A research project to examine the impact of a student buddy system on engagement, performance and sense of community within HE conservatoire technique training

Contents

A research project to examine the impact of a student buddy system on engagement, performance and sense of community within HE conservatoire technique training

Abstract

This action research project explores the use of a peer buddy system within the contemporary technique training of undergraduate dance students at a conservatoire HEP, and the impact of that system on the engagement, performance, and social inclusion of those involved.

Over a number of years my teaching practice has evolved and the strategies I employ within the technique class context have shifted away from purely teacher focussed didactic approaches to the inclusion of more student centred strategies, where I am no longer seen as the sole provider of knowledge, but instead as a facilitator 'who fosters a student-centred learning environment and stimulates students' critical reflection' (Prior, 2000 quoted in Raman, 2009). I regularly use peer to peer learning activities as a method for engaging the students more critically in the act of learning and for providing them with more regular individual feedback on specific aspects of their practice, similar to the 'Reciprocal Teaching Style' referred to by Mosston & Ashworth (2002). However, prior to this research project, this has been in a relatively instinctive and reflexive manner; seeing opportunities as they arise within the flow and delivery of a particular class, and responding in the moment to what I feel would be effective for the learning of those I am teaching. The continued ambition within my own evolving teaching practice; to explore ever more innovative approaches to my practice that place the needs of the learner at the centre of my considerations regarding teaching approaches and strategies, has led to this research project, which has provided me with an opportunity to more formally embed and measure the impact of reciprocal peer teaching strategies within the planning, delivery and evaluation of technique classes.

In 2009 Harding and Haven wrote of a similar interest in exploring what would happen to student learning 'if they were allowed to have a stronger voice in the rehearsal and evaluative process. [And that] by merely asking this question, [they] were moving away from teacher-centred learning and embedding deeper a constructivist approach – breaking the old paradigm - teacher coaches, students listen'.

This report will share the findings and subsequent conclusions drawn as a result of the research which took place over a 5 week period, and involved the use of a mixed methods

approach to action research, in which BA2 students studying a Dance Techniques module at Northern School of Contemporary Dance (NSCD), Leeds, were engaged in exploring the physical, mental and social support that they experienced through peer learning activities. The students were paired with a 'buddy' for the duration of the half term period of technique delivery and this report will evaluate the impact that the partnerships had on those involved.

Introduction & significance

I was driven to explore this aspect of my teaching practice, not only to continue to evolve and examine the use of peer to peer interactions within class as a means of deepening learning and encouraging more critical understanding of class content/material, but also because over recent years I have seen a sharp increase in the number of students who struggle with engagement and whose attainment is effected as a result of several external factors including;

> 1) mental health related challenges
>
> 2) feelings of stress/anxiety
>
> 3) feelings of social isolation
>
> 4) the effects of Covid-19 and emerging from a global pandemic in an even more heightened state of worry/doubt about their futures and the world around them

Evidence from half-termly Student Review Board (SRB) meetings and conversations with colleagues, along with a background in supporting students pastorally during their training has led me to consider other ways to address some of the growing needs and challenges faced by undergraduate dance students.

NSCD's student support systems, whilst robust and effective, are also seeing the additional strain that the increase of well-being and mental health related student challenges causes (30-40% of students accessed well-being support of some type during the academic year 2021/22 according to the NSCD Student Support Manager). It was my intention with this research project to explore how embedding more innovative teaching and learning strategies into the planning and delivery of contemporary dance classes might be a way to support students in their learning and also with their sense of belonging. I acknowledge the specialist and complex nature of counselling in specific cases of trauma and depression, and this project was by no means a way to replace that specialist and necessary support, merely a way to explore approaches to support those less severe student engagement challenges

and feelings of social isolation through interactions and experiences in the technique class context.

As an institution, NSCD has an ambition, and a responsibility, to increase the inclusivity and accessibility of its courses and programmes, so at an institutional level ensuring everyone, irrespective of social, economic or cultural background, feel they belong and can be supported to engage with classes in equal and effective ways was also a motivation in my research.

My aim with this research was ultimately to test the benefits of introducing a more formalised 'peer buddy system' to address some of the aforementioned challenges faced by dance students, and to measure the impact that such a system would have on student engagement, performance and sense of belonging within the technique context, and subsequently the community more broadly.

Literature Review

Much has been written about the value and benefit of peer learning strategies and employing teaching approaches that encourage students to 'learn with and from each other' (Harding & Haven, 2009) in order to build understanding, depth of critical knowledge and social cohesion. However, 'co-operative work is an often overlooked aspect of dance training, particularly in the technique class, and yet widely expected in the professional field' (Raman, 2009) and this underpinned my interest in exploring this teaching method.

