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Exploding the myth: enhancing the expression of faith and spirituality through the study of dance composition in Christian tertiary education

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For dance educators engaged in teaching choreography in Christian tertiary institutes, encouraging students to develop foundational compositional skills whilst exploring personal expression of the Christian faith is undoubtedly a challenging objective. In 2005, a Christian tertiary education provider in South Australia enrolled six female dance students in the unit dance composition 1 as part of a bachelor of arts (dance) degree programme. Research was conducted concurrently with the delivery of the unit, analysing how effectively the content, delivery and assessment within, and of, the subject supported students to develop foundational composition skills and enhance their expression of faith and spirituality in their dance making. During the research project it became clear there was the underlying challenge of exploding the myth that it is impossible to integrate faith with artistic practice and produce work of industry standards. How effectively the training in dance composition facilitated the exploration of faith through and during the choreographic process, without compromising the quality of technical training, became the focus for the research project.

Keywords: dance composition; faith and spirituality; tertiary education

Introduction

Context

The teaching of dance composition is now integral to most dance courses in tertiary institutes. The curriculum of such units continues to be a source of much academic debate and yet '[e]very book on creativity, after paying respect to the flash of insight, discusses discipline and technique of the craft, and the craft of choreography, like a symphony, includes a wide range of parts' (Blom and Chaplin 1998, 3). Despite specific cultural, historical and social frameworks, dance composition as an academic subject is seen as a significant springboard for learning about the making and creating of dance works.

Significantly, for educational institutes, in teaching dance composition, it becomes, as Grove has observed:

the approach rather than the content that matters; *what* students are taught seems to be less significant than *how* they are taught. After all, one can always add to knowledge or expand particular skills, but it's much harder to change the whole orientation of a

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student's learning. So one practical step would be to devise an education that from the beginning seriously began preparing dancers and choreographers to undertake 'dance-exploration' [and]...to provide dance-makers with enough time to enable such research to be effective (McKechnie and Grove 2000, 10).

The teaching of dance composition is not only about the acquisition of choreographic skills, but how to unleash student creativity in the process.

In tertiary institutes characterised by an adherence to Christian world view, the delivery of dance units is a relatively new phenomenon. In Australia, those training organisations which have developed tertiary dance courses are still striving to develop curriculum and assessment that not only reflect current academic trends but also infuse the doctrine of the Christian faith in the teaching of performing arts units.

At times, dance tagged 'Christian' has attracted the stigma of work that is clichéd, poorly devised and executed. Artists often 'want to create something that reflects the passions and concerns of their faith, but they want to compete alongside their non-believing contemporaries' (Turner 2001, 10) and thus have struggled with 'creative arts practice where theory resides in and emerges from the doing as much as in articulating reflection about the doing' (Stock 2010, 2).

The action research project conducted for the duration of an academic semester in an Australian Christian tertiary education institute in 2005 sought to evaluate how effectively the unit dance composition 1 met the objectives of the course, which were stated in the government accredited and registered unit outline as seeking 'to provide the student with a basic understanding of various dance composition devices and the ability to use these as a foundation for personal choreography and the creation of dance that glorifies God'.

Inherent in this stated objective was the challenge to facilitate students' exploration of both compositional principles as well as their personal expression of the Christian faith through learning about dance making.

Terminology

Christian: 'of Christ or his teaching, believing in or professing or belonging to or in harmony with the Christian religion' (Johnston 1976, 139); a person who has an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ.

Choreography: 'Choreography is the process of selecting and forming movement into a dance, designing the action to satisfy a particular intent and involves the process of exploration, improvisation, selection and organisation' (Cheney 1989, 82). This process of creating movement phrases to generate a dance composition may or may not find its completion before a paying audience.

Research project

The research project was intertwined with the delivery of the dance composition 1 unit at a registered Christian tertiary education provider and was run in semester two of the Australian academic calendar (25 July–2 December 2005). As the semester progressed and students began to demonstrate the acquisition of foundational compositional skills, the data revealed that students were also being consistently challenged to confront their previously unquestioned notions of what defines 'Chris-

tian' dance and examine how their perceptions had impacted their dance making and learning.

Scope of the project

For the duration of the project, weekly composition classes were facilitated by the researcher and were characterised by workshops and seminars, which included explanations, demonstrations, practical dance exercises and discussions of choreographic devices and principles, together with personal study, reflection and observation (e.g., of dance on video).

Additionally, in the first two weeks of September, an Australian Christian dance company facilitated master-classes in technique and choreography as part of a Dance Ministry Intensive (DMI) and then performed in several Adelaide secondary schools, both Christian and public, alongside the first year college students.

The company members and the first year students then created and performed a dance work entitled *The four faces of God* and explored the concept of God as extrapolated in the Book of Revelation. The intention was to give the audience a glimpse of the 'faces' of God through movement motifs that recurred with increasing complexity and diversity as the piece progressed.

The artistic director of the Christian dance company had worked in the Australian dance industry before establishing her own company with the intent to create work that explored the tenets of her Christian faith. The company dancers were comprised of both newly graduated tertiary-level dance students and independent artists seeking work in the dance industry.

At the commencement of the project, informed consent for participation in the research was sought from all potential participants.

Strategies for gathering data

Students had regular opportunities to evaluate their own dance compositions in structured compositional studies, and these responses were documented in interviews, through class activities and through criteria sheets and questionnaires. Questionnaires were utilised at the commencement and close of the project and quick questionnaires throughout the delivery of curriculum kept the researcher up to date with students' perceptions of activities (see Appendix 1). Written and oral interviews with students, as well as with other performing arts staff, dance lecturers from other institutes and guest artists from the professional dance company provided reflective data from both internal and external sources.

