

bridging technique **A Blueprint for Dancing the Rainbow?**

by Thomas Körtvélyessy

bridging technique is the name of an ongoing project with the goal to synthesize a comprehensive training for developing individual human movement to its fullest possible potential, beyond a single dance vocabulary or aesthetic. The technique has its visual analogy in the spectral analysis of light that goes through a prism and creates a rainbow of merging colours in a very specific order. In a comparable way, *bridging technique* brings selected existing approaches to specific areas (i.e. colours) of human movement into a single syllabus. The direction of ordering is from movements that a practitioner can do without much practice, to ever more abstract and technically difficult. After more than 20 years of development, it is time to critically review and question what has been achieved, and to evaluate the results in a peer-reviewed context.

The syllabus has grown from a period of intensive self-study and development.¹ While the results have been tested successfully with dancers of several backgrounds over the years, the overall result needs more evaluation from professional peers in the field. Most elements of this syllabus came from practices that were formulated in what could be called a European and/or European-American cultural zone. Because a European modernist "one-for-all" solution is more untenable today than ever, especially in the context of decolonization, this is a further and much-needed area of critical evaluation.² Nor is the claim "new" that here is yet another movement system that supposedly can deal with (control) *all* humanly possible movements. It is therefore important to evaluate if *bridging technique* could truly be more, especially in the wake of European/-American (post)modernism.

Method, structure, and sources

The study of *bridging technique* happens through guided (self)exploration and follows the above mentioned syllabus. A class/session usually has three basic parts, in the following sequence:

- A. sensing the body/warming-up; organic movement patterns
- B. application to a specific vocabulary/(Euclidian) geometric movement patterns
- C. composition/performance

Each session explores at least part A for self-maintenance. Parts B and C are optional expansions, depending on the need and state of the practitioner.³

¹ Especially at Teacher's Circle Initiative Rotterdam (1996); European Dance Development Center (EDDC)/ArtEZ Dansacademie (2000 to present); South Korean National University of Arts (KNUA), Dept. of Choreography (2008); furthermore CLOUD/Danslab (2013), Circle Dance Rotterdam (2013-present), Codarts (1996,2016), Stichting Kunstzinnige Vorming Rotterdam (SKVR)(2010-present), and projects of Reàl Dance Company that involved teaching dance skills to performers (1997-present).

² I consciously say "formulated" to avoid and counteract untenable ethnocentric assumptions of cultural exclusivity, which would irresponsibly ignore ongoing exchanges between cultural zones and regions over millennia to this very day. "Formulated" is to mean that a certain recognizable style or tradition historically becomes distinguishable in a specific geographic region. This process usually includes influences and inspiration from other cultural zones, which – depending on hegemonic relations- too often are marginalized, hidden, "unnoticed" in the locally dominant culture. For example, there is ample research by scholars how various African traditions have significantly influenced European 20th century (post-)modernism in the wake of increased Imperialist aggressions of the 19th and early 20th century. With the examples of Jazz, Tap, Lindyhop, HipHop, etc., the same can be said for various body-mind traditions and their influence on European/-American (post-)modernist/somatic practices.

³ Compare this structure of A., B., and C. to a statement by Elaine Summers: 'Kinetic Awareness® has three main goals: maintenance, development, and creativity/composition.' (Summers, 2002)

The guiding teacher mostly gives instructions by talking, sometimes by participating in fulfilling the same task. A second option is to demonstrate possible solutions by example. A third option is to teach a specific sequence or movement-phrase from a growing array of specific movement-sequences to provide a learning-experience and in the longer run help to structure available movement options. The learning practitioner is expected to responsibly create his/her best possible and available solution to the given task with the available means at that moment. Any variation is accepted as potentially valid, and useful to increase the overall movement experience. If repeated another day, different solutions for the same task would occur. The understanding behind this method is that our bodyminds by themselves produce continual varieties upon a theme, if they are allowed to function organically and without hindrance. The learning process therefore happens short-term and long-term. Through the sequencing of the syllabus, as well as the resulting tasks and exercises, this process happens in a way that is increasingly complex and challenging.

Up to date (2017), the following main sources have been chosen for guiding principles and formulating exercises. Each approach successively creates an embedding structure with further specifications and conditions for the next:

A. sense and articulation of self/bodymind

1. Release, as formulated by Mary O'Donnell-Fulkerson
2. Kinetic Awareness® originated by Elaine Summers
3. simplified patterns from Developmental Movement/BodyMindCentering®

B. bridging towards a specific vocabulary

4. Exercises about placement of weight when standing, correct alignment and positions of the legs, leg-gestures, with torso and arm movements; derived from Elaine Summers, Laban Movement Analysis, European Classical Ballet and Cunningham Technique
5. Basic principles of Eshkol-Wachmann Movement Notation for creating and moving through Euclidian geometric body-shapes and spatial patterns

C. composition and Performance

6. Open Form Composition, with the option of Viewpoints (Overlie) and other strategies and approaches. Equally, dealing with interpersonal communication (including drama/acting).

