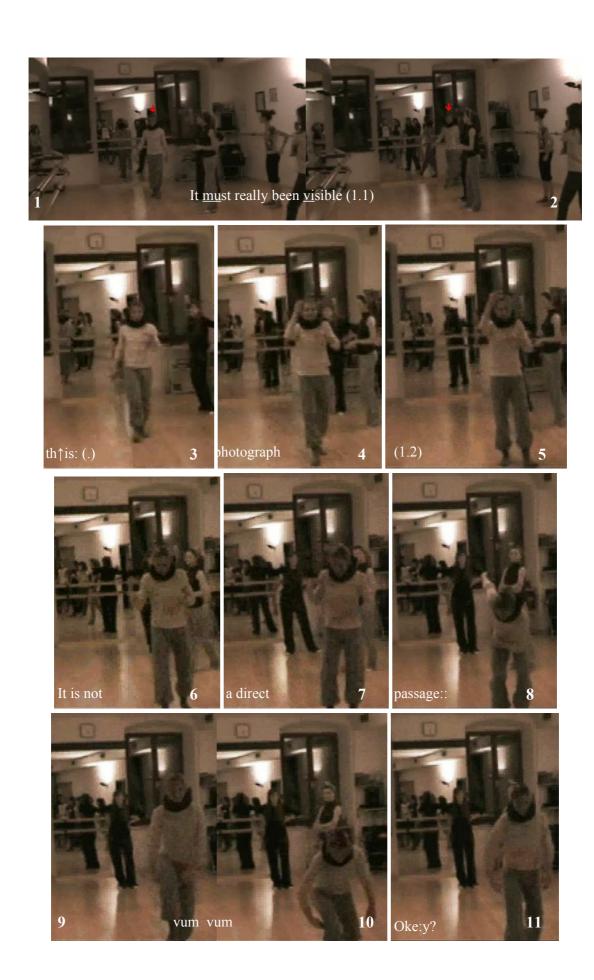
First of all the teacher underline what must been visible in the configuration (squares 1-4, Storyboard 2). In fact, as the teacher has to make visible the properties of movements for an audience of practitioners, seemingly performers (will) have to make visible movements' properties for an audience of spectators. The teacher here underline a characteristic of a particular movement of the conglomeration she is presenting, in which she is interested at the moment. She does so through talk and gesture, while she is moving towards the middle of the dance room: she says «It must really been visible», then she pauses (1.1) waiting to reach the middle of the dance room, ahead of her pupils, and, continuing walking towards the middle of the room, she elicits what must been visible: she says "th\inis" and lifts up her left hand, with palm to ground, keeping it for a while floating in the air; and thus anticipating the movement's property she wants to underline, which is hanging up, stasis, which is exactly: «photograph», the word she tell immediately after, when she has finally reached the middle of the room. Saying so, the teacher lifts up her right hand too and keeps it floating in the air as the left one, but in higher than this, thus anticipating another characteristic of the movement in which she is interested. This gesture, in fact, indicates that the movement must not only been

characterized by stasis, but also by <u>tension to the top</u>. Stasis on the time side, and tension to the top on the space side.

As I said this is simply an anticipation: then the teacher moves to show, in an exemplar manner, first, what the movement is not, so what practitioners must not do (squares 6-11), and, then, what the movement is, what practitioners have to reproduce (squares 12-23). Before this, however, we have another example of *isolation* (square 5): the teacher marks her last two steps on place, and stop motion for a while, in order to make clear that what comes after is an examplar *demonstration*. Here we have a pause in the talk.

Then she verbally prepare what comes after, saying what the movement is not: 
«It is not a direct passage::». It is the talk, here, that enlights the properties of the movements she is going to perform. And participants know that she is going to perform because she – after a gesture which represents the word "passage" (consider the Italian version "passaggio diretto" with the inversion of adjective and substantive) – put her own body in the initial posture of the configuration (square 8). Here is also clearly visible the difference between gestures accompanying talk and gestures pertaining to dance configuration which are not linked with talk.

After this preparatory phase, the teacher begins to perform the configuration with the <u>incorrect version</u> of the movement she is interested in, and in the meanwhile she says «vum vum» (squares 9-10). This "vum vum" is a verbal action which has the function to pantomime the rhythm of the incorrect configuration that the teacher is performing at the moment. A continuous rhythm which is not proper for a configuration including a stasis. Thus a configuration which needs for *segmentation* of the movements it is composed of.





