

# Speaking In Our Own Voices: Negotiating The Space Between

Hanny Exiner Memorial Address

*Heather Hill*

## Abstract

The inspiration and starting point for this keynote address is a story told by a young American dance therapist, a story which seemed to me to encapsulate key aspects of the experience of dance therapists everywhere: firstly the lack of recognition of dance therapy as serious professional practice and secondly the difficulties we dance therapists face in speaking our 'truth' to others. While we see every day the value of the work of dance therapy, we continue to feel in some way lesser than other professionals, constantly needing to prove that what we do has value.

I introduce the concept of ideological hegemony, which suggests that the dominant paradigm or world view sets the agenda for what is valued and what is not. Thus it may well be that lack of professional recognition has less to do with lack of evidence and more to do with the fact that dance therapy lies outside the dominant biomedical paradigm. Far from seeing this as a cause for despair, I suggest that we use this awareness to put our energies into strengthening our profession through good practice, peer support, writing, and appropriate research. In talking in our own voices, from our own truth, we have a strong base from which to reach out and negotiate the space we share with others.

**Keywords:** dance movement therapy, ideological hegemony, arts-based research, interprofessional, values

## Introduction

I feel very honoured to be asked to give this first Hanny Exiner Memorial Keynote address. Hanny was my teacher, a mentor and eventually a colleague with whom I worked on many committees including that which set up the Dance-Movement Therapy Association of Australia. Hanny had such a

strong vision and values – she represented a solid and strong presence in the dance therapy community.

It's only as I chalk up years myself of working in dance therapy and dance therapy education that I fully come to appreciate the immense persistence and stamina – the total and absolute commitment – that Hanny maintained right up to her final illness. In this she was and remains a major inspiration.

If I could pick out one key aspect of Hanny's work, it would be her emphasis on the centrality of dance in dance therapy. I think this has contributed to the way we view and practise dance therapy in Australia. I know for sure that it has greatly influenced me. The experience of a body movement being raised to a moment of dance has remained with me as a touchstone in our 'mind-bound' world for the simplicity and the power of dance, and it has reinforced for me that it is

**Dr Heather Hill** is a Professional Member of the DTAA who has worked for more than 20 years as a dance therapist. She has worked with colleagues to create curriculums for dance therapy training programs and is now a lecturer at MIECAT. She is the author of *Invitation to the Dance: Dance for people with dementia and their carers* (2001, 2nd edition 2009), several book chapters and numerous articles.  
heatherhill@hotmail.net.au

dance which is the special gift we can offer our clients and other professionals we work with.

In the many workplaces I've been in over the years, my contact with other professionals has reaffirmed for me the special perspective I have to offer as a dance therapist (just as they have their particular perspective), and of course the clients, patients and participants in my groups have powerfully demonstrated to me the value of the dance therapy experience. Haven't we all at some time come out of our session feeling a huge welling up of emotion – of joy, excitement, wonder, surprise – a sense that we have been connected in a wondrous way to other human beings and participated in something rich and inexplicably and profoundly human.

And haven't we also all experienced the re-emergence into the cold light of day, when a nurse or carer has come up as the session draws to a close and grabbed a patient saying, 'I need you John – time for the toilet?'

Recently, a young American dance therapist, L, wrote a heartfelt message on the ADTA listserve, which seemed to me to encapsulate something of what I've just said. She has kindly given me permission to share it here. I have selected the 'moment' that was the starting point of her email and that led to subsequent passionate exchanges among members of the listserve. The moment begins when she has newly returned from the ADTA conference and is talking about it to one of her colleagues in her workplace. Another staff member overhears and says:

*'You were in New York recently?'*

*'Yes,' I replied excitedly. 'I was there all last week for the National Dance Therapy Conference!' ...*

*Before I could even finish the sentence she laughed. Not a laugh that resonated in any way as being benign. It was a mocking laugh that left her lips before her mind could edit it. I sat staring at her in shock, mouth agape. Confused. My co-worker, a recreation therapist, also looked at her incredulously. She asked for me, because I simply couldn't form words yet.*

*'Why are you laughing?' Then my defensiveness started to kick in and I echoed the inquiry. 'Yes, why did you laugh?' She fidgeted for a moment trying to find the words that could explain without offending and finally said 'I shouldn't be surprised, they have a conference for everything these days. I guess you said it and I instantly just saw in my mind all these people coming together and dancing everywhere in the hotel and streets.'*

