

# Teacher's conceptions of quality in dance education expressed through grade conferences

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*Abstract:* The aim of the study is to illuminate a teacher's conceptions of quality expressed through verbal and non-verbal actions in relation to summative assessments of dance knowledge. The following research questions are considered in the study: What conceptions of quality emerge during grade conferences? In what ways do teacher's conceptions of quality reflect knowledge hierarchies? How do the teacher's and student's conceptions of quality relate to each other? To grasp the phenomenon, material was gathered during observations in a Swedish upper secondary school and from the teacher's written reflections. Individual grading conversations were observed between the teacher and ten students attending a course called *Dance technique 1*. In the analytical process, the phenomenon was seen, broadened out, varied, and then condensed into two themes: *conceptions of quality expressed through the teacher's focus on abilities* and *conceptions of quality expressed through views on the progression of dance knowledge*.

*Keywords:* conceptions of quality, assessment, grade conference, life-world phenomenology, dance education.

## Introduction

This paper will present a study of a teacher's conceptions of quality in dance knowledge assessments in a Swedish upper secondary school. The study is based on life-world phenomenology and aims to illuminate teacher's conceptions of quality expressed through verbal and non-verbal ac-

tions<sup>1</sup> related to summative assessments of dance knowledge. The teacher's conceptions of quality were made visible through grade conferences held at the upper secondary school. The following research questions are intended to cover the aim of the study: What conceptions of quality emerge during grade conferences? In what ways do teacher's conceptions of quality reflect knowledge hierarchies? How do the teacher's and student's conceptions of quality relate to each other?

Swedish upper secondary schools are obligated to work towards equal assessment which places explicit demands on documentation and guidelines regarding assessment practice (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a). Equal assessment refers to assessments that use the same basis for grading that corresponds with the subject, but it does not have to be used in the same way (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011b). Torrance (2007) argued that there is a risk that assessment for learning is now moving towards assessment as learning, where explicit criteria and assessment practice dominate and steer education because of its instrumental approach. The importance of student-teacher conferences concerns student achievements (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011b). The teacher is obligated to 'regularly provide each student with information about their progress and the need for development in their studies' and to 'inform students of the basis on which grades are awarded' (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013, p.13). There are no regulations on how teachers should communicate the grades nor on the basis on which grading is performed. To fulfil that requirement, it is common but not mandatory for teachers to offer students grade conferences focusing on the final assessment of a course or subject (Rinne, 2014). These grade conferences are constructed as a conversation between teacher and student around the student's achievement on a specific course and can be seen as meaningful communication in a specific contextualised life-world.

Teachers have developed conceptions of quality that are based on their earlier experiences and these become visible in their teaching and assessments. The word 'quality' can incorporate both descriptive and normative aspects (Nielsen, 2002). Both aspects are assessed in dance. In dance technique, a descriptive aspect could be the angle between the dancer's leg and the floor, while a normative aspect could be the sharp accent of the leg when the leg is lifted off the floor. In this paper, the concept of quality is used nor-

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<sup>1</sup> Non-verbal actions involve gestures, facial expressions, movement demonstration, sounds made with the body such as snaps.

matively and is seen as based on the subject's perception and earlier experiences. Therefore, quality is always seen in relation to the context (Zandén, 2010) where quality acquires meaning and is not measured instrumentally. These conceptions of quality constitute an important aspect in assessment practice because assessment of a specific ability can affect how a teacher interprets concepts and appraises different progression levels. How do teachers interpret qualities such as *weight* and *flow*? What does it mean to perform movement vocabulary that relate to weight and flow with *some certainty*? Conceptions of quality are related to human beings, traditions, and contexts. Zandén (2010, p.26, author's translation) described *conceptions of quality* as follows: 'Conceptions of quality come into existence both through bodily and linguistic actions, through what we pay attention to and how we perform it'. Through actions, human beings embody their conceptions of quality. Through decisions on what should receive attention and what not, conceptions of quality are revealed as are the ways in which they take place in a particular context. The qualities we choose to pay attention to and value in an assessment depend on the specific context in which they arise. The teacher's choice of context can be made consciously or unconsciously, and is, in either case, an important factor determining which qualities are attended to. This may signal to the student the qualities and abilities being assessed, and thus may affect the prerequisites, content and performance of the assessment practice including both formative and summative assessment.

