

## **The Eurodans Project: A European collaboration through Choreography and Technology**

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### Abstract

*The Eurodans student dance performance took place at the Project Arts Centre in Temple Bar as one of the cultural events of the ELIA Conference in Dublin in October 2002. This paper describes and analyses the processes which culminated there, and goes on to raise further issues concerning pedagogy for dance choreography and the application of technology as a tool for artistic communication in the preparation of dance performance.*

### Introduction and Context

This paper interrogates from a position of hindsight various elements of a specific European dance project which ran from January to October 2002, and which culminated at the ELIA Dublin conference. The objective of the particular project was epistemological, not conceived in a formal pedagogic context. However, it is evident that in revealing knowledge and experience of our choreographic and technological approaches, we can further debates about training, educational methods, and the phenomenon of choreography teaching in the academies, and also about the growth of technology as a tool for artistic development.

The ELIA Dance Section was initiated at the founding conference of ELIA in Amsterdam in 1990, in order to enlarge the interest and membership in the Dance discipline in HE in Europe, and was formally constituted the following year. Since that time, the Dance Section has continued to raise the profile of dance in higher education, act as a network agency, promote staff/student exchanges between dance higher education institutions throughout Europe, work on establishing equivalencies of dance qualifications between countries, and organise conferences, symposia and festivals. Of special mention are the *Dance Education in Europe* Conference in Amsterdam (1991), *Action for Dance: Issues and Strategies for Dance in Europe* (Pont a Mousson, 1992), *Towards Movement Efficiency*, an intensive 6-day course and conference in Turin in 1996, and *The Greenhouse Effect: the art and science of nurturing dance makers* in Leeds in 1998. The Dance Section has also recently produced a report *Potential Changes in Higher Dance Education in Europe through the Bologna Agreement* (2001) as part of the ELIA contribution to the Socrates Thematic Network project.

The EDS committee normally meets regularly three/four times a year, hosted in Dance academies or universities across Europe: most recently in London, Prague, Madrid, Amsterdam, Budapest, Leeds, Helsinki, Rotterdam, Brighton, Tilburg, Lisbon, Antwerp and Stockholm. Meetings allow members to be introduced to the specific objectives of each academy or Higher Education Institution (HEI); they are able to see specific student groups at work, and understand something of the ethos and objectives of each institute. Often these committee meetings are planned in tandem with performances and seminars, in order to share and discuss good practice. Membership of ELIA has grown to 47 countries and 350 institutions, and increasing numbers represent the discipline of Dance. Elections for the Dance Section committee and chair are held every two years.

In support of their objectives, members of EDS have contributed papers, seminars and student performances to each of the biennial ELIA Conferences. Further, the ELIA Dance Section endorses the objective of ELIA in 'promoting international co-operation between students and teachers of academic institutes of arts throughout Europe' by organising student performances. In Lisbon, Helsinki, Barcelona and Dublin, final year students from dance institutions around Europe have co-created and performed contemporary dance works to present to delegates. For example, in August 1998, 12 students met in Lier, Belgium for the month to create a special piece, *Skin Friction*, for the Helsinki conference, and in Barcelona, six duets were made and linked in *String of Pearls*. In each case, performance space was made available to the Dance Section by the Conference organisers, though funding for the organisation, travel and accommodation for such projects is found from the dance institutions involved. Justification for such commitment is made in relation to the perceived value of such collaboration for the students involved.

The Eurodans project grew from the desire to offer a performance project for the Dublin Conference which reflected the growth and application of technology in dance, and particularly the use of an internet site and compressed video to support a choreography project. At the same time, it was designed to enable European students to be involved in creative collaboration, and to meet and work together through live performance. This

latter element offered a valuable opportunity for students to travel, to attend aspects of the ELIA conference and to work inter-culturally. Drawing on the huge professional expertise of dance HE institutions around Europe, the outcome was a high-quality dance performance that illustrated how dancers from a number of cultures across Europe can work together using new technology in dance.

### The Process

The *Eurodans* Project linked 26 dancers in 10 institutions from 7 different European countries. Together they began collaborating online to create a group piece of choreography, which they would all perform together in Dublin 9 months later. The dancers worked with the authors of this article, who took the role of Choreo-coordinators. The Choreo-coordinators were responsible for co-ordinating choreographic input and guiding the remote groups towards a cohesive final product. The model for this process was developed by Sita Popat as part of her doctoral research, and *Eurodans* represented the first opportunity to begin to test the model in practice.

*Eurodans* utilised an innovative software prototype called Snugfit, which is being developed by Kris Popat at ULTRALAB, Anglia Polytechnic University. Snugfit is a web-based community toolbox that allows project leaders to create templates for project web pages. Participants can then use those templates to create web pages by inserting text, images, videos or other media into the appropriate fields. Automatic links can then be created between the participants' pages as they are created, building a dynamic web site as the process continues.

The process began with each institution selecting a group of 2 to 4 dancers to work on the project. (See Fig. 1) Each group elected a Rehearsal Director, who was responsible for directing rehearsals and communicating with the Choreo-coordinators. The dancers then contacted the Choreo-coordinators for their 'log in' details, so that they could log onto the project web site. There they each created a homepage, with images and text to introduce themselves to the other participants. The dancers and the Choreo-coordinators then discussed the theme for the dance online, and a joint decision was reached to use the words 'invisible connections' as a starting point for the choreography.