*I couldn't articulate what I wanted to say. I wanted to say 'Yes, we WERE dancing in the hotel and the streets and on the steps of the Borough Hall and what exactly is wrong with that?' and at the same time . . . I wanted to ground her in our truth and science and explain to her everything I learned about how neuroscience is supporting what we have always done in our work and how we weren't just twirling and leaping through ballrooms...and YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I DO, DO YOU?!*

*I really was a doe in the headlights, betrayed by seeing a glimpse of what my colleague must really feel about my work. (Truth be told, she's never seen what I do at the hospital - never observed a group for more than 20 seconds, if that). All I could get out in my stunned shock was, 'We actually weren't just dancing we were learning about neuroscience and neurobiology and....', to which she replied nervously, 'well, of course, that makes sense that you were learning about OTHER*

*things...’ Her emphasis of ‘other’ implying that there was no connection to the dancing...*

*The tension was palpable and could have been cut with a knife. My cell phone rang at that moment and honestly, I just turned away from the conversation and indulged in listening to a voicemail. I was too stunned to process speech...*

It was brave to share this experience, yet it is one which I’m sure most of us have experienced in one way or another. I have picked out some key words from the above to further focus our understanding of what happened in this moment.

**Excited** – by her sense of the power of this work which had been so affirmed by the conference.

**Mocking laugh** – Dance – come on. Much too flimsy. Where’s the science? Where’s the evidence? Where’s the measurement? This is all too often the reaction of the ‘real world’.

**Confused**

**Defensive**

**Tension was palpable**

**Too stunned to process speech**

The result is a whole mix of feelings

- *confused*; taken on the hop and not able to find the right words,
- *feeling defensive*; maybe the other is right, maybe this isn’t serious therapy,
- *tension*; pulled between what I know and feel and by what the establishment says is valid and worthy. Much of the latter I may well have internalised, even if I consciously have taken on other values,
- *too stunned to process speech*; given all of the above, how

can I translate my knowing – my profession’s knowing into speech, into words which will express what we do, and in words which make sense to the other? This is a hard one because the move to communicate is often only in one direction, that is, dance therapists need to move towards the concepts and language of the mainstream.

**Yes we were dancing – what’s wrong with that?**

**Ground her in our truth and science and explain to her everything neuroscience supports**

Inner conviction is that dance is good. Neuroscientists are beginning to come to the same sorts of conclusions about body / mind / emotion.

**You have no idea what we do.**

**Never observed a group for more than 20 seconds**

The other hasn’t even given any time to try and see and understand what I do. Other staff think they can make a judgment from a brief glimpse of a session. They see a balloon and see this as something needing no skills. Further, not only do others not know what we do, they often aren’t interested, and sometimes they are even fearful of it.

**We actually weren’t just dancing.** We were doing serious things too.

My response to L’s experience was to feel great sympathy and empathy for her, as well as anger and frustration on her behalf. And indeed on my own behalf and that of my other dance therapy colleagues who, in comparison to the staff they work with, often have more qualifications, a more professional approach and many times more impact on client wellbeing and yet

may still be reduced to the 'lady with the scarves'!

I'm sure most of us can identify to some degree with the above experience – knowing the power of what we do, yet unable to find the way to defend it, and at times even resorting to give what we do more weight by seeking to validate it in terms quite alien to our whole value system and mode of practice. No matter how much we have developed our abilities over time to represent what we do, I think none of us are immune from feeling discounted by the mainstream system or at a loss as to how to give our profession a more solid foothold in our work context.

Returning to L's experience, we have to ask why do we sometimes need to feel apologetic or defensive. Why is it 'just dance'? JUST dance??? Let's remind ourselves of what the dance of dance therapy is about:

- It's about embodiment. We live, function and express ourselves through our bodies. My body and how I move are about how I am in the world, how I am with myself, how I am with others,
- connected to this, it is about human expression and communication which goes back into the human history As Judith Hanna writes, 'to dance is human' (1979, p.3). It is about self and about self and other,
- it's about an aesthetic experience that is intimately related to us as human beings, to feeling, creativity, and meaning-making.

Dance encompasses all of these and as such represents the human project par excellence. As dance therapists, we are working with what is deeply and humanly meaningful.



**So why are we not being employed fulltime in nursing homes, in psychiatric hospitals, in centres for people with intellectual disabilities,** anywhere that there are people who have needs for connection and meaning in their lives? Well, may we ask!