Sweden's upper secondary school curriculum is called Gyll and was implemented in 2011. The syllabi include the subject aims, goals, core content and knowledge requirements (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012). The grading scale is A–F, where F is a fail grade. The core content shows what the teaching should cover and is based on the course goals, while the knowledge requirements relate to quality aspects of the achievement attained. The Swedish school system has a criteria-based grading system, which means that students' target achievements should be assessed according to the levels described in the knowledge requirements. Assessment may take place at a specific time, continuously throughout the course or may take the form of a summary of achievements at the end of the course.

The paper begins with a description of the assessment field, followed by the method for embracing the phenomenon of teacher's conceptions of quality in dance education. The results are presented through two themes and their inherent aspects are considered. This then leads into a section discussing the results in relation to life-world phenomenology and earlier research.

## Educational Assessment

Torrance (2007) raised the question of whether assessment practices have become too narrow and criteria-based and, therefore, too focused on the assessment practice instead of the learning process where criteria-compliance becomes more important. The goal in this kind of assessment is to understand and tick off the criteria through the use of tick-box forms, rather than focusing on understanding the achievement as a whole. This so-called analytic grading system has a tendency, among other things, to be limiting because the criteria affect each other and are hard to isolate (Sadler, 1989). A holistic way of grading involves assessing the domain as a whole (Sadler, 2009), and the present Gy11 curriculum for Swedish upper secondary schools embraces this (Lundahl, 2011). In holistic grading, responses become complex since they demand mastery of specific aspects as well as an overall understanding of the studied area as a whole. The assessor has to base their assessment on the overall perception of the knowledge being assessed and decide on an appropriate grade based on their knowledge base (Sadler, 2009). Having too narrow a perspective on the criteria and assessment can result in a fragmented view of knowledge, which prevents a wider understanding of the specific knowledge (Sadler, 2007). A fragmented way of working with assessment can have the consequence of less independent students.

### *Assessment as an intersubjective setting*

The teacher's ability to tune into the students' knowledge is prerequisite to an appreciation of knowledge, feedback, and assessment. This requires openness, empathy, and awareness (Ferm, Thorgersen, 2011). According to life-world phenomenology, there is no distinction between body–mind–soul; they constitute an entirety of the body-subject (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002). The body-subject inhabits the world and gives access to the world through the human experience of it: 'The body is our general medium for having a world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002, p. 169). Human beings cannot, therefore, be separated from the world. The lived body—that is, the subject—is always situated in and connected with the life-world. The body and the world are intertwined and inseparable from each other. Bengtsson (2001) emphasised that the life-world 'refers to the world that currently exists in our perceptions and hence is inextricably linked with a perceiving subject' (Bengtsson, 2001, p.70, author's translation). Through the subject's intentionality and actions, in different contexts (such as dance) subjects are intertwined with other human beings, things, and phenomena in contexts.

Intersubjectivity in dance education can be seen as communication through verbal and non-verbal expression, where dance can be seen as embodied experiences and expression (Engel, 2004). The importance of body and bodily knowledge is seen as central in dance knowledge (Fraleigh, 1987; Engel, 2004; Lindqvist, 2010; Parviainen, 2003). Based on a way of thinking of the world as communicating intersubjectively, assessment can be seen as a social phenomenon where understanding between the teacher and student is central (Gipps, 1999).

Teachers experience the student expressing dance knowledge in an intersubjective setting, such as in a meeting on the student's achievement. As a living subject, the teacher perceives the student's dance performance and is required to be open to how the student expresses the various combinations of knowledge as formulated in Gyll. This, in turn, requires imagination and fantasy as well as continuous collegiate discussions about how dance knowledge can be expressed in a variety of ways, grasped, conceptualised and critically reflected on the basis of the syllabi. Some kind of description or conceptualisation is needed to ascertain how the student's knowledge relates to the learning outcomes, which requires having an appreciation of knowledge, feedback, and further assessment (Eisner, 1998).

Assessment is commonly divided into formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment focuses on assisting the student to move forward in their learning process (Gardner, 2011) and includes the explicit goals of the teaching, an awareness of where the student is in relation to the course goals and how the student can reach a higher level of achievement on the course (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Summative assessment was initially described as summarised appraisals of a student's achievement (Sadler, 1989; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). According to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011b) an assessment is summative when the result of the assessment is described in the form of a progress rapport such as grades. The teacher communicates a summative assessment at a grade conference and can also present the basis for grading. Also, the grade conference may include formative assessment if the summative result is being used as a basis for further learning. The summary could be based on test results, judgments, or grades (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Sadler (1989) highlighted that this kind of action is a passive assessment process, as it is not used to enhance student learning. Even though in most cases summative assessment does not affect the learning process, it could have an impact on decisions regarding education and still affect students.

