

## Keeping the enjoyment alive: Positive psychology for dance

Posted By **Elsa Urmston on behalf of the IADMS Education Committee**, Thursday, October 29, 2015

The next series of posts from the Education Committee shines a light on the psychology of dancers. Over the next month or so, we have a range of blog contributions from leading dance psychology researchers and practitioners. Erin Sanchez (Dance UK) and Joan Duda (University of Birmingham) will discuss the *Empowering Dance* programme in the UK, a professional development workshop which draws on research finding that support the integration of autonomy supportive environments. Sanna Nordin Bates (University of Stockholm) introduces us to the use of imagery in optimizing dance practice and Imogen Aujla (University of Bedfordshire) discusses the importance of passion in dance. We kick off here with the first in the series exploring the application of positive psychology to dance practice and how we can create positive learning and creative environments in which our dancers can flourish.



Image: Image Source Royalty Free

Think back... why did you first start dancing? No doubt it was because of the sheer enjoyment and exhilaration of feeling your body move, often in time with the music, in front of an audience, of telling a story or evoking emotions. Our love for the art of dance probably never fundamentally leaves us, but perhaps the daily grind of training, of managing and applying the criticism we receive from ourselves and those around us, as well as ensuring we get enough rest and fuel can detract from the pleasure we find in dancing. Dancers in training might often feel as this young professional described to me her experiences in dancing: "It was a very stressful time for me – the need to succeed, pass, do well, all that stuff affected my enjoyment at that time. I was having more fun away from university." As an educator, these kinds of comments have always been bothersome – what happens in a training environment to bring about this kind of sentiment and why is that a response from the people doing the training? What strategies can be encouraged amongst young dancers to become more resilient? And what can I do in my own practice to create an environment where enjoyment can be nurtured?

### **What is positive psychology?**

Positive psychology is described by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p.5) as the "positive features which make a life worth living". Positive psychology is typified by constructs such as

hope, courage, creativity, perseverance, tolerance, future-mindedness, being in the moment, empathy, engagement and enjoyment. In 2009, Seligman and colleagues undertook a positive psychology education project in Australia, teaching about the topics which typify positive psychology, as well as trying to embed positive psychology values in the teaching of all subjects at the school. Their findings reported that the students' enjoyment of, and engagement in learning increased across the board and that cooperation and empathy amongst students and teachers was also consolidated. It appears that there is something to learn here in how we teach, and indeed what we teach, that can support dancers in optimising their performance. But there is perhaps a bigger picture here too. Hefferon and Boniwell (2012) make the case for positive psychology contributing to health and wellbeing in general terms too; that positive psychology approaches can support happiness and contentment as well as be a way for us to support self-directed behaviours in all that we do. So, if our overall well-being is sound, and we have a positive attitude towards dance as part of our whole life, it appears we are better able to cope in the face of adversity and enjoy what we do.

As an area of academic endeavour, positive psychology is a growing area, especially in dance, and has many sub theories through which we can structure research and shape practice. One such theory is Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory.

## Flow

Flow is defined as "a subjective, mental state contributing to optimal experience, which is characterised by complete absorption in an activity, at given moment in time" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 53). It's perhaps typified in popular culture in the film [Billy Elliot](#). The moment when Billy is auditioning at the Royal Ballet School and is asked what it is he most likes about dancing. He says, "I dunno ... it sort of feels good, sort of stiff and that, but once I get going, then, I like forget everything, and I sort of disappear. I can feel a change in my whole body. Like there's a fire in my body. I'm just there, flying. Like a bird. Like electricity. Yeah, electricity." We've all been there I am sure! From a theoretical perspective, flow is comprised of nine dimensions, conceived as constituents of the flow experience described above:

- Skill-challenge balance – achieving a balance between the skills that the dancers have and the challenge which is presented to them
- Action and awareness merging – refers to the moment when the action you are carrying out and your awareness of it appears to blend into one
- Clear goals – having a clear sense of direction
- Unambiguous feedback – clear, direct feedback from tutors and other dancers
- Concentration – an environment in which concentration can be supported and achieved
- Control – perceiving a sense of control over what you are doing
- Loss of self-consciousness – in a flow state, we lose our self-consciousness and are able to invest fully in that experience
- Transformation of time – time might stand still, speed up or slow down
- Autotelic experience – refers to the intrinsic enjoyment we get from doing activity purely for the reason of doing it, and nothing else

Csikszentmihalyi describes flow himself in this [TED talk](#).