Boud (1999) tells us that 'peer learning activities have an advantage over other teaching and learning strategies in that they have considerable potential to promote critical reflection', a claim supported by Hakkarainen et al. (2013, quoted in Cranfield, 2016) who state that 'collaborative learning can be a powerful tool for joint knowledge creation' and 'for encouraging critical thinking and 'deep' rather than 'strategic' or 'surface' learning' (Entwistle, 1997 quoted in Cranfield 2016). It's no surprise then that I have been using peer to peer learning activities, albeit informally as discussed earlier, for many years. On discussing peer mentoring approaches, Harrington, Sinfield & Burns (2016) argue that 'when done well, mentoring can aid students in building communities of practice, where mentor and mentee work together to articulate and grapple with academic questions'. Reid et al (1989) state that small group learning 'generates more ideas than individual learning and provides opportunities to use discussion as a tool for learning'.

Peer feedback is 'when students comment on each other's work' (Topping, 2009) and is defined by Liu and Carless (2006) as 'a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards' and as a result combine their personal perspectives to inform each other and their practice. When discussing collaborative learning, Raman (2009) references Joyce et al (1997) who state that:

> '[collaborative learning] aims to help students appreciate their peers' perspectives on a problem, understand the reasoning behind different viewpoints and form disciplined arguments to support their own propositions'.

Through this project students were therefore not only provided with the opportunity to open up to wider viewpoints but to also have their own opinions and ideas reaffirmed or shifted.

All of the above strongly support the benefits of the inclusion of reciprocal teaching styles, but what was important for me was that clear boundaries and structures were also in place and directed so that students understood how and what to offer feedback on to one another within the technique class context, as 'effective feedback is specific and refers to clearly defined criteria' (Andrade et al, 2015), and without such detail and clarity could in fact lead to mis-information or in fact the promotion of dangerous practices. I felt it important to consider the idea of scaffolding, which in itself is also a much discussed and published concept in which 'guided support given to learners' (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020, p 119) can encourage greater levels of achievement and skill or knowledge acquisition.
Something which Lauren Heist, in an article on dance-teacher.com in 2010, warns about and suggests that 'despite the value, peer coaching can be dangerous without strict ground rules. Students must be taught how to give comments that are positive and constructive', re-enforcing the need to provide clear, specific and accurate things on which to feedback on.

Another benefit of peer coaching approaches is that they 'increase the opportunities for a student to "perform" in front of an audience' (Harding & Haven, 2009) - making them feel more watched, even if only by one other peer, and can motivate them to try harder and attempt to gain deeper levels of accuracy and embodiment within movement execution. The peer coaching process also 'spreads the power of teaching and fosters ownership of learning' (ibis, 2009), which in turn should loop back into a further increase in skill and embodiment, fuelling the ongoing process of reflection from multiple perspectives which Kolb (1984) refers to in his Learning Cycle.

Not surprisingly it appears the benefits of peer learning strategies on critical engagement are numerous and important for many reasons as discussed above however prior to this research project I hadn't ever really considered them as being a useful tool to also promote social inclusion. Harding and Haven's (2009) study ultimately 'revealed an increase in the transfer of skills and content into performance, an increase in confidence and sense of community in the classroom, and an increase in a sense of self-awareness', something that Harrington, Sinfield & Burns (2016) also refer to, stating:

> 'Reciprocal relationship between mentor and mentee is fostered, where each is encouraged to learn with and from the other, working to support each other's academic achievement as a well as personal and social growth'.

The social benefits, along with the engagement and performance benefits, should not be overlooked as Ho et al. (2004, quoted in Cranfield, 2016) state that 'small group learning can carry social benefits too; it may facilitate integration into university life and student diversity can be drawn on to bring different experiences to the group'. Joyce et al (1997) claim that 'interaction with other students and learning from one another can provoke positive feelings of connectedness in the class'. These are all aspects that support some of the previously discussed motivations relating to inclusion within this action research project and will be explored in more detail later in this report when sharing the findings from the data collected.

Methodology

Approach

As someone who tends to favour social constructivist learning theories, 'favouring more flexible and relational strategies, perhaps including group work and time for [students] to make sense of, and interpret, the world and better understand their place in it' (Hodkinson & MacLeod, 2010, referenced in Baumfield et al. 2008), I'm drawn to an interpretivist worldview.

Baumfield et al. (2008) describe interpretivism as the belief that 'truths are constructed through social interaction' and that 'a learner's attainment is dictated by their experience and interaction with the world and other individuals in it'. In order to fully appreciate ones achievement, understanding or skill multiple sources need to be considered and conversation taken place with the individual.

The interpretivist epistemology is closely related with social constructivism, in which one must look beyond the individual to how they relate with the world around them; basically the

context is of key importance. Unlike in a positivist view 'where truths can be separated or isolated from the social world' (ibis). Creswell (2014) describes social constructivists as those who:

> 'believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work [and] develop subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas'.

There is also plenty within a pragmatist worldview that speaks to me, including Creswell's descriptions below:

- Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy.
- Individual researchers have a freedom of choice and are free to choose the methods, techniques and procedures of research that best meet their needs and purposes.
- Truth is what works at the time
- Pragmatists agree that research always occurs in social, historical, political and other contexts

Therefore the approach taken for this action research project was to employ mixed methods for the data collection as I agreed with Creswell (2014) that through combining the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data it would help to 'neutralise the weaknesses of each form of data' and their inherent biases, allowing for 'greater and better exploration of [the] data' (Todd et al., 2004).