Students' work was videotaped at four stages during the project: the collaborative dance work created with the Christian dance company, the students' own compositional endeavours, the final dance work each student created and this final composition as it was presented on stage before a paying audience. The researcher documented observations in a personal journal for the duration of the project to allow the time and space for reflection-in-action (Schon 1983). Additionally, external dance practitioners completed assessments, criteria sheets and questionnaires after viewing stages of students' compositional endeavours both live and recorded (see Appendix 2).

The Dance Ministry Intensive facilitated the experience of expressing personal faith through dance and dance composition. This process was documented through

interviews, reflective journaling and questionnaires (see Appendix 2) as well through audio-visual media.

Throughout the semester-long process, reflective practice by all project participants proved 'essential to learning in order to convert tacit experience into explicit knowledge' (DeFillippi 2001, 6). The narrative of discovery was thus enriched by the 'kind of knowing...inherent in intelligent action' (Schon 1983, 50), as documented in the collection of written, visual and aural data, teaching and learning materials and in reflections.

Student focus group

The tertiary institute offering this performing arts degree is intentional about facilitating a Christian learning environment. Consequently, it attracts students whose belief system is commensurate with ecumenical, charismatic Christian doctrine. As this was the first time that dance units were offered as part of the bachelor of arts programme, only a small group of students were successfully placed in the course.

It became evident that the type of person (female, late teens/early 20s) enrolled in this unit had experiences in common, having an Anglo-Saxon heritage, with a private, Christian secondary education (two in home schooling), and having attended fairly conservative Christian churches in their life.

Inevitably, students' backgrounds and experiences affected not only their perception of what constituted 'appropriate' choreography, but how Christians should approach the craft of dance composition. Students expressed fairly fixed ideas about dance composition, yet had very clearly never been challenged to consider how their faith and art were intertwined.

Key points from the data

The emergent data highlighted that the student group held to notions of faith and dance that were unwittingly an impediment to learning. They needed to be challenged to think: dared to question, reason, analyse and critique. In doing so, the data revealed they were provoked, encouraged and even cajoled into exploring the dimensions of their personal faith, not only as choreographers but also as individuals on a journey of discovery about the process of creativity itself.

For instance, in week 2 students responded to the question, 'Do you think Christian belief affects movement vocabulary?' in similar ways. One wrote, 'A Christian would want the movements to be wholesome and edifying'. Another wrote, 'Only in a sexual or vulgar aspect. Christians' belief in self respect and also that they are a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. To dance representing inappropriate sexuality may be contradictory', while another honestly reflected, 'Yes, but I'm still unsure how it is worked out'. These observations revealed both pre-conceived ideas students held about how Christian faith affects the creation of dance works and a wariness that established boundaries may be challenged through kinaesthetic questioning.

One exception to the question was the response, 'No, it is the intention that affects the movement. God can work through any work performed in the right spirit' (choreographic intention questionnaire 2/8/05). Another student wrote, 'God and the meaning of God and spiritually will effect [sic] intention of movement to include the spiritual message' (choreographic intention questionnaire 2/8/05).

There was awareness that personal faith and spirituality affected the choreographic process, but students struggled to articulate verbally with clarity how it did so. Similarly, the underlying intention for creating work was, by implication, regarded as defining whether a work would be 'Christian' or not. Students were however, tentatively willing to be open to new ideas and slowly began to consider questions about faith and dance and the creation of dance that could potentially 'glorify God'. As one student observed when asked whether the study of choreographic devices could enhance the expression of faith in dance as worship, 'At this point I haven't experienced that, but it may well be that it does' (student beginning module questionnaire 26/7/05).

Similarly, expectations about the delivery and curriculum of the unit reflected the background of students. In responding to the question 'What do you hope to learn by participating in this module?' in week one of the course, student comments included the desire to learn compositional skills, but also sought, as one student wrote, 'ways to enhance my choreographic skill that can help me convey the word of God through movement' (student beginning module questionnaire 26/7/05). As another student wrote, 'I want to learn more about God as experienced through dance' (student beginning module questionnaire 26/7/05).

Students also expressed very clear ideas about dance and Christianity. They made a distinction between what was 'Christian dance' and 'non-Christian dance' generally, as in the words of one student, as 'the purpose: Christians to glorify God, the other showing off what man can do for their own glorification' (student beginning module questionnaire 26/7/05). Thus, it appeared that the students tended towards a world view 'that reflects the human instinct for separating the "sacred" from the "profane" [which] always pretends that you can live life to the full, religiously and humanly, just so long as you do not confuse the two realms' (Schaeffer 1985, 37). I realised these young students were a product of the 20th century, during which, as Schaeffer (1985, 28) wrote:

...people's lives as Christians became compartmentalised. This thing was spiritual, that one was not. The arts, creativity, enjoyment of beauty, enjoyment of God's beauty, even an enjoyment of God's word in the bible for itself were set aside. The arts were regarded as unspiritual, unfit and secondary to those high and spiritual goals now set forth for Christians to achieve. ... Creative people in this framework either had to bow and abandon their God-given talent in favour of a man-made theology, or fly for their creative lives. Many did so, and the vacuum left by the disappearance of creative people within the Christian community has been evident in our lack of ability to communicate to the world around us, and the gray sterility of the Christian world.

This resultant impoverishment of creativity and the creative act in Christian communities has led to a generation of artists who have separated their faith from their artistic practice. The teaching of dance composition needed to directly address this duality, or the quality of the created work would be compromised. This proved challenging as even in the context of the Dance Ministry Intensive, students continued to reflect on their experiences as Christians, rather than artists, neatly dividing their world into two camps. As one student explained, '[the DMI] has shown me that there are just as many options in Christian dance as secular in terms of movement and ideas. The different environment is one caring about people not just composition' (DMI questionnaire #1, 12/9/05).

As evidenced in the material collected, there had been a covert judgement about the implied superiority of Christians in dance – one that presumed secular artists lacked the ‘caring’ approach characterised by the way that Christian artists function. As one student wrote, ‘It would be hard for a secular dancer in a Christian piece to convey the same emotions as they don’t have the same understanding’ (DMI questionnaire #1, 12/9/05).

