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Scene Changes and Key Changes *Disciplines and Identities in HE Dance, Drama and Music*

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Disciplinarity ... deserves some serious rethinking.

Sperber 2003

Prologue

In *The Shock of the New*, his history of modern art, Robert Hughes (1991) dwells at length on the years either side of the beginning of the twentieth century and on the momentous impact of developments in fields such as science, technology and psychology that occurred at that time. In particular, he focuses on the impact those changes had on art and its production, and on the identities and practices of the artists involved. The classic, single-point perspective that had well served the cause of art since the Renaissance was now considered insufficient to capture the dynamism, speed and multiple perspectives of modern life. The great 'isms' of modern art, for example, cubism, expressionism, futurism, surrealism, developed as direct responses to those changes, and artists – out of necessity – found themselves creating works in different media and frequently collaborating on art projects. Their identities altered, as they became integral parts of a much larger, rapidly shifting 'artsworld'. The notion of the 'pure, dedicated' artist became the – rare – exception in much the same way, a century later and in relation to academics 'the idea of the ivory tower, still current in popular discourse, will today elicit a wry smile from almost every faculty member everywhere' (Becher and Trowler 2001).

Scene Changes and Key Changes

For most of the 20th century, it was plausible to think of academics as members of interconnected communities, notably disciplines and higher education institutions, which afforded them stable and legitimising identities.

Henkel 2005: 155

The disciplines of dance, drama and music¹ comprise what is usually referred to as the 'performing arts' disciplines. However, even that apparently straightforward statement is somewhat problematic. As Sperber (2003) points out, the current disciplinary system may be becoming brittle, and the notion of clearly defined disciplines is an historical product that, in its present form, goes back to the nineteenth century and to the development of modern universities and research institutions.

The manner in which the disciplines of dance, drama and music have been and are categorised, and the histories of their development in higher education, are important factors in determining not only how those disciplines are perceived within higher education and beyond but also in determining the identities of the academic practitioners within those disciplines.

The recognition of the three disciplines as appropriate and relevant subjects for undergraduate and post-graduate study is a story that, in the cases of dance and drama, is spread over several decades and, in the case of music, several centuries. Music can trace its academic antecedents to the middle of the fifteenth century and the award of a B. Mus. to Henry Abyngdon at Cambridge in 1464. There is general agreement that the first 'modern' music degree in the UK was established in Edinburgh in 1891, by Professor Fredrick Niecks.

Though Elsie Fogerty, the founder of the Central School of Speech Drama, had been calling for it to be treated as a degree subject in 1906, drama finally separated from English Literature and became an academic subject in its own right in 1947. This was due to the pioneering efforts of Glynn Wickham at the University of Bristol who almost single-handedly established drama as a new academic discipline. Most of the early drama departments, similarly, were of English literature descent, and it was a couple of decades later that the new universities of the 1960s and, much later, the post-1992 universities witnessed the development of departments of theatre studies or performing arts that were founded 'from scratch' rather than directly descended from English.

Nicholas (2007), tracing the development of dance in higher education, comments that the discipline had a difficult time in becoming established. Prior to the 1970s, dance had only held a foothold in British institutions of higher education through specialist teacher training courses leading to a Certificate in Education. It was first established as a degree course in combination with other arts subjects or as part of physical education.²

This was the situation until 1976, when the first BA (Hons) in Dance opened at the Laban Centre for Movement and Dance, successor to the Art of Movement Studio. However, it was not until 1984 that the first university-based, single-honours dance studies BA (Hons) course opened, at the University of Surrey (having been preceded there by post-graduate level dance studies).

Both drama and, particularly, dance, as relatively recent additions to the ever-growing catalogue of degree subjects, have sometimes struggled – within academia itself and also in popular media discourses – to obtain acceptance as bona fide academic subjects. Those struggles have had significant impacts on their developments as subject areas, their attendant discourses and practices, and the identities of their academic practitioners.

