

## **Teaching on the other side**

Next to my office door is a laminated notice presenting, in large letters, a few summary phrases such as ‘In’, ‘Back in 10 mins’, ‘In the lab’, ‘In the library’, ‘Teaching elsewhere, back later’, ‘Teaching elsewhere, back tomorrow’ etc. A colourful, oversized paperclip at the edge of the notice acts as a selection arrow, moving up and down the notice according to the demands of the day. Usually, ‘Teaching elsewhere’ means I am in the medical school buildings at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, or the College of Science and Engineering campus at the King’s Buildings. For a few weeks this semester, though, ‘teaching elsewhere’ meant something quite different, across the country and across the arts-science divide.

Over the last 20 years or so, occasional medical students have stumbled across the fact that, in terms of teaching, I have a ‘double-life’. Seeking an escape from putting up with me droning on to them in the lecture theatre in the daytime, they may venture into one of the city’s swing dance clubs, to learn to Lindy Hop or Shag the nights away as their grandparents did. If they choose unwisely, they may have the misfortune to discover that I am teaching there too, with my partner Katie. I will be dressed a little differently, though (I have never yet dared to teach a medical class while dressed in a bright red zoot suit!), and probably projecting a somewhat different personality. Indeed, I have three times been asked if I have a twin who works at the university! Katie and I have been teaching dance within the City and on occasional dance camp weekends elsewhere for over 15 years, and doing occasional charity performances. When you do something for long enough, people become aware of it and, a few years ago I was elected to membership of the UNESCO International Council of Dance. The appearance of my name on their list is, I think, how I was found by a course organizer teaching at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. He contacted me and asked if we would consider teaching a short season of workshops in jazz partner dance for this year’s undergraduate course.

Our first reaction was ‘Gulp!’”. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has a very high reputation, and was recently ranked by QS as 3<sup>rd</sup> in the world as a place to learn the performing arts. The thought of teaching there, when our students will have already met truly world-class tuition from skilled professionals, was somewhat terrifying. But there is much truth in that saying that one regrets not doing things much more often than one regrets doing them, so we said ‘yes’. Katie managed to

wrangle some half-days of leave from her company and, on the relevant Wednesdays, I moved the paperclip on my door to 'Teaching elsewhere, back tomorrow' and hoped nobody would ask too many questions.

Braving Scotrail's somewhat chaotic train service, we headed each week to Glasgow and made our way through the rain (every time!) to the striking modern building of the Conservatoire. Our classes were in a dance studio on the lower level, its air always made oppressively close by an earlier modern dance class. The students, mostly dressed in training gear (leggings, singlets and sneaker-like jazz shoes) were clearly somewhat surprised by us, in grown-up clothing and leather shoes. But they liked the music and, as we danced a little for them to show them what we would all be aiming for, they were clearly intrigued by the idea of two people improvising together, in hold, in a way that worked in harmony rather than created a tussle of clashing wills. Experienced as they were in many aspects of performance dance, they had not until that point met real leading and following, in which there is no pre-arranged script. We breathed a quiet sigh of relief when we saw them smiling and apparently keen to learn.



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Teaching the undergraduates provided an interesting contrast to the students in evening classes and dance camps that are our usual pupils, requiring us to revise our class plans as the classes ran ('agile planning', we euphemistically call it. 'Winging it' would be a less kind expression). In our evening classes and dance camps, we are used to having to spend time explaining and repeatedly demonstrating rhythms and footwork. At the Conservatoire, on the other hand, it was a case of 'look and do': in general we showed something once and they just did it, with no need for a repeat demonstration and no need to practice over and over again before the next thing could be tackled. Most impressive! And, of course, the students had no trouble picking up a musical beat. On the other hand, while beat was fine, they seemed curiously blind to the larger-scale structure of the music, seldom waiting for a verse or even a line to begin before they started to dance. They reminded me of Benny Goodman's remark that he felt Jitterbugs 'would be happy dancing to the swish of windscreen wipers', so insensitive did many of them appear to be to the nuances in his wonderful playing. We therefore had to devote a little time to simply listening to, and picking up the higher-order structures of, swing jazz. But the real surprise was around something quite different...