However, throughout the process of questioning and challenging the students, some data collected recorded a dawning awareness of personal judgements about the act of creating dance as Christians. For instance, one student reflected that ‘Christians have boundaries in their choreography morally but this is good. I did find that in slow pieces it’s almost like we have a Christian dance vocabulary like we do in our words which entraps our movement patterns’ (DMI questionnaire #1, 12/9/05). Then gradually there began to emerge some observations that the choreographic process in secular and Christian contexts ‘is the same – just intention is different and the presence of the Holy Spirit’ (DMI questionnaire #1, 12/9/05).

Ideas about these differences were similar to those expressed by the Christian dance company dancers, as one wrote that ‘morals, themes and focuses yes (there is a difference), but ‘choreographic techniques’ not so much: only the prayer for the Holy Spirit’s guidance to get the focus right’ (DMI questionnaire #1, 12/9/05). These articulated impressions of the intention for creating work opened new possibilities for each student to begin to explore aspects of their spiritual life previously unquestioned.

Acknowledging that dance composition could go beyond cognitive or kinaesthetic exploration and that intention could be generated from a deeper place of spirit, intuition and imagination gave space for students to consider what ‘Christian’ dance work might look like when engaging choreographic tools to create new work. However, there continued to be more to explore, challenge and question. The data collected throughout the project highlighted students’ religious attitudes, which in some ways limited how far the students could be challenged in their journey of learning. As researcher and lecturer, I had to acknowledge that ‘[i]n the majority of choreography contexts the lecturer acts as catalyst while the students are agents in their own learning. This is not surprising, of course, because students are the creators and have to be active rather than passive learners’ (Smith-Autard 2002, 179).

Interestingly, it was also through this active exploration of choreographic processes that possibilities for healing from dualistic thinking gave covert permission for the creative soul within to explore how spirituality could be enriched through the creative act. This in turn gave direction as to how innate creative gifts could enhance the expression of personal faith. As this duality of thinking was being challenged through critical analysis of the choreographic process, individuals began to articulate that this did not necessarily pose a threat to belief systems, but provided an opportunity to create work of excellence that would be accessible to any audience, regardless of spiritual beliefs.

Unexpected outcome: development of critical thinking skills

An unexpected result of continuing reflective practice and the students’ ongoing struggle with what was ‘Christian dance’ was the apparent need for explicit teaching and learning in the area of critical analysis. As expressed in the data collected for the duration of the project, the development of critical thinking skills was

desired and needed by students, both to make sense of choreographic choices and to enhance their expression of spirituality.

As Lavender, in the justification of the ORDER approach to critical evaluation (1996), explains, there are:

two distinct but interdependent practices in which choreography students are expected to gain proficiency during the course. The first is producing compositional studies, which involves exploring and making creative choices about movement, structure, and meaning in the dance. The second is *critical evaluation*, which involves verbally describing, analysing, interpreting and judging works made by others in the class. (Lavender 1996, 1)

Focussing on the latter proved invaluable in equipping students to create work that not only grappled with issues of faith and spirituality, but also with issues of technique and standards. This approach was generally embraced by students, who often expressed the greatest strength of any given class as, for example, ‘making us think’ and ‘use of various elements to get us thinking – kind of like a brainstorming session where we start to generate ideas’ (student questionnaire 26/7/05) and that an evaluative approach ‘made me think “outside the square” and not just do what comes naturally’ (student questionnaire 16/8/05).

Students were most resistant to reading and reflective writing in the class, which, as Lavender (1996) has explained, is key to developing critical evaluation skills. Sometimes the data was favourable, such as the comment in week 2: ‘The reading was good. The talk on God and spiritual aspects open mind to the different intentions God has for us and our work’ (student choreographic intention 2/8/05). Critical evaluation proved useful for both critiquing dance making and issues of the Christian faith.

Gradually, as students began to practise the language of evaluative criticism, they began to note in data material an increased awareness of the value of detailed constructive criticism. One response, for example, to a specific activity in which students developed movement phrases for evaluation in class was, ‘It gave immediate feedback which encouraged the developments of thoughts (taught us how to keep thinking about own work)’ (student questionnaire 16/8/05). In week 4, one student observed that the greatest strength of class was ‘getting really detailed and challenging feedback that forced me out of my comfort zone’ (student questionnaire 16/8/05).

A key turning point in this learning process occurred in week 8, during the video analysis of the collaborative work the *Four faces of God* generated by the students and professional dancers as part of the Dance Ministry Intensive. The strength of the class was described as ‘watching back the show and analysing it. I can’t believe how much I learnt about choreography after – through actually seeing floor plans and dynamics or lack of these – mostly you asking prompting questions’. Another wrote the strength of the class was ‘the amount of discussion time ... the lecturer really engages us and probes us for our deepest insights’ and another observed it was:

analysing work that we were involved in. It really helps to pick work apart to see how and why it was created. It helped me understand how clear the intention must be – with every movement not just the whole completed work. (student questionnaire 27/9/05)

Students' were given 'guided reflection' assignments that offered further opportunity for reflective analysis and critical evaluation of the collaborative dance work (see Appendix 2). This was still an area of developing skill.

As one external assessor noted with surprise, students clearly had 'a lack of understanding of dance in a Christian context prior to the DMI'. The consistent comment from all students concerning the lack of understanding of what they were meant to express in various sections of the piece *The four faces of God* also surprised the external reader.

Throughout the processes of the project it became increasingly evidenced in the data collected that '[c]ritical skills do not develop automatically as a result of practice in making dances. Choreography students need training and practice in formulating critical responses to the dances seen in class' (Lavender 1996, 57). As the students practised and refined their analytical skills, their choreographic endeavours were impacted so that they began to generate work of haptic perspicacity. This was no easy task and required more than one facilitator of learning, in the guise of both people and processes, to awaken the critical faculties of the dance makers in their dance making.