In any consideration of the three disciplines in the context of higher education, it is important to note that the dance, drama and music conservatoires – often, but not always, with the word ‘Royal’ in their title – now play a small but significant role in the trajectory of the development of those subjects in higher education. These institutions have long and distinguished histories as vocationally oriented training grounds for professional performers. While they still perform that primary function, many of the courses these institutions run are now properly validated undergraduate and post-graduate courses. The transition into higher education has, unsurprisingly, not been without its tensions, and there are continuing and often heated debates about how to maintain a ‘high-end’ vocational/professional training within the ‘academic’ discourses, practices and regulatory frameworks of higher education.

The manner in which dance, drama and music have been considered and categorised within the wider field of higher education policy also has had an impact on those disciplines. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), for example, has always considered dance and drama as the ‘performing arts’ while music is considered to be a single discipline in its own right. This reflects a prevailing sense of an ‘intellectual hierarchy’ that perceives music – particularly classical music – as a serious academic discipline in contrast to the somewhat arriviste disciplines of dance and drama. Until 2003, the Higher Education Statistics Agency recognised drama and music as separate categories, but considered dance to be a subset of drama. Thus, before 2003, it is extremely difficult to find separate statistics for dance in higher education in relation to such things as the growth in student numbers, or social class or ethnicity, etc.

In recent years, all three disciplines have experienced significant growth in regard to both the number of subjects that come within the aegis of the disciplines and the number of students studying those subjects (HESA 2010). Music has experienced the rapid development and growth of two ‘new’ subject areas: Music Technology³ and Popular Music, and what Nightingale (2007: 1) describes as a ‘the flattening of musical hierarchies, whereby classical music is no longer considered more important than other musical forms’. Drama/theatre studies has seen the development and growth of the field known as performance studies or performance research, and dance has expanded to cover a range of subjects including anthropology, ethnography, documentation and reconstruction, and medicine.

Though the three disciplines are very different, each has been subject to the many shifts and changes that have occurred in UK higher education in recent years. These include:

- the significant impact of the four Research Assessment Exercises (RAE)⁴ between 1992 and 2008, and the development of intensive, research-focused cultures in departments and institutions;
- the recent move away from the RAE to the Research Excellence Framework (REF)⁵;
- the moves towards the professionalisation of teaching and the requirement, particularly of new teaching staff, to obtain an accredited teaching qualification;
- the requirement to produce standardised, prescriptive programme and module descriptions;
- the increasing requirement to develop and implement detailed, clear and transparent approaches to assessment;
- the emphasis on widening participation in relation to entry to higher education and – at the other end – the emphasis on employability and graduate skills on exiting higher education;
- the impact and use of new technologies.

Though the above apply to all disciplines within higher education, their impact on dance, drama and music – and particularly the first two of those – has been amplified by the nature of the cultures, discourses and practices of those disciplines. For example, in relation to the increased focus on research, there has always been a small but significant group of academics within those disciplines whose identity is defined by and within a research-intensive academic culture. However, for those whose pedagogic discourses and practices reflect a far more performance- and practice-based pedagogic culture, the pressure to undertake and publish ‘serious’ research has meant that they have had to adopt an academic identity that did not necessarily fit or sit easily with their primary practitioner-teacher identity.

Writing this chapter at the start of 2011, it is impossible to avoid at least mentioning what are likely to be momentous drivers of change not only in the performing arts disciplines, but in the whole of higher education itself. In October 2010, Lord Browne (Browne 2010) published his long-awaited report on the future funding of UK higher education. That was followed closely by the UK Government’s announcement of the outcomes of its Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR).