*Communicating feedback within assessment practice*

In a summative assessment, the student's achievement can be communicated by the teacher on the basis of the student's expressing holistic knowledge during a course or at a specific moment (Lundahl, 2011). When working towards increasing the student's self-confidence and towards target achievement, note should be made of the student's strengths and the competencies that can be further developed (Hofvendahl, 2010). For feedback and assessment to be meaningful, it is important for there to be understanding between the student and teacher (Andersson, 2014; Ferm Thorgersen, 2011; Gibbons, 2004; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011b). Assessing students' learning could be seen as multilingual and therefore requiring more than a simple letter grade, and should include a narrative evaluation of the students' learning (Eisner, 2007). Based on research of assessments, it can be said that feedback is an important part of learning (Black et al, 2009; Gardner, 2011; Hattie, 2009; Klapp Lekholm, 2008; Lundahl, 2011; Sadler, 1989). In dance, feedback serves the purpose of motivating, reinforcing, and correcting (Gibbons, 2004). For feedback to be effective the focus should be on learning and problem-solving, not on the student as a person, though this is not made explicit in the knowledge requirements. Feedback focusing on the personality can have a negative effect (Zandén, 2010). Gibbons (2004) argued that positive feedback could give the student motivation while highlighting improvement.

When it comes to grading coursework, a common way of giving feedback is by providing a completed grade with written comments (Holmgren, 2010). According to Butler (1988), comments combined with grades do not have the intended effect on student performance, and in fact produce the poorest results. Students tend to focus more on the grade than the comments, even though the grade provides the least information about further learning (Butler, 1988). Lundahl (2011) pointed out that grades are unclear because they do not contain any information or guidance about preceding work, and argued that, based on the research, it is not easy to determine what the pedagogic function of grades could be.

In Swedish grade conferences, there is a tendency towards an increase in documentation. One study shows that music teachers in primary school motivate their increased documentation as a tool in grade conferences (Zandén & Ferm Thorgersen, 2015). Hofvendahl (2012) argues that it is important to reflect on how these documents affect the structure of the grading conference and the actions performed within it. There is a risk that these

documents prevent the conference from being open and active. Feedback can be seen as including both the informational content and the effect of the feedback (Sadler, 1989). Rubrics can be used instead as a method of working with formative assessment in dance and provide a means to capture complex performances (Warburton, 2010). The teacher, the student being assessed, and other students can communicate informative content and influence the feedback. If the students do not receive training in self-assessment, there is a risk that the students then over-rely on the teacher (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011b). Self-assessment can result in enhanced learning through the students reflecting on the quality of their own work, assessing whether these achievements fit the knowledge requirements, and then deciding about further learning processes (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a). Grade conferences can be seen as intersubjective settings for feedback. According to existing research, grade conferences have tended to focus more on personal qualities than on knowledge-related qualities (Rinne, 2013). Several researchers and the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011a) emphasise student involvement in assessment practice (Dochy et al, 1999; Lan, 2005; Lundahl, 2011; Rinne, 2013; Sadler, 1989). One goal of Swedish schools is to encourage student responsibility for their own learning (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011b). Rinne (2013) described how a teacher's action in an observed grade conference could be interpreted as a way of obscuring negative feedback; the teacher based her assessments on knowledge requirements that both the teacher and student perceived as abstract and that seemed to make the assessment even more confusing. The content in Rinne's observed conferences did not initially focus on reasoning about subject-specific knowledge.

## **Methodology for Grasping Teachers' Conceptions of Quality**

A starting point for life-world phenomenological studies is to turn to the things themselves and to be open and adaptable as to how the thing is made visible to a subject. In order to grasp the phenomenon in this study of teacher's conceptions of quality in dance knowledge assessment, material was gathered during observations of grade conferences and from written teacher reflections. The material generated constituted the basis for the analysis and created opportunities to perceive different aspects of the teacher's lived experiences of the phenomenon.

