

**Sharing my practice and research in higher education:  
'universal soul', university soul, my university role and context**

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First published, in *Movement, Dance and Drama*, the magazine of the Laban Guild, (summer 2021) <https://labanguildinternational.org.uk/>

Reflecting as a university lecturer in dance and movement, it is apparent that the parts of Laban's work to which I am most drawn, are his visionary perspectives of corporeality, expressionism, and embodied wisdom. I currently think and enquire into the world of embodied knowledge and lived experience and consider where it exists and what its uses are. I investigate dance as a non-verbal knowledge form in its first instance with Laban's 'land of silence' concept providing robust framing for this. 'Laban believed in the existence of two worlds - the world of everyday appearance (the space of action) and the world of an unseen higher order (the space of silence)' (Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez Colberg, 2002, p. 26) and in his autobiography he states that: 'Behind external events the dancer perceives another, entirely different, world [...] a hidden, forgotten landscape lies there, the land of silence, the realm of the soul' (Laban, 1975, pp. 89-90). In my role as a thinking dancer and educator in higher education, I interact with these ideas in my practice which involves consideration of community, learning, knowledge and sharing.

As a lecturer, I am responsible for fostering fair and equal learning environments and am captivated by what might be discovered and learned from accessing those hidden and forgotten landscapes of silence, located in the lived, embodied experience. I teach and facilitate content and practice around performance-making and critical thinking, engaging energetically with questions around social and cultural perspectives. Uniting all of this in my higher education context is, it feels to me, a question of knowledge and how it is generated, discovered, acquired and shared. The question can come from a variety of viewpoints such as: what and how much knowledge is gained in the face of the financial investment made to get it? How does performance, in particular dance, 'count as' research or knowledge? And what place do canons of knowledge and fixity of knowledge have in relation to marginalised or unacknowledged contributions throughout human history? Direct and physicalised demonstrations of longstanding racial inequality and marginalisation, called society to action on a global scale during the summer of 2020. The collective urge of the Black Lives Matter protests last year, sparked initially by George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, 25 May 2020, were an embodied means to break through historical silencing and oppression, to convey a vital message for change. I consider myself called to action and continue to build my practice around dance and social justice and hold closely Laban's philosophy, of a 'universal soul out of which and for which we have to create' (Laban, 1975, p. 94) more urgently than ever in my navigation of knowledge and its communities.

### **Dance and the embodied as epistemology: A thinking example**

In response to the call to action of 2020, I propose that Laban's concept of 'the space of silence', in relation to 'the space of action', offers a way to access insight into cultural occurrences such as protest, that like art forms such as dance, film or music, are 'time-based' and embodied.

Thinking epistemologically, I perceive that Laban's visions, and the dance paradigm overall, are such that they can effectively deal with questions of culture, identity and lived experience. As a promoter of my academic subject area, I am compelled to explore the beneficial possibilities of how widely the characteristics of this way of knowing, could transfer to, or combine with other subjects. I imagine how knowledge practices are nourished and kept alive, in order that new shoots of tradition cultivate and flourish.

In the dance paradigm - whether public, professional or academic - performance, discussion, artistic statement, representation, expression, body politics and creativity are typical means for knowledge discovery and exchange among diverse communities worldwide. These cultural methods and modes importantly locate and voice individual perspectives of people and communities, the presence of individual truths, provide a relational and felt possibilities to the experience of those receiving and engaging with the knowledge. In this way, through active and embodied listening, a delta like network of solidarity can emerge as a response to the sharing of knowledge, capable of supporting a busy cosmos of diversity, as opposed to the singular conditions of one mainstream with its hinterlands. Through the embodied means of dance, the mainstream of spoken and written languages, is initially transcended, as the hinterlands of experiential and qualitative experiences are foregrounded; the lost or hidden dimensions of knowledge, if desired, can form into new channels of consciousness and possibility.

How is the dance, the research? In a dissemination, readers and audiences of the research discoveries can be awakened to their own senses and lived experiences through their active participation in what is being shared. In Roland Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author*, the idea he sees 'as ushering in an era of joyous freedom', that gives way to the active reader being born (Barry, 2002, p. 67), conceptually connects to my pursuit of continued advocacy for practice and participation as an effective method for learning and sharing knowledge. Thinking further about the interactive and involved culture of knowledge transmission, Tyson Yunkaporta, a member of the Apalech Clan in far North Queensland, in his book *Sands Talk*, explains 'kinship-mind', a concept taken from his writing method and envisioned thinking. It is represented by a drawn symbol - two dots with a horizontal line between the two.

The kinship-mind symbol shows the connectedness between two things – places or people or knowledge or any combination of these [...] In Aboriginal worldviews, relationships are paramount in knowledge transmission. [...] In our world nothing can be known or even exist unless it is in relation to other things. Most importantly, those things that are connected are less important than the forces of connection between them. [...] Areas of knowledge are integrated, not separated. The relationship between the knower and other knowers, place and senior knowledge-keepers is paramount. It facilitates shared memory and sustainable knowledge systems. Any observer does not try to be objective, but is integrated within a sentient system that is observing itself. (Yunkaporta, 2018, pp. 168-170)

Yunkaporta here conveys his indigenous perspective of the ethos of how knowledge is held interactively in his culture, rather than a finalistic transactional exchange or transmission. This is useful to my question about knowledge in higher education and the aspect of handling of the relationship between financial investment and knowledge gain. Laban's concepts of embodied wisdom also depict ways of knowing that reside in the inner unseen human world, demanding active participation to receive and become aware of information available from an experience. The 'bodies in space' feeling of Yunkaporta's kinship-mind symbol - that represents the connectedness between two things - brings vision to a way that dance provides a scenario where the reader, spectator, or listener, for example, has an active and sensory role to carry out, the joys and freedoms of which, Barthes demonstrates as possible.