Storyboard 2

Another point should be mentioned: the teacher performs the configuration in a swifter way than the performance she is going to do. Immediately after, in fact, the teacher comes back to her precise position in the middle of the room, taking the initial posture of the configuration. This transition phase (squares 11-12) is combined with ending the precedent sequence of talk (Oke:y?») and beginning the subsequent one («But exactly»). Then she pauses for an half second (0.5) *isolating* the subsequent exemplar exhibition of the configuration.

The *demonstration* which comes after constitutes a very interesting example of the dimensions I called *segmentation*, *emphasis* and *slowdown*, this last reaching, in this case, the *freeze*, passing from slow motion to stop motion. The teacher here is presenting a configuration which includes an "hung up", a stop motion, but – in order to make it recognizable by students – she has to perform the hung up slower, she has to prolong the stop motion. Performing in slow motion, besides, 'enlarges' opportunities for talk and gesture, the last particularly when arms movements are not scheduled. The teacher, here, is using three media at the same time:

- 1. she uses her body in order to slowly perform a segmented configuration of movements:
- 2. she uses talk, on the one hand that of signified in order to describe movement's property and, on the other hand that of signifier in order to reproduce the rhythm, the flow, the "dynamic" of the movements;
- 3. she uses gestures in order to underline that movement's property at the moment not pre/described by talk and/or exhibited by performing.

Being the properties the teacher is interested in – the stasis and the tension to the top in the movement of "hang up" which is part of the configuration – she needs for

separating that movement from the other ones belonging to the choreographic sequence. In particular, she has:

- to segment the configuration of movements,
- to make segments/movements much more recognizable through the *slowdown* of her performance,
- to *emphasize* some properties of the segment/movement she is interested in at the moment.

Note also that, for (1) the need of *slowdown* and *Freeze* in performing a stop motion, and (2) the material and bodily constrictions diktat, the teacher fall down for three times. Nevertheless, she continues performing and "demonstrating" with her trunk, while, with the legs, she comes back three times in the correct posture before going on in the performing of the whole configuration.

She also never stops talking and gesturing: she exploits linguistic signified in order to describe the property of the movement pertaining to the time axis: stasis; while she uses linguistic signifier in order to underline the same property through rhythm. Let's see in detail:

- She says, on the first "photograph" she performs, «stop motion:: (.)» (squares 13-15).
- Then, while she is falling down, she repeats and restates: «held u:p (.)»(squares 16-18). Here she also uses gesture in order to mark the lifting up (tension to top) of the movement teacher's forefingers point the top and the stasis teacher's forefingers remain in position even when she is falling down the second time.
- In the meanwhile she is falling down the second time (squares 19-20), besides, she continues talking, explaining another consequential property of the movement: the "going out of axis" and the consequent prosecution of the configuration. The teacher says, keeping the precedent gesture, «Obviously then I go out of ax::is».

- Then she touches ground for the second time, abandons gesture and in order to better show the "going out of axis" and the prosecution of the configuration she comes back, for the third time, at the initial posture of the configuration, performing again the "photograph" (square 21), and she does so in the meanwhile she continues to explain, saying «>but from there [then so] you can fa:↓ll».
- This last word "fall" is told in the meanwhile teacher performs the movement of falling down included in the configuration (squares 22-23). We as the participants can distinguish this exemplar fall (which is part of the conglomeration students have to learn), from the other two falls of the teacher (which derive from performing in slowdown and freezing the body in balance) exactly thanks to talk and gesture that continue, during the first two falls, as if the falls are not happening (because the teacher was still taking into consideration the segment of the "hang up" and not the subsequent one, that of the "fall").

### 4. Teaching to perform and the dimensions of demonstration

Teaching to perform is a particular pedagogic activity, in that it must not only pass on a knowledge, but also – and especially – a know-how. This is why, among the dimensions we identified, only two are common to almost each pedagogic process, that is repetition and emphasis, even if the second one assumes particular characteristics when the process is performative. On the contrary, slowdown and segmentation are proper to that teaching activities aimed to provide a know-how.