The value of many voices

Human facilitators of learning were engaged in a variety of ways to enhance students' acquisition of skills across the course of the semester. In addition to the critique and analysis of a panel of industry examiners offered three times during the semester, students received critical feedback from external teachers and professional dancers during the Dance Ministry Intensive. Performing arts lecturers gave incisive feedback on students' works in process throughout the semester and written critique was offered for each assessment task students' completed.

Much of the data collected through questionnaires as well as in formal and informal interviews (Appendix 2) applauded the decision to involve external dance practitioners and educators actively in the composition unit. The curriculum sought to expose students to a Christian dance company to give students opportunities to analyse collaborative dance works on DVD and to invite guest artists to observe and critique student work. External adjudicators participated in observing and assessing student dance works, as well as reflecting on issues of compositional skill development in a Christian context.

The decision to incorporate the Dance Ministry Intensive into the curriculum of the unit proved invaluable in exposing students to the perspectives of industry practitioners. This created opportunities for both informal and structured dialogue between the students and the more experienced artists concerning the creative act in a faith-based context.

In the short space of two weeks, students worked with the professional Christian dance company, choreographing then performing the dance work *The four faces of God*, which explored particular dimensions of the Christian faith. This process helped facilitate students' embodiment of knowledge through the action of creative practice and collaboration.

Of all the data collected for the duration of the project, this one event received the most consistent positive feedback, with every participant in the DMI recommending ('strongly' or 'very strongly') that the Intensive become a regular event for first year dance students (DMI Evaluation form 9/05). As one student explained, 'Dance composition within a Christian framework where the dancers were

understanding, encouraging, caring and helpful made choreographing dance heaps meaningful. Opened my mind to new ideas' (DMI evaluation form 9/05).

The success of the DMI lay in offering students authentic learning experiences (Newmann and Wehlage n.d.) set in a 'real world' context rather than solely in the dance studio. It actively promoted the consideration of dance as an act of worship, evangelism and faith, whilst striving to create a dance work to industry standards. As one student commented after the Intensive:

It gave me as a student a glimpse of 'life after college' so to speak and how the theory, technique and Christian faith can all be combined to make something potentially powerful and influential. . . . [It] taught me to open myself up as a vehicle for God while dancing and I had never known it could be so powerful. (student questionnaire 20/9/05)

When asked if the DMI had challenged students' approach to choreography, one student commented that it 'not so much challenged but more shown me the theory in practise [sic]. I could see some of the elements we'd been studying being used and helpful' (DMI questionnaire #2 12/9/05).

In this regard, I felt the academic work in the classroom found its completion in an authentic context. Similarly, going into schools was a highlight for all participants: 'I really appreciated the . . . encouragement, support and inspiration as well as touring around schools and ministering to high school students' (DMI evaluation form 9/05). Furthermore, as one company dancer observed, the collaborative choreographic event had:

mutual benefits for both. For the professional dancers, there was the opportunity to choreograph with new people and to learn to lead in a different environment and the students had the opportunity to have input into a major choreographic work and learn from dancers who have different ideas and techniques (questionnaire 20/9/05).

In the final performances of *The four faces of God* students were engaged in critiquing their work, even as they performed with the company dancers. They were invested in warming up – physically stretching as they quietly prayed for the work and for each other.

The first major assessment task for the students was related to this experience and required a guided reflective analysis of the DMI (Appendix 2, Figure 2.1). This assessment task was appropriate and achievable, providing the opportunity to evaluate and critically analyse the choreographic work devised during the Intensive. Students had the opportunity to watch the collaborative work *The four faces of God* as recorded during the final concert (DVD 17/9/05) in class, before completing the reflection.

In an analysis of the guided reflections (Appendix 2, Figure 2.2), one external dance practitioner observed, 'It was a positive learning experience for the students. Working alongside industry professionals gave the students insight into previously preconceived ideas about professional dancers' (analysis of papers 10/05). In addition to informal dialogue, external artists were asked to complete an analysis of formative interviews recorded mid-semester (Appendix 3, Figure 3.2) and, as one external artist observed, 'Each student articulated a growth in both concepts and skills in choreography' (external analysis questionnaire 11/05) as well in terms of their personal faith journey.

The second assessment task the dance students were required to complete was an analysis of their own choreographed work-in-progress. This was later followed

by the final assessment task: their dance composition, completed. For the viewing and adjudication of these dance pieces, four external dance artists actively engaged in the local arts industry were invited to the showings and asked to complete assessment criteria for each work. These external arts practitioners gave students a perspective from the broader world of dance, their comments lingering in students' minds long after critique had been given. The collated commentary from such a range of experienced arts educators documented a journey that highlighted students' acquisition of foundational compositional skills. One adjudicator, after comparing students' final compositions (DVD 2/12/05) wrote:

Generally the students presented dance compositions that showed an understanding of basic composition principles such as form, structure, style, stimulus, motifs, abstractions, phrasing, visual design, use of space, levels, dynamic content and original movement vocab. Some students however, very effectively used the above compositional principles in well developed ways to produce high quality work with clear intent and communication. (external analysis 12/05)

Feedback given to students by these professional arts practitioners was highly valued by the students themselves, confirming the value of many voices being heard in a course of this nature.

Time constraints

The concern with managing time for the duration of an academic semester is a common one for educators. In this particular course, it seemed evident to me that the time constraints of the semester unit would either limit the in-depth development of students' understanding of key compositional principles or only address the dimension of faith in dance in at best a superficial way. Consequently, I harboured considerable misgivings about the time allocated for the delivery of the subject. Was it even humanly possible to ensure the sheer quantity of content material was covered whilst somehow facilitating the discussion and exploration of faith in choreographing dance work?