It must be emphasized that especially the first three practices have a scope widely beyond "just" a sense of self or warming-up, and that each of these sources in itself can take a lifetime of study in depth.

History of creating the syllabus

The above sequence was formed during a long-term process of research and comparison that I have conducted ever since my dance education at the Rotterdamse Dansacademie (now Codarts), from 1992 to 1996. I was beginning to see the limitations of both older, so-called "hard" styles of dance (classical European ballet, Graham technique, Cunningham technique) and so-called "soft" styles, including Laban-based modern dance and Limón-based technique, including late-modern or "new" dance.¹ When I met Elaine Summers in Vienna in 1993, I was greatly inspired by her inclusive, but still specific understanding which valued any possible movement

⁵ Distinction between hard & soft techniques described by De Wilde (1993); Late-modern as described by O'Donnell-Fulkerson (2002)

of the human body as technical in itself, from the much-noticed pedestrian vocabulary of the Judson Dance Theatre and in part Anna Halprin, to any possible codified and not-(yet-)codified kinds of dance.²

Within the study of Kinetic Awareness[®], Elaine Summers proposed five phases of development: articulation, coordination, speed, tension levels, interaction (Körtvélyessy, 1996). I realized with my practice that this development could go together with the simplified Laban Movement Analysis of body, effort, time, and space, that was then taught at the Rotterdamse Dansacademie/Codarts (Diemer, 1992) I also began to explore Developmental Movement[®], partly at the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) (van Eijden, Cone, Higler, 1996): cellular breathing, navel-radiation, spinal movement, homologue, homolateral, and contralateral coordination, using the in-depth proprioceptive qualities from working with Kinetic Awareness[®]. Additionally, I learned some very helpful movement sequences that helped me to get more sensory-directed orientation, as well as possible relations to already codified dance vocabulary.

Through this comprehensive practice I discovered that the greater incorporated knowledge of all the above helped me perform the various modernist vocabularies at Codarts with more ease, more securely, with more pleasure, and above all, more success and appreciation. The greater demand on the human body by Eshkol-Wachmann notation through its emphasis on Euclidian geometry and greater independence from any (normative) physicality, offered an even wider challenge, especially when I would combine it with the richness of possible dynamics.

After graduating from Codarts in 1996 I continued my study with Elaine Summers and became a certified Teacher of Kinetic Awareness[®] in 2007 and a Master Teacher by 2012. Meanwhile I did a guest-study at the European Dance Development Center (EDDC, formerly CNDO), where I met Mary O'Donnell-Fulkerson and started to understand her open-ended experience of dance and movement towards an even wider context. At EDDC I also committed to study two non-Western movement techniques, Taijiquan (long Yáng style) and the Zen-Shiatsu stretches by Shizuto Masunaga, both taught by Eva Karczag, who also kindly offered me opportunity to try out further attempts that further developed bridging technique. Tony Thatcher demonstrated how European/-American dance could be influenced by exercises from Alexander Technique.

In 2004 I obtained a Masters Degree in choreography at ArtEZ Dance Academy, after I had explored the relation between open and closed choreographies (i.e. choreography where pre-specified elements are more narrowly or more widely pre-determined) but also socio-cultural conditions for making such choices. Sometimes I would further develop a specific exercise or sequence based on better understanding of how it could be made to practice a specific ability, either working by myself or with other dancers.

Incorporating other approaches

Because of the potential independence of the syllabus from any single formula or vocabulary, it should be possible to include other methods and approaches into this build-up, for example the Axis Syllabus (Faust, van Haastrecht, et al.), Gaga (Naharin, et al) - all for phases 1-2; Countertechnique (van Dijk, et al) for 4, and Viewpoints (Overlie, Black, et al) for 6. Such inclusions would best be done in collaboration with teachers of the above.

Equally important were briefer and more superficial studies of so-called non-Western dance forms and traditions, which were evaluated as alternatives and

² This late-modern interest in the pedestrian in itself has a long history of what was perceived as natural movement in European/-American elite-culture. (Noverre, Laban, Duncan et al.)

comparisons for better understanding of my own process: Butoh, Indonesian theatre dance from Java and Bali, West-African Danse Sabár, 20th century African Contemporary (Acogny, Leidsman), traditional and contemporary Hawaiian Hula, and East-Asian theatre and dance-practices and concepts in general, as well as Classical North Indian music in relation to structured improvisation (Danielou, 1968). Sometimes I saw an example on television, sometimes I took classes or workshops.

