Dance-specific psychology, the next steps?

Creating the right environment — optimising the development of talent in ballet

The development of talented individuals is high on the agenda in many professional domains including sport, the business world, academia and, of course, dance. Unfortunately, while the topic is of substantial practical interest, there is little research in the area of effective talent development, particularly in understanding the generic, as opposed to domain specific (e.g. dance, sport, etc.) rules of effective practice. Some practitioners may question the need for such advice – after all we’ve been doing it for years! However, this ‘overarching’ generic understanding of what is required to help people realise their potential is the foundation on which domain specific developments and excellence can take place, and the key to the development process from the domain-specific skills to the personal skills and characteristics which help the individual to succeed. In other words, the emphasis must move away from the ‘whats’ of development (e.g. ‘what technique will I teach today?’) and focus more toward the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of development (e.g. ‘how do we get the best out of our dancers?’).

In one of our recent studies in this area, we asked a variety of dancers and teachers to discuss their perceptions of effective practice in the development of dance talent. Several generic rules or guidelines emerged consistently, which are supportive of current theoretical reviews and our ongoing research in other domains. We present a very quick overview here, supplemented by quotes from the various participants shown in italics. This similarity of generic advice is worth emphasising. Developing potential is as much about people skills as knowledge of dance, and these skills can often be copied from other domains!

So how should you do it?

The principle, most simple, but often neglected aspect of developing potential effectively is the need to take an individual approach. Of course, we all know that people are different; they learn differently, they have different strengths and weaknesses and ultimately, everyone has their own formula for success; ‘each dancer has a very individual way of getting to things’. Therefore, providing a very individualised policy applies to a number of areas including: the assessment of the strengths, weaknesses and needs of individual dancers; the provision of individual guidance, teaching and support depending on specific requirements; and the encouragement of individualism within the programme. Of course, this is by no means an easy task as the more individualised a programme becomes, the more time, effort and coordination is required. However, the benefits of such a system are great.

Firstly, flexibility within the programme is crucial; nothing involving the development of many different talented individuals is likely to be predictable all of the time. Additionally, a co-ordination of methods within the programme allow for a greater chance of all successfully helping the majority effectively. For example, group classes (where possible with an emphasis on individualised goals, instruction and feedback), in conjunction with individual tutorial sessions is a good start; tutorials at least twice a term, which is great, gives you that opportunity to see if what you are saying is going in’. Furthermore, creating an informal atmosphere, where teachers and support staff have good rapport with the dancers will encourage additional interaction and openness. With good rapport (as long as staff are available and ‘seen around the place’), many additional opportunities will be created for individual support and learning. ‘The student support network is fantastic, you can walk up to the staff and talk to them, and you will always have regular tutorials’. The final aspect of such a system, and a crucial one for both effective learning and staff time management, is to promote self responsibility for student learning and development. ‘The sooner they (dancers) take ownership of their learning, the better’. This autonomy involves education, providing dancers with an understanding of the ‘whats, whys and hows’ of what they are trying to achieve, and access to resources and opportunities for dancers to go away and develop on their own. Detachment from the teachers, who can guide dancers with regular goal setting and review opportunities, can keep them on the right track.

Development for the future, not success for tomorrow, is the way forward in talent development. Long-term agendas allow dancers time to develop appropriately, build skills and experience that will be useful in the future, without an overbearing pressure to perform perfectly now. In comparison with other performance domains, the ultimate long-term aim for any school (at least in overt performance terms) is the production of professional dancers. However, there is significant competition for such places and ultimately a large number will not make it or will simply choose to do something else. As such, a holistic approach to needed and dancers must be equipped with transferable life

skills, particularly the mental skills and attitudes that will enable them to be successful in any area they choose, which includes a dance career. Considering the amount of dedication and learning required, and the number of ‘problem periods’ (e.g. auditions, injury, commitment level) that dancers experience throughout their development and careers, it is clear that only those who are mentally tough will progress and succeed. “If you have a little trouble with co-ordination, you can be helped, but if you have the wrong mental approach, it’s a very hard profession.” Such mental skills and attitudes can be taught both formally and informally: for example, directly through education, or indirectly through school ethos, role models or group discussion opportunities. Of course, individual support through and after difficult times is also important. Coherence is crucial both in the most successful and least successful. It is essential that ‘significant others’ in the dancers’ life be educated about the process, aims and methods of development (and are encouraged to be involved) to help encourage and support dancers’ development. Indeed, with a wide support network (e.g. staff, peers, family and friends) successful development is far more likely. For such a thing to be possible, the aims and outcomes of development must be explicit and clear, and good communication patterns between staff, and with students and significant others, need to be encouraged. ‘The teachers try to learn what the support staff are teaching us, so they are on the same wavelength.’

As you can see, developing talent is a complicated process, as there are many different factors, aims and people involved. The co-ordination of efforts and direction through integrated and systematic methods increases the likelihood of efficient and effective environments. As such it is important to think about how certain factors impact on each other and develop systems in which common threads (e.g. professionalism, self responsibility, or individual focus) can be consistently reinforced in different settings (e.g. aims in different classes, aims of assessment), and important aspects can be prioritised when appropriate (e.g. long term development, performance opportunities or recovery).

Implications for practice

- Emphasise individual development and support Create an environment where formal individual feedback can be given but also build rapport and provide those all important, informal opportunities for learning and support.
- Promote self responsibility and autonomous learning Teach the ‘whats, hows and whys’ of development and provide opportunities and praise for independent development.
- Aim long term Develop a holistic programme explicitly aimed at future success. Promote generic pre-curators to success, for example, attitudes such as professionalism and commitment.
- Build coherence educate significant others and promote good communication patterns Many people are involved in the ultimate success of a dancer; educate them about the process and what is required, involve them if possible. Provide opportunities for these discussions. It’s good to talk!
- Be systematic Try to ensure that you systematically prioritise what is truly important and promote development from a number of levels, for example, matching aims in lessons and aims of assessment.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the dancers, their schools and companies for participating in this study.

Ailish Keaveney, University of Edinburgh, MSc Performance psychology
Russell Martindale, Napier University, MSc Performance psychology