*Photo: Heather Hill (centre) with Sharon Chaiklin (left) and Rob Baum, Weaving The Threads conference, November 2007*

I think that when we practice as dance therapists, we are in no doubt of the value of the work, nor our own belief in and passion for it. However, this is not so in the 'real' world, as the story above shows. Most of us work sessionally unless we have another profession we can work within, we're not well paid, and we're likely to be the first to go if money is short. While the work may be appreciated by others, it is still often seen as peripheral to the real work of care or treatment. I'm sure we've all had experiences of other staff interrupting our sessions when they could have waited but don't because they own the space and their work is the real work. This is a bleak picture. This has certainly been a part of my experience, but of course it is not the whole story.

We have all found wonderful colleagues from other professions, been given jobs by enlightened managers, directors of nursing, and in some situations been considered very much part of the team. However, that many of us have managed to carve out a niche where we and our work have some

respect says more about our individual integrity and professionalism than real acceptance of the work as such in the mainstream. We need to spend a lot of time proving ourselves as anything more than the 'lady with scarves', and trying to create a space for ourselves within the context we work in. It's hard to be seen when you're a dance therapist (perhaps that's one of the reasons we wear bright clothes?!).

### The Space Between

These are the ongoing realities for dance therapists. We work hard to get a paid job in the first place, and then to have our work taken seriously and viewed as valid by others. We want to be seen as serious professional therapists and each of us in every job has to negotiate the space between us and the professional context. This is hard given the nature of the space we negotiate with other professionals.

- it's an unequal space. As an individual from a rather fanciful profession in relation, for example, to a nurse with the force of an accepted professional training grounded in science, it's no wonder we're at the bottom of the heap.
- it's a space which has been constructed by others and where we somehow need to fit in, with its values, its language, its theoretical constructs, etc.
- it's a space where we have essentially no muscle, power, or authority.
- it's is a space where there is often no movement towards us. We need to do all the approaching for

we are the ones trying to enter the space.

It is little wonder that we see the only route to acceptance as one where we need to fit in to the language and theoretical constructs of the establishment. It's a fine line we walk between professional survival in the real world and holding on to the values and understandings which give dance therapy its particular power.

### The role of values

One of the things which greatly helped me at least come to an understanding of the sort of space we enter has been the work of Bauman (2001), who introduced two very valuable concepts.

One is the concept of society as a **factory of meanings**. This suggests that rather than there being an absolute reality, societies in fact construct what is meaningful, what is valued, and thereby 'create' or define the nature of reality.

Over time certain values and ideas become dominant and push out ideas which do not conform. Fleck (1935/1979) points out that the 'known' 'has always seemed systematic, proven, applicable and evident to the knower. Every alien system of knowledge likewise seemed contradictory, unproven, inapplicable, fanciful, or mystical' (p.22). This is what Bauman terms **ideological hegemony**. Thus the dominant ideas have great power because:

*they form the basis for defining, judging, and valuing others; what is 'good' practice; who are 'good' performers; and what and who will be included and excluded because they do or do not fit the generally accepted norm of 'rational standard'.* (Cunliffe and Jun, 2002, p.4)

As Bauman says, ‘Mad are only the unshared meanings. Madness is no madness when shared’ (2001, p.2).

In our society, the scientific viewpoint continues to be hegemonic despite challenges from alternative therapies and alternative paradigms, and it dominates in many, if not most, of the contexts we are likely to work in. Hegemonic (dominant) ideologies become ‘self-sealing’ (Cunliffe and Jun, 2002, p.4). Fleck (1935/1979) writes ‘once a structurally complete and closed system of opinions consisting of many details and relations has been formed, it offers constant resistance to anything that contradicts it’ (p.27). How then, in a context of indifference and resistance, do we enter the space between? How do we carve ourselves a professional niche, how can we get the system to recognise and include us?

While this can all sound rather depressing, making our job even harder, I actually think that the concept of ideological hegemony can be incredibly liberating.

Firstly, in showing that we are not dealing with pure rational discussion here in the space we share with the dominant model. Rational discussion and ‘evidence’ will not necessarily push others to accept the worth of our work. Remember by definition, anything which does not fit into the dominant framework is ‘mad’. This therefore should call us to think carefully about where we want to put our efforts in terms of establishing our work.

Secondly, it liberates by taking away the mantle of authority and ‘reality’ from the accepted ‘scientific’ view. The scientific view is just another narrative, albeit a dominant one in our society.

There are no simple answers as to how we can deal with hegemonies. It’s an absolute

challenge to try to overcome a belief system which cannot see beyond itself! However, I do feel that we need to feel strong in our own value and knowledge base.

So I see one of our major tasks is to strengthen our sense of self worth as dance therapists and sense of the worthiness of dance therapy values, language, theory and ways of working. We need to be assured that we are not falling short of standards, that we are *different*, not lesser. We need to stop bending the knee to other paradigms. We need to believe in ourselves!