Browne’s proposals included:

- doubling and, in some cases, trebling student fees;
- a significant shift from public financing of higher education to private financing;

- a total withdrawal of the financial support for the teaching of arts, humanities and social sciences;
- a strong focus on the STEM subjects – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

These, and other recommendations that were supported by the government, combined to create a mood of anguish and, in some cases despair, for the future of many arts, humanities and social sciences subjects. A professor of social and political philosophy wrote:

Even those of us who do survive (and I'm not feeling complacent) are likely to find that the ecology of our subjects will change if students from working-class backgrounds are priced out of degree courses at the most expensive universities and the surviving, cheaper institutions no longer put the humanities on the menu.

Bertram 2010

The likely consequences of the Browne Report and the CSR added to the growing sense that the tectonic plates of higher education were shifting dramatically. There was substantial additional pressure on a sector that had already responded to the shifts and changes already mentioned by taking the first steps toward developing into a 'three-tiered' system of higher education in which higher education institutions fitted into one of the following categories: teaching only, teaching mainly with some research, and research-led. This division occurred not only between institutions but also within institutions with the introduction, on the one hand, of teaching-only contracts and, on the other hand the increasing number of appointments of 'research professors' and the reward of and withdrawal from teaching of institutional 'research stars' (Clegg 2007). One of the consequences of this shift is that academic staff started to negotiate their roles in different phases and in different ways.

So, how have the disciplines of dance, drama and music been affected by these various changes, and what are the implications?

In an attempt to answer that question, and as part of the research for this contribution, I circulated a questionnaire to the discussion lists of the subject associations of dance, drama and music, asking for views on how the disciplines have changed in recent years, and the impact of those changes on academic identities as teachers, researchers and practitioners. The 28 detailed replies I received, from colleagues across a broad range of subjects and institutions, and a number of subsequent emails and conversations with both the respondents and others, revealed the complexities of defining what constitutes the 'discipline'. Rather than a 'tribe' and its 'territory', or even a number of related tribes sharing, ranging over and occasionally contesting a number of linked territories, the landscape of the three disciplines and their various interlocking and

interconnecting communities of practice consists of a complex, multi-faceted, multi-layered network of identities, relationships, values, discourses and practices. As Henkel (2005: 173) describes:

Academics no longer work in a bounded space. Rather, academic autonomy has become something that must be realised by managing multi-modality and multiple relationships in a context where boundaries have either collapsed or become blurred.

The picture that emerges from all this is of a sector in which all the various parts, from the main structural elements to the many subjects, communities, discourses and practices that occupy it, are in a state of fragmentation and flux. This is particularly noticeable in those disciplines – such as dance, drama and music – that have not only expanded in terms of the number, range and type of subjects they now cover but also have a ‘dual identity’ as both academic and practice-based disciplines. As disciplines, identities are mutating and transforming, academic identities, too, are shifting and changing, and the question of what or whose identity has become an important and pertinent one. This is exemplified in one of the ‘thematic prompts’ for a conference on *Academic Identities in the 21st Century* held in June 2010: ‘Fragmentation, specialisation and new work contracts – can we even argue that an “academic identity” still exists?’ (University of Strathclyde website 2010).

There is a strong sense that we have moved, or certainly are moving, beyond a period when there was a single identifiable discipline e.g. drama, and a shared understanding of what that discipline was. One senior lecturer in drama, who responded to the questions about changing disciplines, viewed this as an indication of ‘a splintering of a shared understanding of what the focus/content/values of a degree programme might be, making it difficult to talk of a single subject area nationally’ (Questionnaire response, QR12). A sense of the ‘broad spectrum’ of themes and subjects and methodological approaches⁶ that the discipline of drama/theatre studies now covers can be ascertained from the titles of the eight working groups that currently contribute to the work of the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA): *C20–C21 Performer Training; The Documentation of Performance; Scenography; Directing and Dramaturgy; Applied and Social Theatre; New Technologies for Theatre; Performance, Identity and Community; Performance and the Body; Theatre Performance and Philosophy; Theatre History and Historiography*. All this signifies that the ‘discipline’ now comprises a complex, multifaceted, boundary crossing, and loosely coupled assortment of academic identities, discourses and practices.