I was also keen to employ a Participatory Action Research (PAR) method as it 'is a social process that focuses on the relationship between individuals and their social environment' (Cohen et al. 2018). This form of research is 'deliberately practical' (ibis) and involves 'authentic participation [and] collaboration, establishing self-critical, non-hierarchical communities and partnerships' (ibis). Through the inclusion of this approach I aimed to give increased agency to the students as participants in the research with a shared responsibility for some of the decisions relating to the project, empowering them to immerse themselves more willingly in the exploration of the proposed peer buddy system.

One such example of their involvement in the design of the project was relating to the question of how to pair the students. This had been a large question for me in the planning of this research project and I grappled with what the right decision was to make about whether students should be paired 'with parallel needs to reinforce learning' as Brewer and colleagues (2003) suggested, or as Johnson and associates (1988) contended that 'grouping heterogeneously is a better option'. In the end I felt strongly that the act of simply working together to problem solve and critically interrogate aspects within class would hold a

number of benefits as were discussed above in the literary review and therefore following consultation with NSCD's Head of Academic Registry & NSCD's Student Support Manager I made the decision to allow the students to devise a strategy for pairing up. This ultimately resulted in random names being drawn from a hat, creating what we all felt was a more equitable and inclusive pairing approach, which was hoped would enable all students in the group to feel equally involved and impacted by the support of their peer buddy. Naturally some pairings involved students with parallel needs and others were more heterogeneously paired. The question of the best way to pair students is still one I feel could be explored further and might be the focus of a future iteration of this research project.

Notions relating to sensitivity around when and if feedback was offered was also something we considered as a group, as Chiviacowsky and Wulf (2005) suggested that perhaps 'a protocol that allowed the performer to choose when he or she would receive feedback … encourages self-monitoring and boosts the collaborative element'. An idea supported by Reid et al. (1989) who suggest that 'students benefit from having freedom to leave the group work and work individually when necessary, as thinking and reflection are essentially private actions'. Therefore students could opt out of activities at any point if and when they felt it was appropriate to do so. Incidentally, most students did not make use of this protocol but having it as an option I feel was important to include so students knew the option was there if needed.

Throughout the research project various teaching activities were explored, and one which I was particularly keen to include was a formative peer assessment. This was something I had discussed in a previous assignment for PGLT2 when critically evaluating the assessment and feedback strategy of the Cert HE course at NSCD. Falchikov (1995, quoted in Dochy et al, 1999) defines peer assessment as 'the process through which groups of individual rate their peers', however, Somervell (1993) stresses that peer assessment is 'not only a grading procedure, it is part of a learning process through which skills are developed'. This was my aim through including it within the research project, as Keaten et al (1993) report it 'can foster high levels of responsibility among students' and 'emphasises skills, encourages involvement, focuses on learning, establishes a reference, promotes excellence, provides increased feedback, fosters attendance, and teaches responsibility' (Weaver & Cotrel, 1986, p.25). As discussed previously in the literature review, clarity would need to be provided around what to feedback on and to 'assess', and therefore to avoid students finding 'peer assessment to be difficult or undesirable when guidelines for evaluation were not

established first' (Williams, 1992), as a group we discussed the summative assessment criteria for the module and all students were provided with a sheet to make their feedback notes on directly about each of the criteria (see Appendix 3).

Data Collection

The timeline for the project meant that I needed to conduct the data collection stage during the second half of the Spring term and therefore the students involved with the project were 1/3 of the BA2 cohort (24 students) who I taught 4 times per week over the 5 week half term. The classes I was teaching were a release-based contemporary technique practice incorporating floor work skills.

As discussed above a mixed method approach was chosen which enabled me to marry my findings, offer the opportunity for a more comprehensive study, and to neutralise the weakness of either data form as discussed by Creswell, allowing for greater validity, and a more balanced view (Heinemann, 2003 quoted in Camerino et al., 2012), and 'one in which neither quantitative or qualitative methods are regarded as inherently better (Camerino et al., 2012).

The inclusion of a variety of methods, including those established purely for the purpose of the research project (methods 1 & 2 below) and those that already form part of the everyday process of classroom activity and school infrastructure (methods 3 & 4 below), were planned and it was hoped would allow for a rich data sample without requiring too much additional workload and time resource. I felt it important to 'evaluate research from within its context … because we need different kinds of knowledge' (Baumfield et al, 2013). However in the analysis stage some of this additional insight didn't seem to return the same level of value or reliability as some of the other evidence documented.

Method 1 (Pre & post intervention quantitative surveys)
Questionnaires were conducted via the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment – Moodle) before and after the intervention and were designed in such a way that they were almost identical so that the quantitative impact could be measured effectively between the pre and post surveys (See Appendix 1). There was a low return in responses to these surveys, only 11 for the pre-intervention and 9 for the post-intervention surveys, however these still offered insight into a shift in perception of peer activities as a result of the buddy system, and low-engagement was something I had highlighted as a potential limitation within my original

research proposal. Whilst providing quantitative data, I also decided to include some more open questions at the end of each survey as a means of gathering even greater insight through qualitative responses and these proved to be very rich and insightful, as discussed in the findings section of this report.