Many, many years ago, when I was younger than even these students are now, I used to spend a lot of time in theatres. I had the good fortune to live close enough to Stratford upon Avon to be able to attend summer schools at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, given freely by world-class actors and directors. I also had the immense luck to live in a town with a really good community-run theatre, with constant opportunities for being on stage or working behind it, doing lighting and sound for visiting repertory companies. It was a great introduction to theatrical life and many of my friends who did the same thing went on to make their careers in theatre, film and broadcast media. From this background, I thought I was used to the ways of 'Luvvies'. Back then, in the late 70s and early 80s, theatrical types tended to be fairly tactile even in ordinary life, and nobody seemed to be fazed by the need for bodily contact in the rehearsal room or stage (I'm not talking about X-certificate stuff here, just the ordinary contact needed to hug, to catch, to carry etc.). People did not make much fuss about changing either: in the backstage environment partially- or unclothed bodies attracted neither embarrassment nor prurient interest, though things of the mind, such as political leanings or musical taste, often did.

Imagine my surprise, therefore, at the blushing diffidence shown by the 18-19 year-old students at the Conservatoire, when we moved on from teaching rhythms to dancing as a partnership. This, of course, involved standing close and touching, hand-to-hand, hand-to shoulder or hand-to-wing-of-hip. Nobody refused to do it, but physical communication of this sort, which I had always taken to be second nature to anyone involved in dance, was clearly something very new that took some time to get used to. Both sexes showed some shyness, the men generally showing most. Our classes always involve much changing of partners, partly to deal with unequal numbers of leaders and followers, and partly because dancing with many people is a much better way to hone communication skills than dancing with just one. For the first hour or so, every partner change and new contact brought about a new mini-episode of shyness, underlining how much the culture of stage youth must have changed over the decades when I wasn't looking.

That issue aside, the students learned quickly and asked good questions that put us on the spot in a way that all teachers rather enjoy. Teaching at an undergraduate level, but doing so mainly visually and by touch, rather than mainly by verbal explanation, was a very interesting contrast to my usual academic life. Some aspects of the teaching, such as an analysing where the students were in their

understanding and what help they most need, or working out what should be delivered individually and what to the whole class, were similar. So was deciding when to encourage students to concentrate, and when concentration was flagging and a joke was needed. What was different was how to translate this analysis into action, and how much to balance speaking and doing, and how to plan a 'spontaneous' joke that would be physical and that I would have to communicate to Katie non-verbally, just as I would communicate a 'straight' dance figure. Giving feedback was also challenging, because it was at once evident that these students had not yet learned to separate criticism of what they just did, from criticism of themselves as people. This is something central to academic life and something we are used to tackling as soon as undergraduates come, in Edinburgh. This fragility made it particularly important that we crafted feedback to keep temporary partnerships working together to improve, rather than each blaming the other for something not being right. The other challenge for us, as the workshops went on, was to help people know how to improvise within a framework, rather than 'drying up' or being too wild. Presumably the students will know much more about this, in many other contexts, by the time they graduate in two years' time.

The final afternoon brought a very scary surprise. In the last ten minutes of the last session, the Course Organizer brought a visitor into the room. It was Matthew Bourne, and he stood quietly at the back of the room and watched us teach and the students dance. Matthew Bourne is probably the most famous name in British dance, and has done much to place this country back at the heart of innovative ballet. Having him watching one teach a dance class is a bit like Peter Higgs watching a quantum physics lecturer, or Max Perutz watching someone give a workshop on protein structure. 'Gulp!' once again! He was, at least, amused by some of the comedy (we had used the last class to introduce the students to some Vaudeville daftness from the first jazz age), and was very charming in a brief conversation after the class, when he was quickly surrounded students already excited about the talk he would be giving later in the afternoon.

It has been a strange few weeks, bunking off to teach in another city, another subject, and to a student culture more 'other' than I had expected. It was great fun, for both of us, but also a bit of a strain to fit into a busy working week. I suspect we will not be able to do it next year, even if asked, but I am so glad that we said 'yes' to that so-unexpected request. Had we said 'no', I would definitely have regretted the experience ungained.

Jamie Davies,  
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**Links:**

The RSC: <https://www.rcs.ac.uk/>

ranking: <https://www.rcs.ac.uk/third-world-performing-arts-education/>

Matthew Bourne: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew\\_Bourne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Bourne)