A similar trajectory can be detected in the younger – as an academic subject – discipline of dance. Not only has it grown substantially in terms of the number of courses and students, but also it has matured as a discipline in terms of research and academic robustness. There has been what a Head of Dance described as a

'liberalisation of what is accepted as scholarship – more inclusivity and acceptance of diverse modes, such as practice-based research' (QR5). However, the proliferation of analytical frameworks and the undermining of empirical research have also brought into question the notion of substantial historical knowledge and understanding. A dance historian, in answer to the questions, commented that: 'I feel that dance history is having to fight back in order to establish its identity as a discipline area that may draw on, but does not depend on, theories from other disciplines' (QR1). The problem is particularly acute in dance due to the relatively short time it has been an 'academic' subject. Drama – several decades – and music – several centuries – have had substantial or certainly sufficient periods of time to establish themselves as disciplines with clear identities rooted in established landscapes, for example, historical, philosophical, intellectual. Dance has not had the benefit of such a 'settling in' period. Its academic roots are not as well established and not as deep, and it is therefore, perhaps, rather more susceptible to the 'winds of change' blowing through academia.

In drama/theatre studies, another important factor, particularly in relation to the burgeoning field of performance studies/performance research, is that not only has the discipline 'gone global' (McKenzie *et al.* 2010: 1) in regard to the number and location of researchers, research centres and transnational collaborations in and between institutions, but also 'there is a growing sense that a profound de-centering⁷ is transpiring':

Performance studies is no longer only about the West – specifically the United States – studying the 'Rest'. While performance has for some time been recognized as both a contested concept and a practice of potential contestation, the sites and stakes of those contests have both multiplied and entered into new configurations.

McKenzie *et al.* 2010: 2)

Within this complexity (or 'splintering'), some patterns can be discerned, a number of which provide some interesting tensions and counter-balances. In UK drama/theatre studies, these shifts and changes include:

- a move away from the study of the history of drama to the theory of performance;
- far less focus on 'the canon' of playtexts, dramatists, dramatic forms and a related shift from the study and performance of plays to creating devised performance both in and, particularly, outside traditional theatre spaces. 'It is possible to do a Drama degree and not read a play' (QR12, Lecturer in Drama); 'The impact of increased interest in devised theatre, means that particularly "new" universities rarely teach any substantial sort of history or historiography (this is NOT a good thing)' (QR19, Professor of Theatre History);

- a move away from the study of ‘plays’ as artefacts of interest in themselves – or even in context – and into areas of ‘performance’, broadly configured. As a consequence, even when studying written texts, new paradigms (see note 2) for understanding the practices involved have been applied;
- an increased separation of research practice from professional practice:⁸ ‘Students see, study and emulate student work, and the work of those companies touring the academic venue circuit, rather than professional work for general public audiences’ (QR13, Lecturer in Drama);
- a much more focused set of research practices, incentives and pressures to create high-quality research outputs, including the increased acceptance and influence of discourses and practices based around Practice-as-Research;⁹
- in response to developments in the arts world, an increasing amount of crossing of disciplinary boundaries with other creative and performing arts subjects, for example film and visual arts as well as dance and music, and away from traditional humanities subject areas;
- the increased use and integration of information and performance technologies in and into performance.

These shifts and changes have had various and variable levels of impact across the discipline as it is taught in universities. Similar, or parallel shifts can be observed in the disciplines of dance and music, and the ‘de-centering’ described by McKenzie *et al.* applies as much to those disciplines as it does to drama/theatre studies. That ‘de-centering’ also applies to the identities of those who work as teachers, researchers and, in a significant number of cases, practitioners in those disciplines.

A recent conversation with a music colleague encapsulated this phenomenon. Originally a professionally trained musician and composer, he is also a musicologist and an acknowledged expert on the work of an early twentieth century composer. His main teaching specialism is currently in the subject area of music technology, and in recent years he has collaborated with an artist and fellow academic on a series of major art projects and installations that have been exhibited around the world. When we met, he had just returned from a workshop run by biologists that was concerned with the visual and aural representation of biological data, to which they had invited a number of colleagues from the visual arts and music/sound disciplines.