Method 2 (Mid & post intervention structured interviews)

Qualitative data was collected mid and post intervention through the use of recorded structured 1 hour interviews with a select number of participants from the group (4 students each time). This selection created a more manageable sample size and allowed more focus to be drawn out relating to the impact of the intervention on specific individuals (See Appendix 5). One of the most useful things about the first interview was that the data collected was able to be used to inform the tasks/activities used within the subsequent classes and also the design of the later post intervention group interview creating an 'iterative process whereby feedback loops [were] built into the data collection procedure' (Baumfield et al. 2013, p26) supporting the notion of action research being an ongoing process of trial and reflection. In reality the data gathered through this method felt less valuable to include within the actual findings than the surveys (Method 1), which seemed to return far more succinct responses which in most cases supported what had been discussed in the interviews anyway. However this data was utilised within the process of the research itself as suggested above.

Method 3 (Ongoing teacher reflections analysing students' progress against learning objectives)

Including the use of pre-existing systems for additional data collection and analysis was planned as an efficient way to expand the range of data being considered. And whilst my own ongoing feedback notes (See Appendix 8) were able to provide some additional insight on the impact of the intervention, I haven't specifically referred to them in the sharing of my findings, as I felt they were less reliable than the experience and reflections that the students provided, which tended to be far more valuable as lived experiences of the learning process, and often specifically referred to the peer activities being explored verses my own notes which tended to be more general. I can report however that across the cohort I found high levels of engagement and physical progress within the group which I attribute, at least in part, to the inclusion of the peer buddy system.

<u>Method 4 (Existing and accessible data sources – attendance reports, SRB conversations/actions)</u>

Again this data, which is collected as part of the schools regular practice, was collected but for the most part didn't feel as beneficial to include in the final sharing of my findings. Attendance during this period (Appendix 6) was heavily impacted by other course modules and similarly the disruption that caused had negative impacts on the SRB data (Appendix 2) which didn't really feel linked to the peer buddy system and has therefore been omitted from the findings to not invalidate the data that was specifically measurable as being an impact of the actual research project.

Analytical Techniques

Upon completion of the data collection, via the methods described above, and through excluding particular elements of the data which felt unreliable, I set about creating a system through which I was able to analyse and group together key pieces of evidence from the remaining sources.

A coding system was applied to the raw data which enabled the grouping of evidence which referred directly to the impact of the peer buddy system on one or more of the following areas drawn from the initial research question:

1. Student engagement
2. Performance
3. Sense of community

Through exploring the data I was able to identify 'themes, patterns and categories (Bennet, 1994) within each of the main categories of evidence, which could then be separated down and refined into more specific areas as outlined below:

Engagement (E)

E1 = More detailed feedback
E2 = Increased challenge / motivation / working harder
E3 = More inclined to take risks
E4 = Purpose of class / take away ideas
E5 = Broadening perspectives

Performance (P)

P1 = Performativity / being watched / having to watch
P2 = Ability to observe / offer feedback (articulation / value of feedback)
P3 = Retention / picking up material
P4 = Taking on feedback (application)

P5 = Inspiration from peer execution
P6 = Deeper understanding (embodiment)

Social Inclusion (S) S1 = Belonging
S2 = Feeling Inspired
S3 = Not alone / togetherness / feeling supported
S4 = Awareness of others

This method of coding allowed for easier interpretation and grouping together of the key themes and ideas from the qualitative data collected.

As the qualitative and quantitative data was collected concurrently the method of triangulation could then be employed to determine if there was convergence, differences or some combination between the two types of data. The concept of 'methodological triangulation' (Camerino et al.) in which different methods are used for the same research problem, aimed to help 'to ensure the consistency and reliability of the result obtained' and is 'well-known and widely used among mixed methods designs' (Creswell et al., 2003). Below, side-by-side integration (Hope & Waterman, 2003) is utilised to provide statistical results from quantitative data followed by qualitative comments that support or disconfirm the results.

Findings & Discussion

I will now refer to each of the 3 main themes identified above, drawn from my original research question, and discuss the impact on each.

1. Engagement

Within the post-intervention survey, 100% of participants responded that they had enjoyed working with their partner to problem solve, a positive increase from 82% from the pre-intervention response to the same statement. 67% of students also agreed in the post-intervention survey that they felt more engaged in classes where they had to work with their partner, again a positive increase from only 18% in the pre-intervention survey. 89% of participants agreed that working with their partner had allowed for a deeper, critical engagement with class content, up from 64% who had agreed to the same statement in the pre-intervention survey.