In this, my greatest concern was the prospect of compromising academic standards in the quest to balance content delivery with deep learning about faith and choreography. I did not want, as Schaeffer observes so often happens, to 'accept in our spiritual world a mediocrity that would be immediately intolerable in what we regard as the real world, which Christians still live in, even though they try at times to pretend they are having heaven on earth' (Schaeffer 1985, 42). This concern was tempered by both personal faith and incisive reason.

As the semester progressed, the issue of time for the delivery of the curriculum and allocation of assessment tasks became of intermittent concern from the dance students' perspective until towards the end of the semester when one of the most frequent comments, recorded both formally (questionnaires, interviews) and informally (class discussions) pertained to insufficient time to choreograph and rehearse students' own compositional pieces (student questionnaire 1/11/05).

Data collected from external sources also touched on the issue of time for the delivery of such a unit. Generally, most comments noted the tight time frame for meeting stated unit objectives. However, as one professional dancer observed during the Dance Ministry Intensive, 'It was great to have the time pressure that forces you to get over it, move on and work together because we have to get the show on the road' (questionnaire 26/7/05).

In the final outcome, time management, whilst still a constant source of angst for the lecturer and bemusement for the researcher, became a skill that students were challenged to master. By the final week of the semester, as one student commented, time issues seemed to fade into the background:

This course has been good in that we were allowed time to think, and given food for thought, and had lots of good discussions. I have clarified for myself a few things regarding God's role in choreography and His role in portraying intent in dance. (student's final questionnaire 29/11/05)

These kinds of clarifying moments were evidenced in both the students' attitude to crafting movement phrases and in the process of choreographing. Students sought to respond intuitively to what was sensed spiritually and make choreographic changes based on an articulated awareness of a Creator-God who had given them, in their experience as choreographers, new and innovative ideas.

This shift in process led to a willingness to consider how choreographic tools aided the creation of work that was responsive to what such a creative God might be seeking to say through the language of dance itself. Concerns with time were set aside as each student worked quickly to create and was energised by an awareness of God-inspired ideas in the process.

Faith and spirituality

Throughout the course, the dance students, as Christians, quite willingly engaged in conversations about their faith. What began to emerge in the questionnaires, during interviews and through the course of the Dance Ministry Intensive, was a slow realisation that dance and dance making also had something to do with that faith.

Students were keen to engage in discourse about what was 'Christian' dance. As questions were asked in classes, as dance works were viewed, as compositional studies incorporated biblical texts and considered faith-driven intention, students began to think more seriously about the role of their faith in their art form.

The DMI exposed the students to professional Christian dancers who continued to challenge the discourse on faith in dance. It also demonstrated how the two could work together: as one student observed, prayer was beginning to be seen as a choreographic tool in the process of dance making (CD formative interviews 1/11/05 Appendix 3).

One student reflected on her DMI experience: 'Most enjoyable is creating dances from scripture also praying and dedicating our dances to God' (DMI questionnaire #2 12/9/05). A company dancer also commented that 'praying all the time in and out of dance pieces has inspired me' (DMI questionnaire #1 12/9/05). Yet I continued to grapple with this issue as an academic concern. Is it really possible to enhance the expression of faith through the delivery and assessment of a dance composition unit? How do you measure that? Should dance educators even be measuring that? As one dancer commented, 'The focus isn't on making yourself look good, it is on making the 'piece' look good and message/themes get across' (DMI questionnaire #1 12/9/05). Is there more to it than that?

As documented in students' questionnaires, the weekly questions in class raised deeper questions in individual students' minds about the role of faith in choreography. This fed into the DMI experience, which offered many opportunities for the investigation, reflection and debate on dance as a spiritual act of worship, as recorded in documentation of the event.

By the time individual dance students were interviewed for the formative interviews (CD formative interviews 1/11/05, Appendix 3), each student acknowledged a shift in their understanding of both their spirituality and how they saw dance and the making of dance works as an expression of their faith in God. As one external arts practitioner observed after listening to these recorded formative interviews:

Students...are emersed in a variety of faith developmental units so clarifying validity issues re: influence and where influence comes from is a challenge. Having said this, and because the course content approached specific issues 'head-on' such as the 'reality or otherwise of Christian vs. secular dance', I think it is clear that students, because of this unit, directly focussed their attention and theological faculties in a way that developed their worldview and so enhanced, challenged, evolved their faith. (analysis of formative interviews)

Personally, I was excited that the students were being challenged in their learning and began to note there was a spiritual dimension to the work going on which defied the logic of the natural world in which we inhabit. I was reminded deep in my spirit to listen to God's voice: to hear the voice, not just respond to a vague presence (personal journal, 1 April 2005). In doing so, I noticed students' attitudes to creating work had shifted to become more holistic and evaluative language was becoming more inclusive. There was less of a distinction made between creating 'Christian' work and 'non-Christian' work, but rather a greater desire to create work of excellence that communicated intention clearly to an audience.

In seeking to dance in faith, students were seeking to engage in a relationship with God through the action of faith and hope. This was reflected in the articulated choreographic intention to create work about God, using all the skills the students had as choreographers-in-training to ensure the intention was clear and the crafted movement phrases articulate. As a result, the creative process expanded as student ideas were fleshed out in the studio and on the stage before an audience. Authentic learning experiences facilitated a cognisance and spiritual acuity demonstrated in the choreographic choices made by the students.

These shifts in students' understanding of their faith were evidenced to varying degrees in the final dance compositions. The final assessment task required students to create a work that explored an aspect of their faith. Students felt the intention for each piece was thus thoroughly explored and analysed, their reflective practice demonstrating a clear understanding that the work was conceived to illuminate an aspect of their spiritual journey. They themselves felt that they had grown spiritually through the act of creating dance work that dealt with theological concepts that most impacted them through their course of study.

The students chose to explore concepts that held universal appeal, yet pursued the exploration of meaning from a Christian framework utilising the craft of choreography as the language for making meaning of their spirituality. One student, for example, created a work entitled *In the image* and stated, 'Its intention is to appreciate the human body as an intricate, perfectly functioning work of art, designed by God and made in His image' (student synopsis 11/05).