Each of these traditions had very specific ways of dealing with what I myself would then see as organic and/or geometric-oriented movements, different kinds of relations to everyday-movement vocabulary of the related culture, to music, narrative, etc. with various levels of (geometry-oriented) abstraction.

Observed effects on students

Since many dance students learn a specific form of dance through imitation and put a lot of effort into reproducing specific movement from a single vocabulary and style, the beginnings of learning the *bridging* syllabus can be confusing. Is it "just" improvisation? A "creative dance" class? Anatomy-Kinesiology? A Composition workshop? A beginners' class for building up the skills that are needed for performing Classical European/-American Ballet or (post)modern Dance? To provide an answer and avoid too much confusion, core elements and exercises are introduced progressively over time. The guiding teacher adapts these to the individual (group of) student(s) in an ongoing dialogue. As long as the overall sequencing of the syllabus is maintained, any part of it can be chosen and explored more in depth. However, "jumping" from one to another should be avoided. Overall, the feedback from students of *bridging technique* has been very positive. The greater variety of what could be done, the ongoing, self-directed research was often greatly valued.

Example 1: Exchange with Urban Dance

bridging technique proved to be interesting and worthwhile for a group of practitioners of Urban Dance styles and Hiphop: from their practice, the dancers were already used to find their own solutions. Through their training they were also aware and open to moves from others in the class. Because the transition to movements from Classical European Ballet and Cunningham Technique happened gradually, through following principles of Developmental Movement, these principles effectively deconstructed the specific vocabulary and made it more directly adaptable.³

Example 2: Time to Dance – a case study with elderly dancers

From March 2016 to January 2017, I applied *bridging technique* to dancing with amateur seniors, aged 55 and above. The classes happened within a project called *Time to Dance*, commissioned and organised by the dance department of Stichting Kunstzinnige Vorming Rotterdam (SKVR), the largest institution for amateur arts in Rotterdam and the Netherlands. The project was made possible with funding by the Rotterdam Municipality. I taught dance at senior housing flats and homes for the elderly.

The main way of teaching became direct imitation, repetition, and sometimes touch. Depending on the abilities of the participants, both physical and mental, it was sometimes possible to go beyond these direct methods. In all cases the syllabus of *bridging technique* provided a very useful orientation for possible progression and adaptation of various exercises and principles. The general reaction was positive, and I could observe gradual improvements in the movement abilities of participants. I even got to create new artistic work with the most able group, which we got to perform at an informal showing organised by SKVR at one of the elderly homes.

³ Video of the recorded session at CLOUD Danslab, Den Haag 2013: <https://youtu.be/BtjROnDLEZE>

As an example: with the physically most able group, we could practice moving from the navel by putting a finger on the navel to feel where the contraction and release of the entire body had to start from. This was followed by the now-standard sequence of building up tension levels organically through Developmental Movement Principles with one arm/fist (yield/release, push, reach, pull). These exercises were followed by a set sequence of individual variations on 8 possible combinations of Laban-based Eukinetics (central-peripheral, slow-fast, light-strong) These 8 movement qualities lead to many individual variations, but also provoked an emotional response and lots of fun for the dancers. The assignment made the exploration of non-imitative vocabulary and improvisation safer to do in their social environment, because they had a very specific and pre-set sequence which was repetitively done in the same order, together as a group, but not bound to specific shapes and qualities.

On the other hand, by using the above sequences in each class, eventually the same group of seniors rather quickly learned a fairly simple, but technically complex sequence of Ballet-derived tendus and dégagés that uses an understanding of the same Developmental Movement principles and Euclidian geometric horizontally, vertically and diagonally oriented shapes.

Evaluation/Critique

The overall arch of *bridging technique* is designed to generate sustainable anatomic understanding through guided individual practice and expand this understanding further to a desired range of possibilities. This process can be further challenged by an increasingly abstract and visually rooted, Euclidian-geometric coordinate system. Within this field of organic and geometric possibilities, the learning dancer can start to make choices about composing and performing movements, as a dialogue with others.

This comprehensiveness may make *bridging technique* interesting and supportive for the training of (beginning) students of Dance educations, especially when it comes to the already evolved deconstruction of basic vocabularies used in European/-American classical ballet and subsequent techniques, in particular Cunningham technique. This has been proven in practice by teaching it to a wide age-group of dancers, professional and non-professional, albeit mainly within a "Western" context⁴.

On the other hand, each source alone has many more in-depth elements, than what could be covered in a single class, even over longer stretches of time. Lack of deeper understanding of certain elements can seriously limit the learning curve of students, and on some occasions has led to minor injuries, because the progression through the various levels turned out to have been too superficial.

Standardization?