It would appear that the students, albeit only a small number who completed the survey, felt a definite increase in engagement as a result of the peer buddy system. 3 students in the pre-intervention survey agreed that they prefer working alone in class however by the end of the intervention none of the students agreed to this statement suggesting that even those who might have been sceptical about the peer buddy system found some benefit to working with another student. One participant in the post intervention survey (see Appendix 1) specifically identified that 'even if I tend to prefer working alone … I think peer work experiences and activities are always useful, especially after [the] pandemic because we forgot what it means to break our own bubble and let someone in, to share something face to face or doing it together'.

When specifically asked in the post-intervention survey about the impact that the peer buddy system had on their engagement the students fed back extremely positively with responses ranging between aspects that supported an increase in motivation, usefulness and quantity of feedback, and curiousness with the class content. Statements such as 'I felt more engaged and important as I knew I was being watched and observed' where a regular response.

Relating to motivation one participant stated 'I was more engaged and more motivated as the feedback being given was really encouraging' and another responded 'I have definitely had an increase in my motivation to attend classes as I feel I have had added duty to not only my own development but also to someone else in class', suggesting a link between being engaged with the process and a feeling of social responsibility which is the third theme I will examine later.

The increase in feedback opportunities was also seen as a great benefit with one participant stating that the peer buddy system 'was only positive for me. It was so helpful to get more personal feedback and ways to improve my way of moving … at the same time the feeling of being able to help someone's growth is so valuable. It was always a 'receive to give' kind of feeling', again linking to the social feeling of togetherness that the peer buddy system promoted.

On the idea of curiousness one participant stated that 'these sessions gave me more room to be curious as being watched by a supportive group, created a safer atmosphere, allowing me to play more and be curious about the movement in the class', another shared a similar

experience stating 'it has positively impacted me especially when we have worked together with our buddies to achieve something or to give each other different inputs … I felt more curious as a result. Observing my partner … allowed [me] to analyse the movement with greater detail and find new possibilities for it in my partner', suggesting a deeper critical engagement with the material being explored in class as a result.

Within a Moodle forum, posted to encourage reflection on the approaches used in general classes to encourage engagement (see Appendix 9), one student wrote:

> 'As we are working a lot in pairs currently in Matt's class, I found it really helpful to stay engaged when you know you have someone watching you to give you feedback …now that we have to watch someone and be able to give feedback it's really encouraging me to stay connected to the class'

Another student, commented on the same forum, saying that:
> 'I've found it really helps my learning to work with a partner and go over material with them. I can be very doubtful of my capability and working alone can sometimes leave me more confused. However working in small groups or partners allows me the time to watch, communicate and learn'

It appears to be the case that through the peer buddy system the students did feel an overwhelmingly positive impact on their engagement in class supporting Horgan's (2003, p77) statement that 'teaching methods that utilise students' active participation are more effective than traditional lecture methods', and Raman (2009) who proposed that 'should not efficient dance technique training actively encourage dance students to engage in the movement material and to explore and to question how they perform it?' (p.77). The evidence from this study would suggest that it does.

2. Performance

100% of participants in the post-intervention survey agreed that they valued peer learning activities as a tool to support their development, an increase from 82% who agreed with this statement in the pre-intervention survey. 89% also agreed they had received useful feedback during the peer buddy system. However, only 56% agreed that they felt they performed better when being observed by a peer. Interestingly though, when asked to offer thoughts on the impact of the peer buddy system specifically on their performance in class, nearly all the comments were positive in outcome, including:

> 'I was more conscious of the goals I would set myself during the class. Having external affirmation helped me stay on track to my goals and develop certain skills more. Particularly for the more 'acrobatic' tricks, it was good to have someone guide me as some of the tricks are more challenging to get on your own. It feels scary at times but knowing someone has got your back and is helping you be safe reassures me and gives me more confidence to perform the step'

Other students spoke of the benefit of having an outside eye to critique their work - 'having another dancer to critically assess what I'm doing within a class has been helpful to identify areas which I need to put more time into improving', whilst other students spoke about how the influence of watching their peers had led them to 'take inspiration [from] someone else dancing' and how this led to wanting to 'try new things, different qualities and experiment more with playfulness while doing an exercise'. Other students spoke positively about wanting 'to do better and to give something new and different every time I was doing an exercise' and how they were 'always trying to go further'.

Performativity was also drawn into the discussion, although my initial personal definition of performance had been more aimed at the development of skills and physical capabilities, but students often reflected back that they felt an increased desire to be more performative in class as a result of the peer activities:

> 'I think that mostly it helped with performance as I knew that someone was watching so focus and other performative features had more intention to them than before'

And:

> 'I felt that I could perform more because someone was constantly watching, so I knew I had to give more to the outside than focussing on myself doing it'

It would appear, as with the engagement, that the impact of the peer buddy system on the students' performance was also positive. This supports the idea that 'technical skills [can] be effectively acquired through the use of student centred learning and teaching approaches' as questioned by Raman (2009).