Ten individual grade conferences were observed between the teacher and ten first-year students taking the dance component of the *Dance technique*

*I* course that forms part of the upper secondary's arts programme observations. The teacher offered each student two grade conferences in one semester and these were observed. At the first grade conference, the students were given information about the grade they had achieved on the course so far. At the last grade conference, the students received information about their final grade on the course. Before the first grade conference, the student and teacher filled out a rubric on the student's achievement level. The teacher constructed the rubric and it contained ten core content items based on the formulations in the syllabus. The core content items required by the syllabus were written in the left-hand column on separate rows. The column containing the core content items was followed by columns containing the knowledge requirements for each grade and core content item. The grade conference took place in the teacher's office in the presence of the teacher, the student, and the author. The teacher and the student sat facing each other on a couch, and I sat on a separate chair by a little side table. I needed to be aware that my presence would affect the setting. Observing the grading conference enabled me to understand the verbal and visual material and later analysis shed light on the teacher's conceptions of quality. During the observation, I handwrote structured field notes. They were structured such that one column was dedicated to the teacher's communication and a separate column was reserved for the student's communication. I noted down all the verbal communication and non-verbal actions I was able to capture. The field notes were then rewritten into a text document and I added questions and comments about the observations. Afterwards, the field notes, which included my comments and questions, were emailed to the teacher who wrote reflections based on the written content and sent them back. The teacher's written reflections made it possible to further comprehend the teacher's experiences, thoughts and reflections. This study follows the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines and the participants were informed that participation was optional (Swedish Research Council, 2002).

The method used for analysis is based on Spiegelberg's (1960) phenomenological method, which provides guidelines for phenomenological analysis. The method is interpretive and involves searching for meaning. This method of analysis harmonises well with basic concepts in phenomenology, namely openness and adaptability to the phenomenon. A base in phenomenology is to come into contact with the phenomenon's general essence (Patočka, 2013). The phenomenon – teacher's conceptions of quality – is identified and broadened out, varied, and then condensed in order to find the essence of the phenomenon. To be able to be adaptable to the phenomenon, it is im-



portant not to force the phenomenon into a fixed structure. Hence, I chose to follow the analytical method in a non-chronological order.

First, the phenomenon was experienced through a phenomenological attitude. This was achieved by letting various aspects of the phenomenon show themselves to me through the field notes and by embracing the material in a non-critical way. My intention was to be aware of my own lived experiences and to be able to be as adaptable and open to the phenomenon as possible. The material was reviewed several times and different aspects appear in the text, and eventually essences of the phenomenon were highlighted.

Then, through condensation and interpretation the essences of the phenomenon were related and compared to each other, and themes of the essences started to appear. These essences were broadened out, seen through variations and differences and similarities, and then the essences were condensed by exploring which essences might or might not be connected to one other. In this process, the themes of the phenomenon became clearer and relations between the essences were investigated before the first image of the phenomenon crystallised. The themes and their aspects were not fixed from the beginning of the analysis but emerged over time through the analysis.

Additionally, the process included identifying different modes that appeared through further investigation of the relationships between the themes and their aspects. Images of the relation between themes and aspects became clearer and were clarified in the way described in the results of the study. The phenomenon was then viewed from different perspectives and appeared as a complex form in the researcher's consciousness. The researcher has to be conscious of earlier experiences of the phenomenon by being aware of them during the analysis process. That is also why it is so important to read the material several times and zoom out and in of the material. That is why you can see the material from different views without letting your earlier experiences take over the analysis. The purpose of the analysis was to explore various dimensions of the phenomenon related to the original material. The phenomena were interpreted so as to perceive the meaning, seen in the results below.

## **The Phenomenon of Teacher's Conceptions of Quality**

During the analysis, two themes relating to the phenomenon emerged: conceptions of quality expressed through the teacher's focus on abilities and conceptions of quality expressed through views of dance knowledge progres-

sion. Various aspects of the teacher's conceptions of quality regarding dance knowledge are indicated in the examples provided of the statements and non-verbal actions observed between teacher and student during the grade conference. All the statements were originally in Swedish and have been translated into English for the purposes of this paper.

*Conceptions of quality expressed through the teacher's focus on abilities*

Two intertwined aspects emerged in the theme *Conceptions of quality expressed through the teacher's focus on abilities*: the dance abilities expressed and the general abilities expressed. During the conferences, the teacher expressed conceptions of quality through verbal and non-verbal communication. The teacher alternated from her position on the couch to the floor and communicated her thoughts through the different modalities.

*Dance abilities expressed*

The teacher's conceptions of quality regarding the students' performed dance abilities were expressed through *Dance abilities expressed*. The dance abilities expressed in the student's achievement concerned embodied qualities<sup>2</sup> and idioms<sup>3</sup> in movement, including the student's control over movement in performance and connecting between movements<sup>4</sup>. Awareness in the non-verbal expression incorporated spatial ability. Conceptions of quality were also seen in placement<sup>5</sup> and technique<sup>6</sup> in the more static positions as well as in movement. These selected dance abilities emphasised the teacher's conceptions of quality in that they were an indication of what the teacher valued as meaningful dance knowledge on that specific course (Zandén, 2010).