## What facilitates flow?

There has been much research in sport, leisure activity and work-based settings, and a small amount in dance, which has identified what facilitates flow. Have a look at the further readings which are recommended below. In summary the facilitators, or antecedents of flow fall into personal or situational factors; so things that the dancer themselves can control, and those which are influenced by the environment around them. These include:

<b>Personal Antecedents</b>	<b>Situational Antecedents</b>
Mental preparation such as image-based rehearsal, rituals, getting in “the zone”	Suitability of space including flooring, lighting, warmth, etc.
Physical preparation such as warm up, breathing, fitness, sufficient rehearsal	Relationships with peers and teachers
Having confidence in skills and expertise to complete the task	Feeling unjudged and trusting others
Finding the fun in a task	

So if these things help people achieve a flow state, then helping dancers autonomously develop the personal skills above may better ensure their enjoyment in dancing for themselves. But we too, as educators working with dancers throughout their careers, can shape our teaching climate to foster positive psychology.

The constructs of flow itself can perhaps act as a way to shape our practice. For example, balancing the skills of the dancer to the challenge of the tasks set can immediately foster a sense of capability and brings about enjoyment itself. Setting clear goals in class and creating an environment for dancers to concentrate engenders the flow experience. Ensuring that your feedback is timely and unambiguous helps too, and making sure there is some fun in class can ensure that autotelic experience we seek.



Image: Ross Carpenter teaching at DanceEast Centre for Advanced Training (Rachel Cherry)

There are many other educational frameworks which can support the occurrence of flow and promote positive psychology. A useful one is Epstein's TARGET strategy, an acronym for the following:

- **T**ask - designing class activities for variety, individual challenge and active involvement, focus on learning through fun and task-involvement, rather than competition.
- **A**uthority - involving dancers in the decision making process, offering leadership roles
- **R**ecognition - recognising individual development rather than rewarding talent alone
- **G**rouping - encouraging cooperation by working together, small groupings and using multiple ways of organising those groups
- **E**valuation - using criteria for development using self-set goals, to involve students in process of evaluation
- **T**ime - providing opportunities and time for improvement, time management, flexibility in reaching goals using various pathways

More recent research that my colleague James Hewison and I have undertaken, has been to look at how flow can enable greater willingness to take risks, particularly within the teaching and learning of Contact Improvisation. Full details of the study have been published in the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* (see further resources), but our findings point to a range of structures which enable flow to occur and greater risks to be taken. These include:

- Starting with small, scaffolded tasks and building to larger ones in terms of:
  - o Task length
  - o Simple to complex

- o Familiar partners to those less well known
- o Quiet to loud
- o Solo to group
- o Private to public exploration
- Allowing time for full exploration, discovery and play
- Engendering an environment of trust and on-judgment
- Building a community of learning of which the teacher are a part
- Offering space and time to discuss the significant and not so significant

There are lots of ways in which we can keep the enjoyment alive, these are just some and there are of course many more. For further information have a look at these resources:

*American Psychologist*: Special Issue on Happiness, Excellence and Optimal Human Functioning. January 2000, 55(1).

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Collins.

Hefferon, K. & Boniwell, I. (2011). *Positive psychology: Theory, research and applications*. London: McGraw Hill.

Seligman, M. *The pursuit of happiness: Bringing the science of happiness to life*. Website available at: [www.pursuit-of-happiness.org](http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org) (Accessed: 13.11.13)

Urmston, E., & Hewison, J. (2014). Risk and flow in contact improvisation: Pleasure, play and presence. *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices*, 6(2), 219-232.

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## Comments on this post...



**[Janet Karin OAM](#) says...**

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An absolutely excellent blog! My thanks to all those involved in writing it, and thanks from all the teachers who are soon to be inspired by these practical, soundly based suggestions. Great work!

Janet

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