3. Sense of Community

This aspect has had the most mixed responses of the 3 areas explored through the research project within the quantitative data however in the post-intervention survey 78% of participants did agree that working with their partner had provided support in the learning environment, a small increase from 73% in the pre-intervention survey. 78% also agreed that the peer learning activities had promoted social interaction in class, although this was a slight reduction from 82% agreeing to the same statement in the pre-intervention survey. Interestingly, only 44% agreed that working with their partner in class had led to a stronger bond outside of class and only 44% agreed that the peer learning activities had made them feel more included in class. This might be because relationships between students have already been established by this point in the course and therefore didn't move beyond the class room context for the majority of participants.

Many positive qualitative comments were offered though about the impact the peer buddy system had on their feeling of inclusion within class (including social interaction, relationships and sense of belonging), which seemed to conflict with some of the previously discussed quantitative data.

One participant responded stating 'it's empowering to always have someone encouraging you and lifting your mood. It feels like we are really in this journey together'. Another spoke of the benefits relating to retention of the material stating 'it's nice to have someone to go through the exercises with for memory'. Another suggested a positive impact away from the classroom context too stating that 'it helped getting closer to my partner as we were having conversation about the class but also beyond the studio which felt nice. I think just the feeling to not feel on your own was really helpful to jump in a good mood for the class'. The following statement from one participant also provides insight into the transformative power that this type of intervention can provide:

> 'For me it was a moment to grow as a person, to improve my confidence and to realise the fact that we are here to grow, and we can create a place where everyone can learn from the others. For me this process was definitely a way to feel myself more part of the group'

There was even suggestion from one participant about how:

> 'this system of peer learning activities could be used as an excellent ice breaker especially in first year when students do not know each other yet … this is an easy way to start a conversation when people do not know each other and then keep it alive outside of the studio to create a sort of connection'.

This is something I will certainly take forward to induction planning and to recommend as a potential strategy when considering the students arrival and first term of activity at NSCD; the introduction of a similar peer buddy system at the start of their training might help students interact and 'get to know' one another better, breaking the ice sooner and feeling more confident within class as a result, agreeing with Ho et al.'s (2004, quoted in Cranfield, 2016) assertion about small group learning helping to facilitate integration into university life.

Despite the quantitative data suggesting mixed feelings amongst the participants relating to feeling a greater sense of inclusion, the qualitative data certainly does seem to support the notion that that peer buddy system had a positive impact on those involved and supports the view of Barnes and Todd (1995, referenced in Rahman, 2009) who suggested that 'traditional teaching methods promote isolation amongst the students by creating a

competitive atmosphere and fear of failure'. The kind of collaborative learning, fostered through the peer buddy system, it would appear created 'a comfortable learning environment in which students [felt] less threatened' (Macaro, 1997). A view supported by one participant in the project who summarised the experience stating 'I enjoyed feeling like I could give more of myself to my partner that I didn't know very well. The tasks in pairs created a really cohesive group dynamic which I enjoyed and the class felt very connected'.

Peer Assessment

In week 4 of the half term I carried out a small peer-assessment task with the group as this had been something I had wanted to include from the planning stage of the project. Firstly because I thought it would be a good way to bring together the experience of working with their buddy over the half term but also as I had been curious about this type of formative assessment since doing research for the PGLT2 assessment. Keaten at al (1993) reported that:

> 'peer assessment is a practice that can foster high levels of responsibility amongst students, requiring that the students be fair and accurate with the judgements they make regarding their peers'

<div align="right">(quoted in Dochy et al, 1999, p338).</div>

I was interested to see the engagement from the student experience and how the task would support not only their general assessment literacy and confidence, but also their engagement, performance and sense of inclusion within the session (the aims of this particular research project).

The 90 minute class was split into 2x 45 minute sessions where students would take it in turns to be in the 'assessor' or 'assessed' role. The students engaged really well with the task, performed to a high standard and seemed to really see the benefits of this kind of task, far more in fact than I had first imagined. The situation seemed to really spark a sense of motivation and commitment within them 'emphasising skills, encouraging involvement, focusing on learning, establishing a reference, promoting excellence, providing increased feedback, fostering attendance, and teaching responsibility' as suggested by Weaver & Cotrell (1986, quoted in Dochy et al, 1999). Students commented positively to the task via a reflective Moodle survey, indicating that 'being in an assessment context really pushes the performance aspect in the exercises' and it was 'a nice way to round things up towards the end of the half term'. They also noted the benefit of 'getting to experience the assessment atmosphere', 'receiving constructive feedback and useful corrections to work on', and 'having another point of view and not just the one of the teacher'.

Other comments that support some of my previous findings relating to engagement and performance were 'being watched and assessed gave me more energy to go through the exercises during the class; I felt I was pushing more than usual' and 'I wasn't just doing the exercises, I felt I was performing; I was enjoying more the movements and I gave 100% to dance and had fun'. Finally 'knowing that someone was watching me at all times definitely made me push myself more than I do most classes. Having that extra motivation was nice, because I felt like I could make the most out it'.

However, interestingly the participants also spoke very generously about not only the impact for themselves being assessed but also how much they benefited from being in the assessor role and supporting their peers development (the social impact). One participant indicated that they 'really saw how [their] partner has grown and applied the feedback … it is really heartening and encouraging to see how far we can push each other', whilst other participants reflected that they 'enjoyed [assessing] because it was a nice practice of being more precise while I am observing somebody else … it is all about helping each other', and 'it was a moment to improve myself, be inspired and at the same time be useful for the other person'.