At the beginning of the conference, the teacher initiated the dialogue by asking, 'How did you manage to fill in the rubric?' The students replied

<sup>2</sup> Quality refers to the dynamic of the movement: how the movement is performed and the movement qualities used. Common qualities can vary between genres.

<sup>3</sup> Idioms can be described as bodily positions, shapes and movement in space. Common specific idioms can vary between genres.

<sup>4</sup> Connection between movements refers to the way in which movements connect and intertwine with each other in contrast to movements that are distinctly separate from each other.

<sup>5</sup> Placement refers to bodily placement in relation to space; both anatomically in the way the body is placed in a space as well as the bodily subject in relation to space, other human beings and things within that space.

<sup>6</sup> Technique can be described as the way in which movements should be articulated in certain contexts.

that it had been hard to understand what was meant by the phrases in the rubric, saying things like, '[I] didn't understand everything ... [It was] hard to understand'. The rubric was based on the phrases given in the syllabus and included verbatim phrases. This is an example from the rubric in which letters are used to represent the grading level of knowledge requirements:

**Figure 1:** Schematic illustration of a rubric based on the *Dance Technique 1* course

Core content	A	C	E
Use of codes, conventions & instructions in skills training	Use with certainty	Use with some certainty	Use with some certainty

In the syllabus, the core content seen above is given as 'Codes and conventions in technique training' (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a). In the knowledge requirements, this is given in more detail, but the phrases used in the rubric are taken directly from the syllabus. The students were not familiar with the rubric, and it was clear that the teacher would prefer to use the rubric differently if she or he were required to use it again.

We had not talked about the rubric beforehand because we lacked time, which was very unfortunate. It was almost thrown at the students. NOT good! [I] Won't do that again, because it was barely fit for purpose. Many students thought it was hard. I think I will redo it. If you don't understand it, you blame yourself.

The teacher chooses the exact phrasing given in the rubric based on the core content and the knowledge requirement. The teacher made the rubric.

The movement qualities expressed by the teacher were flow and weight in movements<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, the teacher verbalised the sentence, 'Flow, work with that to save energy and to connect [movements]'; she or he embodied the meaning through the sentence. The teacher embodied the meaning by performing the related movements that interconnected and that condensed the amount of energy required to perform that specific movement. Here, 'flow' was seen as a tool to be used in the training process in dance and also as a way of connecting movements. This aspect also includes the

<sup>7</sup> Flow and weight in movement are concepts commonly used in dance based on Laban's analysis of dance movements that describe movement quality in general terms and that can vary in different genres. Flow relates to control and bodily tension including speed, energy, frequency/rhythm and pause (Camurri, et al., 2003; Zhao & Badler, 2001). Weight refers to the impact of the movement including tension and dynamic (ibid)

importance of being precise in a movement but without losing the connection between movements. The ability to connect movements was also seen in combination with flow in the text above. The teacher communicated the ability to connect movements by visually embodying the movement between different positions and finishing the movement, while saying: 'Think of how you get there'. The teacher demonstrated two positions and how to transition between them using her body to give a visual picture of the difference between whether or not the student should work with the way in which the movements connect.

Teacher: [You need] Exactness in [your] movement, you sometimes sail away. You seem to flap a bit.

Student: [I] need more control.

Teacher: Yes, but not smaller [movements]. It's about how you connect the movements. How you move on [starts showing movements that flow into each other like weaving], come together without stopping. Can you see this?

Student: Yes, not too staccato. Yes, [I can be] a little incomplete [in my movements].

In both the verbal and non-verbal actions, the qualities of flow and weight were communicated through the use of idioms relating to the contemporary dance tradition. The teacher and some of the students expressed the idea that the achievements referred to one genre – contemporary dance. For example, the students expressed that they had not danced contemporary dance before.

The teacher says to the student, 'You need to find the weight'. Through the embodied movements of the teacher, the expressed qualities of movement were related to the specific movement vocabulary in contemporary dance. The teacher emphasised the importance of control in dance performance<sup>8</sup>, 'You have the ability to let yourself go, but [you] need to be in control'. To show the student what the outcomes meant in terms of movement, the teacher made sounds and curved movements that moved in space, and then said 'slurp', and all movement stopped in one static form in her body. The teacher also said that control was needed in extreme positions. During the conference, the importance of using momentum<sup>9</sup> in movements and the

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<sup>8</sup> Control in movements here refers here to an awareness of the body, the conscious use of different movement dynamics and the ability to combine contrasts in movement quality.