While some, as demonstrated by the music colleague above, embrace the opportunities provided by the de-centering or fragmentation, others find it a rather disconcerting and even threatening phenomenon. One respondent to the questions about changes in the nature of the discipline and identity – a professor of theatre history, specialising in nineteenth century theatre – wrote, only half-jokingly: ‘Oh, I’m becoming a dinosaur!’ (QR16). But she then went on to make the serious point that while only a few years ago there was real concern about the future of theatre history as a discipline. ‘There has been extraordinary innovation in my particular corner, with the impact of post-structuralist theory

as forming the “new theatre historiography”, which I’m lucky to be a part of’ (QR16). A similar phenomenon has occurred in dance, where the proliferation of theoretical perspectives on dance studies has, in the words of a dance historian ‘been both astounding and sometimes confusing’ (QR1).

Among the dance, drama and music conservatoires, there has been relatively little impact in those institutions that have remained as close as they can to their original, skills-based, vocational training ethos, albeit while operating within a framework of validated, academic integrity. However, there has been a significant impact in those instances where institutions have undertaken major changes in curriculum design and delivery or, in some cases, a complete overhaul of their entire higher education provision. As a senior manager in a drama and music conservatoire undergoing profound change commented: ‘It’s sure as hell scary for teachers in the conservatoire, though, who are not used or suited to change’ (QR22). Such changes have been undertaken, in large part, in response to the employability and skills agendas that are now prevalent in higher education, and the consequent recognition that specialist institutions have at least some responsibility to provide a much broader educational experience in preparation for a much greater number and range of career opportunities. This has led to much ‘soul-searching’ within those institutions. Teaching staff – often with conservatoire training and professional careers themselves – grapple with reconciling the understanding that a wider, more interdisciplinary education will actually benefit the profession, with the widely held perception that pursuing such a path will inevitably result in a dilution of the skills-based training that they value and which they believe the profession demands. Similar tensions exist in the music conservatoires as new technologies and the changing musical marketplace are creating a new and wider range of opportunities for graduates (Nightingale 2007).

There is another aspect in relation to the disciplines of dance, drama and music that might influence the manner in which academic identities are configured – and re-configured – in those disciplines, and the willingness and ability to adapt to the many shifts and changes occurring both internally within those disciplines and in the external environment. Of the three disciplines, drama/theatre studies is possibly the most ‘hybrid’ discipline in that its discourses and practices range over a particularly wide and varied range of subjects, tools and stimuli. As a senior lecturer in drama commented: ‘this mix of skills is far wider in range than in traditional humanities subjects’ (QR15). Anyone engaged in drama/theatre studies practice inevitably will have found themselves adopting a plethora of roles and functions in relation to those discourses and practices – in teaching and research, production and performance. Thus, the adoption of multiple, metamorphosing identities within the discipline is a naturally occurring phenomenon, and the ‘adapt or die’ approach to academic existence is part of the DNA of the discipline.

The phenomenon of a multifaceted, shifting academic identity also can be discerned in both dance and music as those disciplines expand into new areas of study and work, and as the boundaries between subject areas become increasingly permeable. However, if there is a differentiation between the three disciplines it may be discerned in the extent to which each discipline has become 'de-centred' or detached from the set of discourses and practices that, by general consensus, constituted its core. Drama/theatre studies has experienced a far greater de-centering as a discipline than either dance or music, both of which still retain a distinctive 'core'. In the case of music, the technical element, for example, musical literacy and theory, is very distinctive to music and musical skills. However, as a professor of music wrote, there is a sense that even in music 'there has been an erosion of this, and, as a result, students tend to go for other areas of music such as pure history, philosophy, ethnology, sociology, etc., where, dependency on musical facts derived from musical theory can be avoided' (QR25).