This is further evidence of the general supportive nature of the group which evolved through the process of the peer buddy system. Being in constant contact and supporting another individual's development over the 5 weeks really created a sense of responsibility and connectedness to the other individual and even if this didn't shift everyone's interactions outside of the studio, within their work there was a definite shift towards being more inclusive and supportive of one another from the vast majority of those involved.

Summary & Conclusions

Overall the outcome of this research project has been overwhelmingly positive, both from the students perspective but also from my own, as evidenced above within the sharing of the findings from the research.

Not only did the students and myself feel an increase within the engagement and performance of students as a result of the peer buddy system, but there were also signs that the system had a positive impact on their social interactions, the group dynamic and their relationships with one another.

Further questions have been instigated as a result of this initial enquiry including notions relating to how to best pair students in this kind of activity, how a similar system could be introduced as an ice-breaker activity at the start of a student's training, the use of peer assessment as a tool for learning and finally how best to support students to understand when and how to deliver feedback to their peers. These are all possible future iterations of similar peer buddy research projects.

From a personal development perspective this research project has affirmed my desire to continue to embed more innovative approaches to teaching and learning within the contemporary dance training of UG students, and has more formally enabled me to map the impact that such approaches can have on the teaching and learning experience, and beyond that, the community more broadly.

Whilst the findings don't necessarily suggest a huge transformative impact, and have more helped to re-affirm my own pedagogic philosophy and give increased confidence to me as a teacher, I think the process of carrying out this research project does speaks of the need to continually innovate, reflect and make changes to the approaches we employ as teachers – continuing to search, in partnership with our students, for the best ways to support them in their learning.

References

Andrade, H, Lui, A, Palma, M & Hefferen, J (2015) *Formative Assessment in Dance Education, Journal of Dance Education,* 15:2, p47-59

Baumfield, V, Hall, E & Wall, K (2103) Action Research in Education, Sage, London

Brewer, R, Reid, M & Rhine (2003) *Peer coaching: students teaching to learn. Intervention in School and Clinic,* 39:2, p113-126

Boud, D, Cohen, R & Samson, J (1999) *Peer learning and assessment. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 24: p413-421

Chiviacowsky, S & Wulf, G (2005) *Self-controlled feedback is effective if it is based on the learner's performance. Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 76:1, p42-49

Cohen, L, Manion, L & Morrison, K (2018) Research Methods in Education – 8th Edition, Routledge, Oxon

Cranfield, S (2016) Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education (Chapter 3), Sage, London – Edited by Pokorny, H & Warren, D

Creswell, J.W, Plano Clarke, V.L, Gutmann, M.L & Hanson, W.E (2003) Advanced mixed methods research designs, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA

Creswell, JW (2014) Research Methods, Chapter One: The selection of a research approach, Sage, London

Dochy, F, Segers, M & Sluijsmans, D (1999) *The use of self-, peer and co-assessment in higher education: A review, Studies in Higher Education,* 24:3, p331-350

Harding, M & Haven, B (2009) *The effects of peer coaching in the secondary arts classroom, Journal of Dance Education,* 9:2, p41-51

Harrington, K, Sinfield, S & Burns, T (2016) Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education (Chapter 6), Sage, London – Edited by Pokorny, H & Warren, D

Heist, L (2010) *See and Be Seen*, www.dance-teacher.com (accessed November 2021)

Hope, K.W & Waterman, H (2003) *Praiseworthy pragmatism? Validity and action research, Journal of Advanced Nursing,* 44:2, p120-127

Johnson, D, Johnson, R, Holubec, E & Roy, P (1988) Circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom. Alexandria VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum

Joyce, B, Calhoun, E, & Hopkins, D (1997) Modes of learning – Tools for teaching, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK

Keaten, J.A & Richardson, M.E (1993) A field investigation of peer assessment as part of the student group grading process, paper presented at the *Western Speech Communication Association Convention,* Albuquerque, NM

Kirschner, P & Hendrick, C (2002) How Learning Happens (Chapter 12), Routledge, Oxon

Kolb, D (1984) Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development.

Liu, N & Carless, D (2006) *Peer feedback: learning element of peer assessment, Teaching in Higher Education* 11:3, p279-290

Macaro, E (1997) Target Langauge, collaborative learning and autonomy, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters

Mosston, M. & Ashworth, S. (2002) Teaching physical education, Benjamin Cummings, San Francisco

Raman, T (2009) *Collaborative learning in the dance technique class, Research in Dance Education,* 10:1, p75-87

Reid, J, Forrestal, P & Cook, J (1989) Small group learning in the classroom, Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA

Somervell, H (1993) *Issues in assessment, enterprise and higher education: the case for self-, peer and collaborative assessment, Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education,* 18, p221-233

Todd, Z, Nerlich, B, McKeown, S & Clarke, D (2004) Mixing Methods in psychology, Psychology Press, Hove, East Sussex