Yes, of course, all of us necessarily need to negotiate within the ‘real’ world. Without it, we may not even get employed. At the same time, though, let us be mindful that these are pragmatic actions undertaken in order to get into the system and to have the opportunity to let dance therapy do what it does so well. Furthermore, I don’t believe that the way to go is to try and make ourselves more scientific. As a professor of phenomenology told me some years ago, the scientists will always do science better than ever we can. We are much better to focus on doing really well what we do. Let us return for guidance to the wisdom we find in dance. As dancers we know to move out from a position of stability, strong and centered. In presenting ourselves and our profession to the world, we need to hold on to what we know is a valid and powerful form of therapeutic work grounded in a humanistic value system.

### **What do we need for this strong base?**

- **Training/education:** Keep building on the basic dance therapy training, ongoing professional

development and supervision. Let us continue to work towards the best standards of training we can have.

- **Writing:** Write and reflect on our work, write for the DTAA Journal and other dance therapy publications, write for publications outside the dance therapy field, perhaps in publications relating to the contexts we work in, special education, trauma, aged care, etc. This is not only about informing ourselves, but about finding out for ourselves what it is we know and taking it further.
- **Research:** a tricky one because of limited opportunities in our professional workplaces and funding availability. The Hanny Exiner Memorial Fund grant has been a great initiative and it's been good to see the interesting projects which have emerged with this support. We also need to gain training in research methods which is a whole other domain of knowledge and skill in itself. It is important that we develop good research questions, use appropriate methodologies, and carry them out with rigour. But for goodness sake, let us stop thinking that we need to aspire to 'scientific' (i.e. positivist) research. Rigour and honest systematic study are not exclusively the property of the natural sciences approach. There is a huge literature out there offering many different research methods which would be appropriate to answer our questions. Find out about them.

- **Support each other:** Give some time to our professional association. Try to make sure that when you leave a job, another dance therapist takes your place. Pass work on to each other.

- And keep in touch with the **dance!**

### **So that's our base - we also need to reach out**

- It all has to start from a base of **conviction, integrity and professionalism.**
- **Talk**, talk and talk some more. Inform others at work about what you are doing, write reports, give feedback on groups and individuals you are working with. Talk and write. Bore others to death if need be!
- **Communicate:** Practise and develop ways of talking and writing which retain the integrity of your work, yet which are able to bridge the space between and communicate to other professionals.
- **Context:** Learn about the particular area you work in – the issues, the theories, etc. Dance therapy does not function in isolation but in a context. This will help your work; it will help your task of translation and, importantly, it will enrich your work by offering different perspectives. For instance, through my studies in dementia, I learnt something of the science of dementia (some of which is decidedly questionable I might add), I found out more about the new advances in neuroscience which offer interesting parallels to

our view of mind and body, and, most importantly, they led me to person-centred care which has provided a very nourishing and supportive framework for my dance therapy practice.

- **Learn that there's more to life than science!** Connect to the ever growing body of practice, writing and research at the highest academic levels which offer different paradigms or world views; the many modes of qualitative and arts-based research, experiential and humanistic approaches in therapy and so on.
- **Relationship:** Above all, continue to build good relationships with your colleagues in all your work. They are more likely to listen to and consider new ideas from people they know and respect.

## And finally

For dance therapists, the space between will always require a balancing act. But as dancers, who can be better suited to doing that!

## References

Bauman, Z. (2001). *The individualized society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Cunliffe, A. and Jun, J. (2002, May). *Reflexivity as intellectual and social practice*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Public Administration Theory Network, Cleveland, OH.

Fleck, L. (1979). *Genesis and development of a scientific fact* (F. Bradley and T. Trenn, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1935).

Hanna, J. (1979). *To dance is human: A theory of nonverbal communication*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

## Further reading

### Neuroscience:

Damasio, A. (1996). *Descartes' error: Emotional reason and the human brain*. London: Papermac.

Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. Orlando, Fl: Harcourt Brace and Co.

### Dance therapy research:

Koch, S.C. and Braueninger, I. (Eds.). (2006). *Advances in dance/movement therapy: Theoretical perspectives and empirical findings*. Berlin: Logos.

### Qualitative and arts based research:

Hervey, L. (2000). *Artistic inquiry in dance/movement therapy: Creative alternatives for research*. Springfield, Il. Charles C. Thomas.

Knowles, J. and Cole, A. (2008). *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Liamputtong, P. and Rumbold, J. (2008). *Knowing differently: Experiential and arts-based research methods*. New York: Nova Science.