Epilogue

In the course of exploring how academic identity is configured in higher education dance, drama and music it has become clear that academics' narratives are threaded with stories of shifting identities, as they move into, out of, and through communities of practice and located aspects of their professional identities across many contexts (James 2005). One of those contexts, particularly and obviously in relation to learning and teaching – and which has been mentioned only in passing – is the student context. The construction and re-construction of an academic identity occurs in a context in which student identities themselves are being constructed and re-constructed. As higher education in the UK shifts much further towards a student demand-led system driven by bottom-line economics, and as the long-term future of subjects such as dance, drama and music come under increased pressure to prove their worth – to the economy – and their financial viability, it is clear that the academics in those disciplines will continue to adapt to the many and varied changes within and pressures on the environments in which they work. What is less clear, in the face of what appears to be an inexorable process of disciplinary expansion, fragmentation and de-centering, is whether there may be a point at which any notion of an academic identity – in the traditional sense – becomes meaningless.

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Notes

- 1 Dance, in its early manifestation as an academic discipline, was concerned mainly with choreography, performance, dance history, and the appreciation of contemporary dance. Drama, with its strong link to English Literature, was focused mainly around theatre history and the study of plays and their performance. For a considerable period, the study of music was focused on composition, performance, reception, and criticism, particularly in the Western classical tradition. All three disciplines have now expanded considerably to include a wide range of sub-disciplines that range across the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences. In 2011, PALATINE, the HEA Subject Centre for Dance, Drama and Music, listed 24 sub-disciplines for dance, 49 for drama, 63 for music, and 20 technical/design sub-disciplines.
- 2 Some dance degree courses are still located in physical education or sports science departments.
- 3 Boehm (2007), using data from UCAS (the UK's Universities and Colleges Admission Service) identified 351 degrees in the category of music technology, of which only 131 actually used the phrase 'Music technology' in the title. In all Boehm identified 63 different names for music technology courses.
- 4 The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was an exercise undertaken approximately every five years between 1992 and 2008 on behalf of the four UK higher education funding councils to evaluate the quality of research undertaken by British higher education institutions. RAE submissions from each subject area (or *unit of assessment*) were given a rank by a subject specialist peer review panel. The rankings were used to inform the allocation of quality-weighted research funding (QR) each higher education institution received from their national funding council. Top rated institutions received substantial amounts of money.
- 5 The Research Excellence Framework (REF) was developed in the light of concerns about the impact of funded university research on the economy, the cost of the RAE, and the 'Government's firm presumption ... that after the 2008 RAE the system for assessing research quality and allocating "quality-related" (QR) funding will be mainly metrics-based.' (HM Treasury 2006). The first REF is scheduled for 2014.
- 6 'The breadth of research methods and theoretical frames is as wide as the broad spectrum of subjects studied, being drawn from such fields as anthropology, art history, communication, dance history, history, linguistics, literary studies, philosophy, postcolonial studies, psychology, sociology, and theatre studies. The methods include critical race studies, deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, new historicism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, queer theory, semiotics, and speech act theory' (McKenzie *et al.* 2010: 2).
- 7 'Decentered: The absence or denial of a particular society's or culture's perspective from which to view the world, usually associated with moving away from a Western or Eurocentric perspective. Could potentially imply the absence of any central perspective' (Eller 2009).
- 8 The need and requirement for students to see and study performance *in situ* i.e. public performance in public theatres, studios, concert halls, etc. has been replaced to a significant extent by the establishment of a university 'circuit' of performance venues, an unofficial 'list' of preferred companies and performers, and the appointment – from among those companies and performers – of visiting fellows. Consequently, the teaching and research of performance frequently occurs within an academic 'bubble'.

- 9 Practice-as-Research (PaR) is research activity in which disciplinary practice – normally arts/ media/ performance practice – is an integral part of the research method and outcome of an articulated and positioned research inquiry – in the form of documented processes and/or products.