Weaver II, R & Cotrell, H.W (1986) *Peer Evaluation: a case study, Innovative Higher Education,* 11, p25-39

Williams, E (1992) *Student attitudes towards approaches to learning and assessment, Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education,* 17, p45-58

Bibliography

Andrade, H, Lui, A, Palma, M & Hefferen, J (2015) *Formative Assessment in Dance Education, Journal of Dance Education,* 15:2, p47-59

Armstrong, F & Tsokova, D (2019) Action Research for Inclusive Education, Routledge, Oxon

Baumfield, V, Hall, E & Wall, K (2103) Action Research in Education, Sage, London

Bell, J & Waters, S (2018) Doing your research project – 7th edition, Open University Press, London

Brewer, R, Reid, M & Rhine (2003) *Peer coaching: students teaching to learn. Intervention in School and Clinic,* 39:2, p113-126

Boud, D, Cohen, R & Samson, J (1999) *Peer learning and assessment. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 24: p413-421

Careriona, O, Castaner, M & Anguera, M.T (2012) Mixed Methods Research in the Movement Sciences, Routledge, Oxon

Chiviacowsky, S & Wulf, G (2005) *Self-controlled feedback is effective if it is based on the learner's performance. Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 76:1, p42-49

Cohen, L, Manion, L & Morrison, K (2018) Research Methods in Education – 8th Edition, Routledge, Oxon

Constantinou, E & Ainscow, M (2019) *Using Collaborative Action research to Achieve School-Led Change Within a Centralised Education System: Perspectives from the Inside, Educational Action Research,* DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2018.1564686

Cranfield, S (2016) Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education (Chapter 3), Sage, London – Edited by Pokorny, H & Warren, D

Creswell, J.W, Plano Clarke, V.L, Gutmann, M.L & Hanson, W.E (2003) Advanced mixed methods research designs, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA

Creswell, JW (2014) Research Methods, Chapter One: The selection of a research approach, Sage, London

Dochy, F, Segers, M & Sluijsmans, D (1999) *The use of self-, peer and co-assessment in higher education: A review, Studies in Higher Education,* 24:3, p331-350

Falichikov, N (1995) *Peer feedback marking: developing peer assessment, Innovations in Education and Training International,* 32, p175-187

Forster, C & Eperjesi, R (2017) Action Research for New Teachers, Sage, London

Ghaye, T (2011) Teaching and learning through reflective practice, a practical guide for positive action, second edition, Routledge, Oxon

Harding, M & Haven, B (2009) *The effects of peer coaching in the secondary arts classroom, Journal of Dance Education,* 9:2, p41-51

Harrington, K, Sinfield, S & Burns, T (2016) Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education (Chapter 6), Sage, London – Edited by Pokorny, H & Warren, D

Heist, L (2010) *See and Be Seen*, www.dance-teacher.com (accessed November 2021)

Hope, K.W & Waterman, H (2003) *Praiseworthy pragmatism? Validity and action research, Journal of Advanced Nursing,* 44:2, p120-127

Johnson, D, Johnson, R, Holubec, E & Roy, P (1988) Circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom. Alexandria VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum

Joyce, B, Calhoun, E, & Hopkins, D (1997) Modes of learning – Tools for teaching, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK

Keaten, J.A & Richardson, M.E (1993) A field investigation of peer assessment as part of the student group grading process, paper presented at the *Western Speech Communication Association Convention,* Albuquerque, NM

Kirschner, P & Hendrick, C (2002) How Learning Happens (Chapter 12), Routledge, Oxon

Kolb, D (1984) Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development.

Liu, N & Carless, D (2006) *Peer feedback: learning element of peer assessment, Teaching in Higher Education* 11:3, p279-290

Macaro, E (1997) Target Langauge, collaborative learning and autonomy, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters

Mingers, J & Gill, A (1997) Multimethodology: The theory and practice of combining management science methodologies, Wiley, Winchester

Mosston, M. & Ashworth, S. (2002) Teaching physical education, Benjamin Cummings, San Francisco

Raman, T (2009) *Collaborative learning in the dance technique class, Research in Dance Education,* 10:1, p75-87

Reid, J, Forrestal, P & Cook, J (1989) Small group learning in the classroom, Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA

Somervell, H (1993) *Issues in assessment, enterprise and higher education: the case for self-, peer and collaborative assessment, Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education,* 18, p221-233

Tekin, A.K & Kotaman, H (2013) *The Epistemological Perspectives on Action Research, Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 3:1, p81-91

Todd, Z, Nerlich, B, McKeown, S & Clarke, D (2004) Mixing Methods in psychology, Psychology Press, Hove, East Sussex

Vygotsky, L (1962) Though and Language, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA

Weaver II, R & Cotrell, H.W (1986) *Peer Evaluation: a case study, Innovative Higher Education,* 11, p25-39

Williams, E (1992) *Student attitudes towards approaches to learning and assessment, Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education,* 17, p45-58

Wood, D.J, Bruner, J.S & Ross, G (1976) *The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving, Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry,* 17:2, p89-100