<sup>9</sup> Momentum is the movement's inherent force. A movement continues in the same direction it started from.

ability to capture movements using control while finding the dynamics in the movements appeared.

Another conception of quality that emerged was the importance of awareness during a dance performance. The teacher answered a question, which was added to the rewritten field notes, about how she or he knew that the student had worked on using greater awareness, and in what way they felt able to assess awareness. The teacher's quotation indicated that he or she felt it was not possible to see awareness as merely a cognitive activity – that's not an option in dance. Awareness is also something that is expressed in and through the body. This is in line with Merleau-Ponty's (1962/2002) view on embodied knowledge that the whole body is involved in learning. In this quotation from the grade conference, the teacher emphasised that awareness cannot be delimited to involving only cognitive activity.

I see bodily progression/awareness in her – I see that she can make choices when she dances. Awareness is not only in the mind but also in the body. It's tricky ;)

In the grade conference, the teacher communicated how spatial ability could be seen as intertwined with awareness, both concerning the geometry of the room, other subjects in the room, and the difference between dance materials. The importance of being aware also emerged in what the teacher said in this context. 'Sometimes you sail away, try to make choices about how you will relate to others through the use of awareness. Take off your blinkers, open up, and see'.

When it comes to placement and technique, the teacher focused on how the student worked on placement and technique overall and not in relation to specific movements in the dance performance. The teacher emphasised the ability to vary between working on the leg's rotation in parallel and turned out<sup>10</sup> positions. The teacher talked specifically about technique during movements that involved the floor; she or he referred to this floor technique in contemporary dance thus: 'You and the floor are like best friends'.

You have found the floor nicely, especially in the choreography. You have to find your centre<sup>11</sup> in your body's placement. You are falling for-

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<sup>10</sup> Turnout refers to lateral movement in the hip joint.

<sup>11</sup> Working with the centre is about engaging the core muscles to find stability in the torso.

ward [with your body]. You found a lot in your torso towards the end. But you still need my help, just keep on working at it.

The teacher's conceptions of quality appeared through the choices of focused dance abilities, which also emerged in the phrases in the syllabus. For example, qualities and idioms in movement were mentioned in the core content in the syllabus:

Movement vocabulary relating to time and space as well as qualities such as weight and flow. The idioms of dance technique. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, author's translation).

In the core content, it was stated that dance knowledge should be related to two genres. In this study, dance abilities were solely related to the contemporary dance genre. The students studied two dance genres on the course: contemporary dance and hip hop. Yet the conceptions of quality show that the dance abilities in contemporary dance were the ones that were valued during the grade conferences.

#### *General abilities expressed*

*The general abilities expressed* by the student referred to the work undertaken during the course – for example, process and effort made during class. This communication was about how the students had worked in class and included effort, ability to memorise dance movements and students reflections. These general abilities were communicated without the teacher expressing what dance knowledge the student achievements were related to. The teacher expressed this as:

You are finding [the movements] fast [in your body] and copying. Sometimes it's hard to know if you are working correctly or if you are copying ... Work on your verbal reflection.

The teacher emphasised the importance of memorising the movements and distinguished between copying movements and working correctly within the movements. Copying means performing the same movement as someone else, while interpreting the movement is referred to as working correctly. What is important is not the value of the student's dance performance but the process by which the movements are learned. Memorisation was one of the core content requirements of the course and also part of the knowledge requirements. The quotation above was the only time the teacher talked

about reflections and I asked whether all other students had reached that goal. The teacher answered:

Yes, actually, now that you mention it, I have been working actively with this student throughout the year to make her reflect more verbally. She can reflect and is learning quickly with her body, but she is a bit shy. I have actually pointed this out in conversation and will try to push her a little extra in the upcoming year. Sometimes, things can develop when they are left alone for a while during [the] summer [holidays].

The *general abilities expressed* included communication about work that was not always connected to a specific ability, such as: 'You are working really nicely with your body ... You are a beautiful dancer ... You have come a long way'. These quotations embraced the process in dance performance whereby the students' efforts in class were valued. The conceptions of quality expressed could not be derived from the course syllabus but show that it is something that still informs the teacher's conceptions of quality.

