Dance-specific psychology, the next steps?

What you see IS what you get!

Optimising imagery use and avoiding negative vibes in ballet

People in all ‘disciplines’ are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of mental aspects of performance. Many performers, dancers included, employ mental imagery as a strategy to improve performance. In fact, its use is so potentially powerful and broad ranging that in sport, psychologists have called it the ‘Swiss Army Knife’ of mental skills – put simply, it can help almost everything! It is, therefore, obviously important to understand how to optimise imagery use; all the more so since, although imagery of good performances can have significant positive effects on performance, imagery of poor performances can be a powerful performance disruptor. Since the content of the image appears salient, it is vital to understand why this differential content of imagery affects performances in such pronounced ways. What are the differences between images of good performances and images of poor performances and how does this subsequently influence physical performance?

In this study we asked a group of ballet dancers to describe images of both good and poor performances. Good performances were described in terms of enjoyment and flow, with the focus very much on the outcome of the performance rather than an executing the individual components of movement. Poor performance was difficult to verbalise because peak performance is characterised by automaticity, a letting go, which suggests unconscious control of movement execution. Therefore, the dancer was not conscious of the components of the performance but instead, as one dancer described:

“When I was doing a good performance, I was aware that everything was happening, I wasn’t really thinking about what was happening at all.”

Imagery is functionally equivalent to physical performance and what is deemed ‘good’ imagery is also effective in imagery. During peak performance, the dancer’s focus is not on movement execution or the mechanical aspects of the steps. The dancer is in a state of flow with the emphasis very much on the outcome of the performance, how to enjoy the performance and on the emotions involved. In sum, imagery of good performances reflects the characteristics evident in good physical performances.

Conversely, during images of poor performances the dancer focuses on mechanical aspects and are attempting to consciously control their performance. This conscious control and awareness of the ‘movement mechanisms’ of the performance interrupts the execution of the dance and appears to result in subsequent poor physical performances. Images of poor performances were self-focused and the dancer was able to recall in detail the incorrect movement execution. One dancer describes an image of a poor performance as follows: ‘I can really just see myself doing it. Nothing else is there, just me. It is just me and a couple of ballet steps going together and I can see all this in detail.’

This vivid, self-focused recall of the dance differs from the automaticity that is characteristic of peak performance and, therefore, leads to a disruption of the movement pattern that is associated with good performance.

It also appears that the emotional aspect of the differential images affects subsequent performances. Images of poor performances were full of frustration and agitation and these negative emotions were found to infect future performances. This is how one dancer described how a negative image affected performance: ‘Very agitated, I get really angry at myself and my control just goes a lot lower and it is like I can’t do this, I don’t want to do this, why am I here! Everything that is negative is what I say to myself and it just snowballs!’

Furthermore, images of poor performances contained substantial analysis of the mistakes inherent in a poor performance. Consciously trying not to make the same mistakes in physical performance ‘don’t do it again’, was shown to result in increased behavioural manifestation of these mistakes. However, this doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t think about mistakes. This sort of rumination (constant re-runs in the head) is fine as long as the dancer is aware of how to rectify the performance and concentrates on these positive elements rather than the emotionally stronger negative aspects. Negative images also seemed to affect confidence: ‘You start thinking: I can’t do this, I really can’t do this and you begin to doubt yourself’. Again, this suggests mechanisms, rumination and confidence, by which images of poor performances disrupt subsequent physical performances. It is important to understand, however, that these nerves can actually benefit performance if the dancer can imagine herself coping successfully with the situation and, subsequently, performing well. Once again, it’s not necessarily what you think but what you do with and to the thoughts and their effects.

Since we know that imagery can be an important tool in maximising performance, but an even more powerful disruptor and generator of failure, it is vital to understand how best to use imagery to optimise its effects. Imagery can be a powerful performance disruptor when the image content mirrors aspects of poor performance such as conscious control, negative emotions, ruminations and self-focus. It is critical, therefore, to control imagery content so that it reflects optimum physical performance. Consequently, when using imagery as a tool for improving performance, the dancer should ensure that the image replicates good performance aspects of movement pattern, automaticity, emotions and vivdness. Simply, if imagery is to be used as an effective performance-enhancing tool, the image should include the characteristics of peak performance: automaticity, mentally effortless and flowing performances.

‘So THEREFORE’: Implications for dancers and teachers:

- Be aware of the powerful influence which negative imagery can have.
- Try to avoid ‘ruminating’ on past mistakes, poor performances or even worse imagining a cock up at a forthcoming event.
- Some teachers, and pop psychologists, say you should never offer negative feedback. This isn’t necessarily true. Saying ‘don’t do that…’ is absolutely fine in so long as the learner knows what they should be doing and concentrates on this.
- Recognise that automatic, mentally effortless and flowing performances are the aim. Try to avoid an overly critically dissection of a performance.
- Nerves aren’t bad. However, they can really ruin a performance if, as a result of the nerves, you imagine yourself making mistakes. Therefore, accept your nerves (even enjoy them – they will push you towards greater achievements) but imagining yourself coping with the pressures rather than folding under them.

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Dance teaching qualifications

Dance teachers have long achieved professional recognition via the teaching qualifications of British based dance teaching societies. Teachers trained by these societies can be found all over the world and the UK is rightly known as the home of some of the world’s most influential teaching organisations.

There have always been issues surrounding the status of dance teaching qualifications, however, and they often appear to have little currency outside the dance world. Some dance teachers feel that the requirements of their awards are consistently that the requirements of their awards are very bit as demanding as those of other disciplines and deserving of full recognition within the academic and professional worlds.

And then in 1997, along came the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) which introduced, in 1999, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Both initiatives were very important to the development of the Dance Teaching Societies and their curricula.

QCA is a non-government body that maintains and develops the national curriculum and associated assessments, tests and examinations; and accredits and monitors qualifications in colleges and at work. The NQF is the framework within which all qualifications accredited by QCA are placed. The framework is made up of nine levels (entry level plus levels one – eight) and accredited qualifications of similar standard and rigour, no matter what the discipline, are placed at the same level.

Consequently, all level four qualifications, be they in dance, engineering or philosophy, are considered to make equivalent intellectual and physical demands on students.

The teaching qualifications of four of the dance teaching societies – British Ballet Organisation (BBO), British Theatre Dance Association (BTDA), Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) and the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD), all of which are registered with the Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET), have recently achieved Accreditation by the National Qualifications Framework. Those of a fifth – the International Dance Teachers Association (IDTA), are currently going through the process of accreditation. Consequently, students, their advisers and the professional and academic worlds at large are now able to integrate the quality of these qualifications and take note of their currency in relation to their own awards.

The real and tangible benefit to the societies, of course, is that their teaching qualifications and graded examination programmes not only have nationally recognised status in their own right but, also enable their graduates to access programmes of study in higher education and teacher training. A very significant step forward.