Another student wrote that her dance composition was:

entitled *The thing is to keep balanced* and stems from the stress I feel in an attempt to find a balance between my human perfectionist tendencies of 'wanting to do it all for God' and then letting him do it because he is gracious. This dance is not choreographed to answer why things in our life get out of balance or how to fix it,

but instead its intention is to explore the inner reactions we have to being off and on balance. (student synopsis 11/05)

External adjudicators who observed and assessed these student works also noted the exploration of faith in the original dance compositions. As one observer wrote:

All students showed a clear demonstration of faith and spirituality – some in quite abstract ways while others were again, a little predictable. . . . The students worked with obvious commitment and involvement in what is a demanding task and produced some interesting choreography which was driven by their spirituality. (external analysis questionnaires).

The synopsis of the student work entitled *And not by sight* offers an example of the intention driving the choreographic process. The student wrote:

This piece centres on my investigation of Faith as it is described in 2 Corinthians 5:7 which reads ‘We live by faith and not by sight’. Performed to a mixture of Josh Groban’s *Oceano* and Linkin Park’s *Cure for the itch* this work focuses on struggling to live a life without God and how having a relationship with him offers the best form of guidance for a life lived by faith. (student synopsis 11/05)

A comparative task for the external professional dance practitioners had each one view the students’ work in progress, the final exam piece and then the completed piece in a public showcase forum. As one then commented, ‘It is evident that personally each student explored the dimension of faith and spirituality throughout the choreographic process; however some students were more successful than others in communicating the ‘compositional theme or idea’ to the audience’ (external analysis questionnaire).

The data collected from external dance practitioners towards the end of the unit thus focussed predominantly on the students’ demonstrated acquisition of skills and knowledge. The dimension of faith was also acknowledged as evidenced in a number of ways. The general feedback on the outcomes of the unit’s delivery, assessment and curriculum was that deep and authentic learning had resulted through the learning processes.

Conclusion

Dance composition 1 as a unit of study became a starting place for the students’ investigation into the expression of faith in the field of dance. As one of the dance students, in responding to the question, ‘In what ways has this course changed your understanding of your faith and your art?’ wrote:

My faith is who I am and that affects what I do. My art is what I do and implicitly shows who I am. Both are a big part of me and my life. This course has brought the two together. No longer do I see one and then the other but one as the other. My faith is a part of and a foundation for my art. I can now see that I can not escape faith in my art. Also that both will develop and grow effecting [sic] each other. (student questionnaire 29/11/05)

The student who wrote these words has now completed her degree and gone on to further dance study at a secular tertiary institute in Adelaide. In 2010, she moved into the role of the national coordinator of an Australian Christian dance networking

association. She continues to choreograph in many different spheres of life and work and her understanding of spirituality has continued to grow through the action of artistic practice. As she commented recently via email:

My time studying faith and the arts has been the training I needed for a holistic approach to my career as Independent Artist and teacher. It has given depth to a career as not just something compartmentalised into my 'work being', 'my play being', 'my spiritual being' and 'my artistic being' but has given me skills to continue to develop...all these things. My training particularly offered me the eyes...to see that the success of my practice is not dependent on me but on God and that he has given me tools through my training to use for his work not just my own. (pers. comm. 8/3/11)

The other students who have also since graduated have continued to grapple with the issues of faith and artistry as part of their daily life. A few who continued to work part time in private dance studios as teachers during their degree have continued to do so since graduating. One graduate moved to Canada and took a position as a teacher for a dance school abroad.

Three other students went on to complete education degrees. One now is employed as a primary school teacher whilst another has sourced employment in a public high school as a dance teacher.

The third dance educator is now working part time in primary education in order to find space and time to work as an independent artist. Upon reflection of her experiences, she recently observed:

The integration of faith and arts was crucial to my choices regarding my actions following the end of my arts degree. Because I was not only interested in performing, but also communicating faith through my art, it helped to form my desire to create, and be involved in work that speaks of faith, and seeks to impact a community in a way that is relevant to them. The program there was one that was able to reach beyond what I thought I wanted to achieve as a 17-year-old, and allow me to explore and investigate fully how I was able to integrate my faith. The mentoring that I received was invaluable, and has in effect, completely altered the course of my life since graduating. (pers. comm. 13/3/11)

Each artist now seeks to produce work of excellence. Each is engaged in choreographing in many different environments. Each has gone on to consider how their faith and art inform their creative practice, regardless of the context for dance composition.

Questions still linger for the dance educator who continues to facilitate learning for dance students in these contexts. How do you assess spiritual growth? How does one teach sensitivity to the spirit world, let alone assess the spiritual dimension of students' dance compositions? Can a class on choreography examine the role of God in the choreographic process? What does it mean exactly to create work that 'glorifies God'? And how do you generate assessment criteria to measure the success, or lack thereof, of such endeavours?

However, for the students who are now functioning as professionals engaged in making dance in varied contexts, their embodied knowledge has now found its practice in the making of dance today in their own unique professional contexts. There has been an acknowledgement that the students' training in dance composition facilitated the exploration of faith through and during the choreographic processes of their study without compromising the quality of their technical training.

Whilst it may be challenging to fully document the extent of learning for these arts practitioners, it is clear in the evidence of their ongoing practice as dance

makers. And '[i]f we accept that practice and exegesis are interdependent and indissoluble, resulting in an holistic thesis, what should the exegesis encompass and is text the only way to represent the exegetical component?' (Stock 2010, 8).

In this particular case, the text has been wrapped in flesh and finds its narrative in the living work of the dance makers now creating in the Australian dance industry.