Over the course of 20 years, certain standard exercises and classes in *bridging technique* have evolved, where each of the successive elements are introduced progressively. Even certain pieces of music are combined with certain exercises, to heighten recognisability. After a number of classes, many students are finding their way with ever more ease, and start to happily make the principles their own by developing very individual solutions to the given tasks as well as generally enjoying greater self-confidence in their ability to move beyond specified vocabularies or traditions. Many state that they enjoy the larger range of freedom combined with a deeper sense of anatomical accuracy and sensitivity.

While any standardization and formalization may help for an easier introduction

⁴ The one exception was teaching at the South Korean National University of Arts, where I adapted to the practice of repeating a single sequence of movements in order to learn the inherent understanding and technique. Here I was greatly inspired by Seung-Hee Yang's teaching of Contact Improvisation.

in the beginning, I believe they inevitably carry their own expiration date, by which they no longer sufficiently convey the inherent meaning, and therefore lose their living usefulness, having become ossified and calcified form. One can compare this process with certain customs or patterns in behaviour/language, that have been created in and from a specific context, but now, since the context has changed over time, may no longer be equally useful, or even avoided. (e.g. pejorative expressions against minorities in a society)

The overall structure of *bridging technique* must therefore be subjected to continuous critical examination and careful, sensible re-design. After the first wave of origination around the early 1990s, it is high time to include and relate newer, contemporary research. So far, I have been the only person to actively develop and teach this technique. As with any "originator", a different teacher will unmistakably explore and develop other aspects, perhaps find new directions altogether.

Decolonization?

As said in the introduction, the limitation of any intended universality becomes critically apparent when the technique is reviewed in a global and 21st century context: In its formative years, the various elements, decisions and choices that lead to *bridging technique* have been significantly informed by studies of (theatre)dance in other cultures, mostly from societies that have been directly affected by European/-American Imperialism until the mid-20th century and beyond.

However, these sources have not been studied in equal depth for the creation of this technique, but merely for a comparison to what was in the process of being developed. As a consequence, first by hegemonic ethnocentric-privilege, later by attempted conscious refraining from more direct cultural appropriation, the technique has focussed on deconstructing "Western", more correctly, European/-American formulated theatre dance, referring to body-mind approaches that were formulated in its immediate cultural zone.

Because of this limitation, past, present, or future assumptions about possible usefulness of what now constitutes *bridging technique* for other kinds of dance, (especially from other cultures/cultural zones) are categorically untenable until further examination and testing by proficient practitioners and experts. Further decolonization is needed. It must also be clear that the synthetic and analytic strategy in bridging technique is likely not at all of interest in other dance traditions, including European/-American ones.

Perhaps at best, the strategy of *bridging technique* could be compared to learning another language by first exploring which sounds one can make individually with various ways of using vocal chords, breath, lips, tongue, and teeth; and only then trying out to understand and correctly articulate more specific vocabulary and grammar of a certain language – or creating one's own as desired. This would contribute to the name *bridging technique*, from one language/style/expertise to another. For many kinds of dancing, this process is not necessary, since only one style/vocabulary is aimed for.

Every humanly possible movement?

At least since the 18th Century C.E., declarations about the biggest, widest, most universal, comprehensive etc. solution to human existence have been proposed repeatedly in various European and European-American publications, similar to affirming a cultural tradition as "the best" and "good enough". From today's perspective, they can seem hopelessly outdated, limited, preposterous. However, it is also possible to see them as continued attempts to get the most of a situation at any given time.

I still believe that bridging technique *can* lead to a continued conscious exploration of what kinds of human movement could be possible and desirable, using

the various “colours” or specific areas towards ongoing exploration. The chosen elements and structure can encourage very specific, but also very open-ended research and development, in a way that is responsible towards the abilities and interests of the studying practitioner. In order to successfully do so, the connection with what is alive at any moment, and what can be done responsibly, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually needs continuous re-evaluation. By giving space and attention for the individual variation, emphasizing self-responsibility, and self-directed research, it may be possible to do this on a more long-term strategy.

On a final note for the future, I would like to refer to the understanding of knowledge creation as an ecologic and open, multi-authored process, based on a recent article by Dr. Jill Green about research and validity in dance education (Green, 2016). She describes how discipline and scholarly knowledge are not the product of a single (socially privileged) “genius”, but a co-created result of many individual studies and research. With the nearing of a quarter-century of organic development of this particular comprehensive approach to dance technique, this openness is to be embraced and made part of the innate structure, in perpetual growth and development.

Following the motto of the Science-fictional Vulcan civilization from the US-American series *Star Trek*: ‘Endless Variety in Endless Combinations’.

Or, as Elaine Summers liked to say:
‘Merry Dancing!’

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