### **The space of action and of silence: A thinking example in practice**

Here, I have considered three memorable, physicalised moments of the 2020 Black Lives Matter occurrences. I think and write about spaces, actions and silences under headings that aim to keep present the paradigm of dance in the discussion of it as an epistemology capable of reflecting culture, politics and experiences. In Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez Colberg (2002, p. 220), Paula Salosaari shares her research on 'the concept of multiple embodiment'. She demonstrates a shift of possibility in the performance of ballet, from fixed and concerned with the reproduction of traditions to creative and experiential. The dancer is discussed as a cultural agent of change in this research that acknowledges the lived experience of those participating in its performance and institution. Salosaari's findings here provide a key example of how dance and its practice have tangibility as a site with fertile ground for the development of knowledge and makes space for the possibility of cultural understanding.

### In the street

Demonstration protests, like dance, are frequently described as ephemeral, temporal and corporeal. The 2020 racial injustice happenings, along with the ensuing global protest responses, are accessible now only in the documentation and viscerally felt impressions and memories of participants and onlookers (space of silence). The influence of it all still streams in the continuing discourse and influence of this global campaign for racial equality. The 'action' taken by many worldwide to gather en masse and protest in the streets, overrode fears of a pandemic virus where the message of injustice was simply too urgent, with either prospect demonstrably posing a threat to life. Actions speaking louder than words. Stand up and be counted. Stand as one. Be there.

### Reverence

'Taking the Knee', a gesture of silent and respectful protest with a long and rich political history, was and is still now performed in many contexts - particularly sport, where there have been significant examples. Silently, from an individual performer, the action communicates deep and detailed political statement within itself and when performed collectively, solidarity can also be signaled across diverse groups in society. Communities are nurtured and society influenced.

### Taking the space

People came together to topple and deface statues worldwide; statues that gave recognition to individual figures in society for good that had been done – good that had been done for some groups, but that had come at great human cost and atrocity to others. The example of Edward

Colston's statue (Bristol, UK) long contested for its representation of truths and realities unacknowledged over time, is a reminder of vast information locked away from access or action. Raised fist gestures all around, signaled the meaning and reason for taking down of the artefact and evoked an array of thought and feeling on histories, experiences, and injustices. The embodied strategy, all round, was the most natural and effective way to respond to the situation, with urgency and universality.

The sculpture *A Surge of Power, Jen Reid (2020)* by Marc Quinn, to me, represents both spaces of action and spaces of silence. I notice a sequence of the demonstrators' removal and transportation of Edward Colston's statue to spatially dispose of it (space of action), to a momentarily but highly resonant and energetic empty space on the plinth (space of silence), to then what appears as a breaking through of the oppressive silence in an expressive, sculptured representation of an individual figure taking the space anew. Quinn's sculpture here embodies the 2020 BLM message through the performed bodily expression of Bristol protester, Jen Reid with a rooted wide stance, the black-power fist punched to the air (spaces of action/silence).

### **Moving on into action**

The epistemological field of dance encompasses and covers hugely diverse areas of knowledge including, but not limited to, philosophy, history, culture, health, social development, community and equality. In my context, I consider how the various online petitions that call to save undergraduate dance programmes from closure might be evidence of a detrimental effect of the reported low take-up of dance subjects at school level. One Dance UK's web article by Claire Somerville, *Charting the Decline of Arts in Schools - Looking Ahead* (January 2018), shows how dance and creative arts, as academic subjects, provoke doubts and divisions around worth and value within education at school level. Another One Dance UK feature published a year later, reports figures of students taking GCSE dance finally rising again in 2019, after several years of previous continuing decline (One Dance UK, 2019).

In concluding my thoughts and response to the question of how I apply Laban's principles in my role in higher education, I wonder about the effects of names and titles and if 'dance' is misleading, off-putting or culturally exclusive. For me then, I next think of epistemological review work of the subject area to question the role of language and terminology and what might be constituted or obscured in relationship to the realities and details of this spatially and bodily, universal site for knowledge. Could such consideration put the subject area's powers into a new light of visibility in the academy, to save it from becoming 'lost' or 'hidden'? Laban himself states that 'it is almost impossible to find a name' for the energy behind the occurrences and material things found in the 'other world' that a participant of dance can encounter (Laban, 1975, p. 89).

I notice and feel how dance is sometimes a part of life that can be picked up and put down by not only the academy but also societal culture more widely. For some however, dance and other forms of embodied culture - from collective expressions of joy and consolation to perpetuating violence - remain a constantly flowing river of reality and experience. As Salosaari described, a dancer, concerned with the act of embodiment, can function as a 'a cultural agent of change' and this links to the 'phase of permanent revolution' that cultural theorist Stuart Hall refers to when commenting on Britain's multicultural society (J T, 2015). Surely, acquiring perspective and

practice in embodied and cultural modes builds towards universal graduate attributes, no matter what the subject of study? An applied and experienced practice of equality and diversity, a global perspective and cultural perception as a key literacy are essentials to advocate for in the delivery of higher education.

Laban's systems offer ways into developing these ideas, integrally encouraging exploration and evolution as a philosophy through the physical experience, whether in a dance specialist setting or otherwise. My reflections on the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings aim to show the centrality and universality of the physical and embodied knowledge as arguably one of our most powerful tools for working together as a community of global citizens on a diverse range of societal tasks and projects. In a post-2020 world, this is something which carries new possibilities and verve, amid the spatially cosmic effects on the evolution of our lived realities.

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