Notes on the contributor

Lucinda Coleman is an arts practitioner and dance educator with extensive experience as a teacher in a variety of educational, theatrical and community contexts in Australia. Most recently, she was employed as senior dance lecturer and curriculum development officer for a Christian tertiary institute in Adelaide, South Australia. Currently, Lucinda is a choreographer with the independent artists' collective, *Remnant Dance*, based in Perth, Western Australia.

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Appendix 1

5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1
Student Response to Class
<p>In the space provided below, please record your response to the questions asked in relation to this week's class. Your answers will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Please place your completed forms in the response box provided. Thank you!</p> <p>1. What do you think was the greatest strength of this class?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>2. What do you think was the greatest weakness of this class?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. Proverbs 27:17</i></p>

Figure 1.1. Student response to class' questionnaire.

5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1
Questionnaire: Specific activity
<p>Please take a few minutes to answer the question below. Then place your responses in the response box provided. As this questionnaire is intended for research purposes only, there is no need to sign your name and all responses will be treated with the strictest confidence.</p> <p>Date: _____</p> <p>Describe activity:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Question: Do you think this was a useful activity? Why? Why not?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Thank you!</i></p>

Figure 1.2. Specific activity' questionnaire.

5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1
Questionnaire: Choreographic Intention
<p>Please take a few minutes to fill in the questionnaire. Then place your responses in the response box provided. As this questionnaire is intended for research purposes only, there is no need to sign your name and all responses will be treated with the strictest confidence.</p>
<p>1. Does the intention of a dance work affect movement vocabulary? How?</p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>2. Do you think Christian belief affects movement vocabulary? How?</p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>3. Do you think a faith-driven dance composition focuses on Christian belief to the detriment of compositional principles? Why? Why not?</p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>4. Was this a useful exercise? Why or why not?</p> <hr/> <hr/>
<i>Thank you!</i>

Figure 1.3. Choreographic intention questionnaire.

5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1	5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1
End Unit Questionnaire	Final Questionnaire
<p>Please take a few minutes to answer the questions below. Then place your responses in the response box provided. As this questionnaire is intended for research purposes only, there is no need to sign your name and all responses will be treated with the strictest confidence.</p>	<p>Please take a few minutes to answer the question below. Then place your responses in the response box provided. As this questionnaire is intended for research purposes only, there is no need to sign your name and all responses will be treated with the strictest confidence.</p>
<p>Date:</p> <hr/>	<p>Date:</p> <hr/>
<p>1. In what ways has your approach to creating Christian dance works been altered as a result of this module?</p> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>1. In what ways has this course changed your understanding of your faith and your art?</p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>2. List the activities of which this module was comprised. Rank in order from most useful to least useful.</p> <hr/> <hr/>	<i>Thank you!</i>
<i>Thank you!</i>	

Figure 1.4. End of unit questionnaires.

Appendix 2

5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1
Assessment 1: Guided Reflection

Following the Dance Ministry Intensive, you will be required to complete a guided reflection on the experience of working with a Christian dance company. In no more than 1500 words, please answer the following questions:

- What were the most significant learning experiences for you during the Dance Ministry Intensive?
- Analyse the choreographic process of the dance work, 'The Four Faces of God'. Describe and evaluate the completed work.
- How has the DMI enhanced and/ or challenged your understanding of choreographing dance work within a Christian framework?

Date: *Weighting:* 20%- 10% for attendance, participation, collaboration
10% for guided reflection and analysis

Refers to Unit Objectives: 1,5

Criteria for Assessment:

CRITERION	STANDARD A:		STANDARD B:		STANDARD C:		STANDARD D:	
	HD	DN	CR		P1	P2	F1	F2
Attendance and Participation	You have demonstrated dedication & commitment in exemplary attendance in all workshops, classes & performances, as well as having maintained a high level of energy, focus & responsibility in participating in all activities.		You have demonstrated commendable commitment in attendance at workshops, classes and performances whilst demonstrating a credible level of energy, focus & responsibility in participating in activities.		You have attended an adequate number of workshops, classes and performances, yet struggled to maintain energy & focus whilst participating in activities.		You have demonstrated an inadequate level of commitment and dedication in attending and participating in many workshops, classes and performances.	
Contribution and Collaboration	You have willingly made insightful, pertinent contributions to class discussions, whilst showing deep respect for the work of fellow artists. You have consistently, willingly sought to engage artistically with peers.		You have made many relevant contributions to class discussions whilst demonstrating commendable respect for the work of fellow artists. You have sought to engage artistically with peers.		You have made some relevant contributions to class discussions on occasion. You have shown adequate respect for the work of fellow artists and have engaged artistically with peers.		You have demonstrated an unwillingness to contribute in many activities and discussions. You have demonstrated an inadequate level of respect for the work of fellow artists.	
Reflection	Your reflection has demonstrated insight and perceptive understanding of the choreographic process. You have thoughtfully considered your experiences within the context of your Christian faith.		Your reflection has demonstrated insight and understanding of the choreographic process. You have discussed your experiences within the context of your Christian faith.		You have shown adequate reflection on the choreographic process, discussing how it is affected by the Christian faith.		You have demonstrated an inadequate level of understanding on your choreographic experience, reflecting very little on composition in the Christian context.	
Analysis	Your detailed analysis of the experience of choreographing within the Christian framework is insightful, relevant and perceptive.		You have shown perceptive analysis of the experience of choreographing within the Christian framework.		You have adequately analysed your experience as a Christian arts practitioner.		Your analysis is lacking in substance and/or is mostly irrelevant.	

Figure 2. Guided reflection: assignment completed by students following the Dance Ministry Intensive.