In analysing some fundamental *keys* used in our society, Erving Goffman [1974] identifies the category of the "technical redoings" and lists as its first two subcategories "practice", test, exercises and so on, and "demonstrations", "or exhibitions, that is performances of a tasklike activity out of its usual functional context in order to allow

someone who is not the performer to obtain a close picture of the doing of the activity" [Goffman, 1974: 66]. When the activity at hand comes keyed as "demonstration" and/or "practice", not only we look at this activity in a different way, having in mind a different end – being that its *primary structure* has been transformed, translated – but also the interplay of bodily conduct, gesture and talk comes modified accordingly to bodily and material constrictions.

To put emphasis on something means to accentuate it - and/or (some of) its properties, characteristics - so that others could recognize it/them. In order to emphasize a concept, for instance, we can modify, accordingly to the context, voice loudness and/or its intonation while we are saying a particular (piece of) sentence – e.g. "I need help"; and/or we can gesture in order to reinforce an assertion, indicate something co-present relevant to the concept, and so on; not to mention facial expressions and proxemics. However, when we are teaching to perform something to someone, all these media remain at our disposal, but in a weaker way, so to speak. Think to a language lesson: when, for example, a teacher tries illustrating how to correctly pronounce "th" in english, (s)he can't provide a demonstration at the same time (s)he is verbally explaining where to put the tongue. Equally, a chef who is demonstrating how to knead can't, for instance, close his/her fist in order to emphasize the strength needed by the activity (s)he is exemplarly exhibiting, but could accentuate the action of letting off the weight of the body's high part on arms and hands so to gain much more strenght. The same happens, as we have seen, in a dance lesson and in all that activities that, aimed to provide (also) a know-how, strongly involve participants' bodies, so influencing their, embodied, communication possibilities.

As well as *emphasis*, *slowdown* and *segmentation* have recognizability as primary purpose. However, *segmentation* is aimed, above all, to allow pupils identifying

components of the activity that is being taught, and only consequentially to mark and underline its properties. In the case I presented here, *segmentation* helps making identifiable and isolatable movements belonging to the same configuration, distinguishing, for instance, between "hung up" and "fall". *Segmenting* an activity means to show what it is composed of, presenting it as a series of well defined, and separate from each other, micro-actions, none of which is, so to speak, left to chance.

As for slowdown, it improves segmentation's efficacy, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, allow, during demonstration, to bodily emphasize movements' properties (e.g. 'stasis' and 'tension to the top'), as well as to describe and prescribe them through talk and gesture. Teaching to perform, in fact, means describing and prescribing what one is doing while (s)he is doing it, repeating (parts of) this doing as well as such verbal and gestural de/pre-scription, segmenting the activity in a series of micro-actions, emphasizing properties of them, and performing in a slower way so to make segments and their properties much more recognizable, thus identifiable and reproducible.

#### 4. Conclusions

We have seen how, through *isolation*, the teacher shows a new configuration of dance movements – and, particularly, the segments/movements of this configuration – in a way that separate it from the surrounding ones, and make it more recognizable. The instruments she exploits to this end are: talk (specifically: mentioning the academic step, the lesson segment or the room area relevant at the moment), position relative to the environmental space and the bodies present in it, and bodily posture.

During *Demonstration*, instead, the media that the teacher uses are talk, gesture and bodily conduct. Through talk, she frames steps' presentation, describing and

prescribing (configuration of) movements' properties, both in negative (e.g. «It's not...») and positive (e.g. «But exactly...») terms. She mainly exploits signified in order to describe movements' properties, and signifier in order to resemble movements' flow. Gesture as well, with and within talk and/or performance, are used in order to describe and prescribe movements' properties (e.g. forefingers kept pointing to the top). Finally, the teacher makes use of her body so to exhibit how to perform movements and what must (or must not) been visible while they are performed.

By analysing the interplay of these three media, I tried to extrapolate some dimensions of the exemplar exhibition of dance steps and, more generally, of that doing which consists in *teaching to perform* an activity to someone. Dimensions of *demonstration* I identified are: *segmentation* of the movements' configuration (or activity) in a series of well defined and distinct movements (or micro-actions); *repetition* of the whole configuration (or activity) and of its movements (or segments); *emphasis* on particular movements (or segments) and their properties; *slowdown* of the performance in order to make movements (or segments) more easily identifiable and their properties recognizable.

Some topics remain that demand for further research. When (e.g. during demonstration or after? is the process recurrent?) and how (e.g. looking at the teacher, at classmates, or at themselves in the mirror?) do participants practice? How do they show their understanding? Which is the role of both individual and collective corrections?

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