*Conceptions of quality expressed through views of progression in dance knowledge*

The teacher communicated various conceptions of quality verifying that the student had reached a certain level of knowledge. Different conceptions of quality emerged in the various combined ways in which the teacher recognised knowledge in the grading levels. Two aspects emerged: progression in levels of knowledge achieved and the relation between the teacher's and the student's expressions of conceptions of quality.

*Progression in levels of knowledge achieved*

Conceptions of quality were seen in the way the different levels of knowledge were expressed in relation to students' abilities. It was apparent that the appreciation of knowledge emerged differently in relation to the lower and highest achievement levels. There was also a difference in the abilities explicit in the lower (grades B and C) and highest (grade A) achievement levels. These two achievement levels emphasised the same abilities, with the addition that the lower achievement level also emphasised control over movement in performance and awareness in the embodied action. Knowledge at the lower achievement level was expressed through the student's acknowledgement of the ability. At the highest achievement level, knowledge was expressed in the way the student used the ability.

At the lower achievement level, the student's acknowledgement of ability was seen through the communication during the grade conference concerning assessment of student recognition and acknowledgement of abilities in the dance performance. Regarding technique, for instance, the teacher pointed out that the student had to find their centre by saying 'You have to find your centre in the way you place yourself; you are falling forwards'. It was enough for the student to find different abilities in their dance performance; the quality of the performance was not assessed in terms of their knowledge. Concerning the quality of movement, the stress was on the importance of finding flow and weight in the performance. The teacher emphasised placement through a process of finding the centre strength in the core muscles in order to find weight and flow in the dance performance, 'Weight in flow, centre is high up; find the weight'.

Use of ability referred to how the students used their ability in performance, which was seen in the highest achievement level. The students acknowledged their ability in the dance performance and were appraised on the way the student explored variation and gradation in use of ability. The student had to be able to acknowledge ability in the dance performance and develop use of this ability. In addition to finding their centre, the student had to be able to use this ability to work with their centre to find other ways of using placement, 'Lift up your centre; find the length, and turn out'. Regarding quality of movement, the goal was to explore the movement on the basis of different qualities.

*Relation between conceptions of quality expressed by teacher and by student*

The teacher's conceptions of quality also emerged when verifying student achievement in accordance with a certain level of knowledge. According to the completed rubric, the teacher assessed the students higher than the students did themselves; I observed that the students had higher expectations of their achievements. The conceptions of quality emerged in the way the teacher valued the way in which the dance knowledge had progressed and how this progression in dance knowledge was seen in accordance to student conceptions of quality.

In the conferences, the students appeared to demand a lot of themselves during the assessment, and the teacher encouraged them to see what they were good at. The teacher expressed this by saying, for example: 'You are



hard on yourself. Maybe we should work on that? ... It's good to have will-power, but not when it gets in the way of other achievements'. The teacher also said:

Sometimes you should give yourself encouragement. We talked about it last autumn; have you done it? Shall we have a routine where you tell me you are doing this? No buts! We could make it a routine to get it started.

The difference in the teacher and student assessments showed that they had different conceptions of quality in relation to the knowledge requirements. The progression of the teacher's conceptions of quality was reconciled with the students'. They did not discuss specific areas in the assessment, just the overall assessment for the course. The difference in assessment was not problematised other than the teacher saying that it was due to the students' high expectations of themselves.

## **Discussion and Further Thoughts about Conceptions of Quality**

Here I further discuss and relate the findings to earlier research and life-world phenomenology. The teacher's conceptions of quality are seen in the choice of focused abilities and communication, while the interpretation of achievement levels is discussed in relation to the challenges of assessing dance.

The abilities that the teacher chooses to focus on or disregard can highlight their conceptions of quality (Zandén, 2010) and constitute what the teacher values as important qualities to assess. These conceptions of quality are based on earlier embodied experiences. Even though decisions on which abilities to focus on were circumscribed in the syllabus, the teacher's conceptions of quality emerged in the space and time devoted to different knowledge during the lesson. The abilities the teacher focused on depended on his or her own experiences or lack of experiences based on background, education, dance tradition and context. The different meanings may be influenced by the teacher's experiences of the genre's history, traditions, genre-specific content and movement vocabulary, as well as the teacher's education. Different qualities, such as weight and flow, can be expressed differently according to genre and the person's conceptions of quality. In the study, the body was a major part of communication and expressing knowledge.