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5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1																																			
Analysis of Guided Reflection																																			
<p>Please read the first year dance student papers (attached). Each of these reflective papers were written shortly after the Dance Ministry Intensive (DMI) held in September, 2005. The dance students were asked to respond to the following questions:</p> <p><i>'Following the Dance Ministry Intensive, you will be required to complete a guided reflection on the experience of working with the Christian dance company. In no more than 1500 words, please answer the following questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What were the most significant learning experiences for you during the Dance Ministry Intensive?</i> • <i>Analyse the choreographic process of the dance work, 'The Four Faces of God'. Describe and evaluate the completed work.</i> • <i>How has the DMI enhanced and/ or challenged your understanding of choreographing dance work within a Christian framework?'</i> <p>After reading these three papers, please record your observations and comments in response to the questions below. Your answers.. will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Thank you!</p> <p>1. In the boxes below, please insert a tick (✓) where you believe the student's standard is for the criterion 'Reflection' and 'Analysis'.</p> <p>a) Student #1: <i>Criteria for Assessment:</i></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th rowspan="2" style="text-align: left; padding: 5px;">CRITERION</th> <th colspan="2" style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">STANDARD A:</th> <th style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">STANDARD B:</th> <th colspan="2" style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">STANDARD C:</th> <th colspan="2" style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">STANDARD D:</th> </tr> <tr> <th style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">HD</th> <th style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">DN</th> <th style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">CR</th> <th style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">P1</th> <th style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">P2</th> <th style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">F1</th> <th style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">F2</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">Reflection</td> <td colspan="2" style="padding: 5px;">Your reflection has demonstrated insight and perceptive understanding of the choreographic process. 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You have discussed your experiences within the context of your Christian faith.</td> <td colspan="2" style="padding: 5px;">You have shown adequate reflection on the choreographic process, discussing how it is affected by the Christian faith.</td> <td colspan="2" style="padding: 5px;">You have demonstrated an inadequate level of understanding on your choreographic experience, reflecting very little on composition in the Christian context.</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">Analysis</td> <td colspan="2" style="padding: 5px;">Your detailed analysis of the experience of choreographing within the Christian framework is insightful, relevant and perceptive.</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">You have shown perceptive analysis of the experience of choreographing within the Christian framework.</td> <td colspan="2" style="padding: 5px;">You have adequately analysed your experience as a Christian arts practitioner.</td> <td colspan="2" style="padding: 5px;">Your analysis is lacking in substance and/or is mostly irrelevant.</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>2. What has most surprised you about these students' comments? _____</p> <p>3. Would you recommend the DMI to be an integral part of the Dance Composition unit? Why/ Why not? _____</p> <p>4. What changes would you suggest if the DMI were to be offered again? _____</p> <p>5. Any further comments or observations? _____</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Thank you!</i></p>					CRITERION	STANDARD A:		STANDARD B:	STANDARD C:		STANDARD D:		HD	DN	CR	P1	P2	F1	F2	Reflection	Your reflection has demonstrated insight and perceptive understanding of the choreographic process. You have thoughtfully considered your experiences within the context of your Christian faith.		Your reflection has demonstrated insight and understanding of the choreographic process. You have discussed your experiences within the context of your Christian faith.	You have shown adequate reflection on the choreographic process, discussing how it is affected by the Christian faith.		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Figure 2.1. Analysis of guided reflection: completed by external assessors after reading students' guided reflections (following the Dance Ministry Intensive).

5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1	5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1	5209 DANCE COMPOSITION 1
<p style="text-align: center;">Dance Ministry Intensive: Week 1</p> <p>In the space provided below, please record your response to the questions asked in relation to the Dance Ministry Intensive. Your answers will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Please place your completed forms in the response box provided. Thank you!</p> <p>1. What have you (a) most enjoyed and (b) found most challenging about the DMI in week one?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>2. How would you describe the choreographic process for the dance work; ‘The Four Faces of God’?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>3. Has this process challenged your approach to choreography? How?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Thank you!</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Dance Ministry Intensive: Week 1</p> <p>In the space provided below, please record your response to the questions asked in relation to the Dance Ministry Intensive. Your answers will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Please place your completed forms in the response box provided. Thank you!</p> <p>1. What has most surprised you and inspired you about the DMI in week one?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>2. How has the experience of choreographing within a Christian framework affected your ideas about dance composition?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>3. Do you think there is a difference between the choreographic approaches in a Christian context, as compared with a secular environment? Why/ why not?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Thank you!</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Dance Ministry Intensive: Questionnaire</p> <p>Please take a few minutes to fill in the questionnaire. We will then discuss responses in an open forum at the end of the class session.</p> <p>1. What were the most significant experiences for you during the Dance Ministry Intensive?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>2. What were the most challenging/ difficult aspects of the Dance Ministry Intensive?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>3. How has the DMI experience affected your ideas about choreographing dance work within a Christian framework?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Thank you!</i></p>
<p><i>Students completed this questionnaire once during first week of DMI.</i></p>	<p><i>Students and professional artists completed this questionnaire once at the start of week 2 of DMI.</i></p>	<p><i>Students completed this questionnaire once at the end of the DMI.</i></p>

Figure 2.3. Dance Ministry Intensive questionnaires #1 & #2 and End DMI questionnaire.

Appendix 3

Each student was informally interviewed, one at time, and invited to comment on the following areas:

1. **What has been your experience of the course to date?**
2. **What have been the (a) strengths and (b) weaknesses of the course so far?**
3. **How has your study both challenged and informed your understanding of dance-making and its relationship to your faith and spirituality?**
4. **Any other areas of concern, critique? Additional comments?**

Figure 3.1. Formative interview questions (recorded on CD).

External assessors were instructed to listen to the CD recording of the first year dance students discussing their experience of participating in the module 5209 Dance Composition 1.

After reviewing the dance students' comments, assessors recorded responses to the questions below in written form.

1. **How effectively has the delivery of the module supported students to develop foundational compositional skills as well as enhance their expression of faith?**
2. **How effectively has the curriculum facilitated an authentic learning experience for the dance students?**
3. **From the students' perspectives, have the assessment tasks been appropriate and achievable? Do you agree?**
4. **Any further comments or observations?**

Figure 3.2. Analysis of formative interviews.