Awareness was a focused ability which could be improved through self-assessment and peer assessment. The teacher emphasised that awareness can be expressed with and through the body and in the choices students make when dancing. A life-world phenomenological point of view is that awareness cannot be isolated to a certain part of the physical body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002). A life-world phenomenological approach could influence ways of working and assessing such that the whole body is taken into account. Since dance is a bodily expression, it is important that the whole body is included in the communication. The students did not express themselves through the dance performances and did not try out what the teacher was communicating as a means of understanding the grading or to achieve a higher grade. The teachers' conceptions of quality have a tradition and are situated in a context that affects decisions and actions. There student's learning process may benefit from their involvement in the assessment practice through various modalities, including dance performance. In research adaptability, flexibility and openness are important in line with life-world phenomenology. This could be seen in the teacher's various modes of communication.

With regard to the risk of becoming too criteria-based (Torrance, 2007) and students becoming less independent (Sadler, 2007), how can we, as teachers, be clear about what abilities they should focus on whilst not being counterproductive when it comes to student learning? In this case, the students did not understand the rubric. Creating understanding between the teacher and student is an important factor (Gipps, 1999) in learning and can make it easier for students to be involved in their own learning (Dochy et al, 1999; Lan, 2005; Lundahl, 2011; Rinne, 2013; Sadler, 1989). The difference between the teacher's and the students' assessments could have been different if the students had had a better understanding of the rubric and the steering document and may depend on how used they are to self-assessment. In order to develop this ability, assessment should be discussed and practiced so it becomes embodied. In a grade conference, assessments should be conducted using the mode best-suited to expressing the assessment of the area of knowledge. As mentioned in the paragraph above, adaptability, flexibility and openness to what is being assessed, students' needs and the context are tools that can be used in assessment practice. The teacher's reflections about using the rubric differently, since it did not achieve the desired effect, can be seen as an important questioning process about the teacher's own assessment practice. The choices we make are based on well-reasoned decisions and/or the context and tradition. In collegiate discussions among dance teachers that I have been part of as both dance teacher and researcher, they have sometimes argued that modes

other than dance performance are necessary to perceive some of the core content and knowledge requirements, such as students' reflections about their own processes. However, self-reflection is a long-term process related to earlier embodied experiences. The teacher used various modes to convey the student assessment, which made it possible for students to grasp the meaning of the assessment in various ways.

In the grade conferences, students' efforts in class were considered, which did not necessarily relate to the goals of the course, but still indicated the teacher's conceptions of quality. Feedback that focuses on personality traits instead of the task can have a negative effect on the student (Zandén, 2010). But can it have other functions that are important for the student's learning process? Perhaps the teacher uses it to develop student self-confidence in dance performance. Positive feedback can motivate the student and communicate to the student areas of improvement (Gibbons, 2004). Understanding between teacher and student determines how the student interprets the meaning of the feedback. If a grade conference gives a summative assessment, depending on the context and use of encouragement, discussions of the student's effort in class could become somewhat confusing. Encouragement can be a way of obscuring negative feedback (Rinne 2013). It is important for teachers to reflect upon their intentions, the consequences of such encouragement and the conceptions of quality that emerge in an assessment, so they can be adaptable, flexible and open attitude. In this process, the collegiate discussions are significant (Zandén, 2010). By discussing what they focus on in their teaching and their assessments, it is possible for teachers to develop an awareness of their own practices.

The teacher communicated the student's achievement level via the rubric and gave each student a grade. Earlier research suggests that the student focuses on the grade even when the comments are also communicated (Butler, 1988), but also that rubrics are a way of communicating complex performances (Warburton, 2010). The rubric could have been used to communicate the goals of the course, the student's achievement level, and how the student could improve their learning outcome, that a more nuanced approach to movements was needed and on how the student used this ability. The difference in the requirements for the highest and lower grades indicates that the conceptions of quality teachers express are informed by knowledge hierarchies. For a C grade, the student had to acknowledge for weight in their embodied expression. To receive the highest grade, the use of weight had to be graded in relation to the embodied performance and the focus was on how the student made use of this ability. The same

content was performed at different levels of progression; however, expressions of awareness in the embodied action and connecting the movements were only found in discussions of lower achievement levels. The question is whether awareness in the embodied action and connecting the movements can be seen as prerequisite to there being a different content focus in the highest achievement level. It is possible that awareness and control are needed to be able to perform a more nuanced dance, making use of flow and weight; at least this was seen in the assessment in the highest achievement level. It would be interesting to explore further how teachers perceive the basis used for assessment and how they interpret the achievement level in relation to conceptions of quality. As mentioned above, the teachers' collegiate conversations can function as a way of making them aware of their own conceptions of quality and help them explore how they handle assessments.

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