The dancers took this phrase into their individual rehearsal studios and used it as a stimulus to begin creating movement. They recorded sections of their movement on video and captured it onto computers. They then used the 'rehearsal record' template from the Snugfit software to create web pages showing their rehearsal video and describing in text the processes that they had undergone in creating the movement (see Fig. 2). They viewed each others' work and shared their responses to it with each other and with the Choreo-coordinators. The Choreo-coordinators left their input in a space on each rehearsal record page, commenting on the rehearsal material and supplying ideas for developing it. Often they suggested that the dancers should take on aspects of another group's rehearsal, so that the movement began to develop cohesively across all the groups.

As the process continued, the Choreo-coordinators created a framework for the dance in 9 sections, and displayed it on the web site for the dancers to give their comments. Later in the process, the costume and lighting designers also displayed designs for the dancers to make their responses. Towards the final 6 weeks of rehearsals, the Choreo-coordinators selected 9 phrases of movement from all the material that had been created so far, and asked all the groups to make variations and developments around these phrases. Thus when the dancers arrived in Dublin, they had a rich palette of motifs, variations and developments that would fit within the framework that had already been planned online. In Dublin the dancers worked together with guest choreographer Wayne McGregor, who completed the formation of the online material into the final 40-minute dance. The dances rehearsed together in 'real space' for 6 days and then performed 'Eurodans.net' at the ELIA Conference.

Figure 1: A breakdown of the *Eurodانس* process

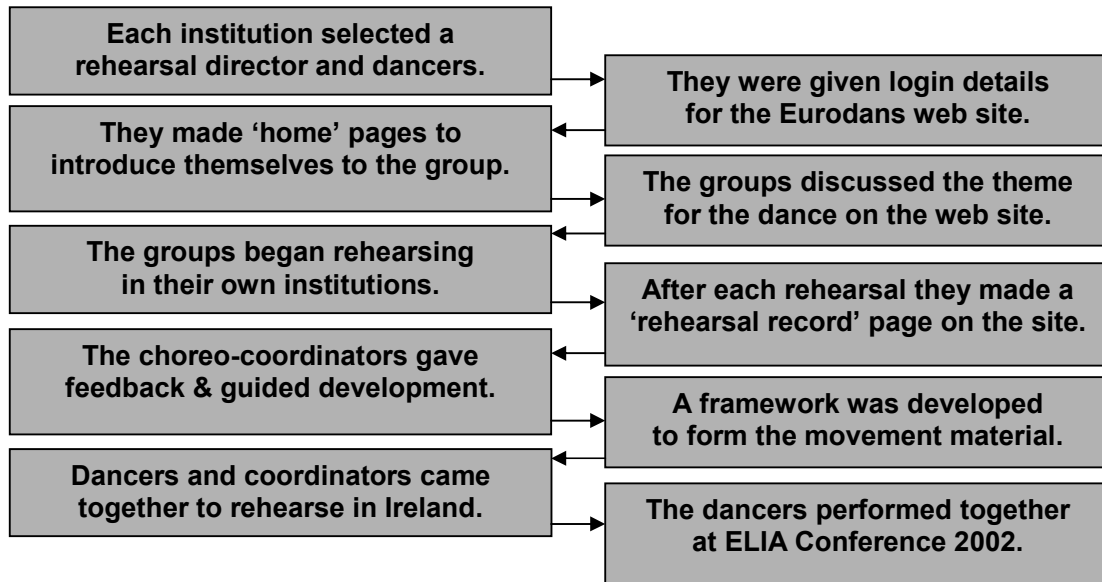


Figure 2: An example of a rehearsal record page on the *Eurodانس* web site. The left side of the page contains the links to other parts of the site. The image indicates where the video would be positioned, and the text areas show where participants and choreo-coordinators would type their comments.


# Eurodانس

**Project page**

**Team page**


**Home page**

## Rehearsal Record for Group A - 28th June 2002



Participants typed text about their rehearsal in this space

*Choreo-coordinators' notes*  
The Choreo-coordinators typed comments and suggestions here for the participants.



### Fulfilling objectives

The Eurodancs Project was instigated with higher education dance students, but it was not primarily a pedagogic project. Instead the focus was on communication and collaboration and their effect on the choreographic process. There were a number of objectives set out in the initial stages that primarily promoted an epistemological approach. These objectives were:

- To provide a forum where dancers from different European countries and institutions could share their experiences of dance in practical and creative applications.
- To promote communication and forge relationships between dancers and their institutions in Europe.
- To fulfil the artistic aspect of the choreography, through the creation of a dance product that involved the dancers in a real-space performance.
- To adapt and develop new Internet multimedia communications software for creative collaboration.

These objectives were fulfilled to different levels, although there was evidence of the potential for success in the future in all cases. The initial two objectives were fulfilled in part, and for some groups more than others. This type of project requires considerable commitment over an extended period of time for reasons that will be discussed later in this article. Several groups engaged in the project with such a level of commitment, and these groups reaped the benefits in the realisation of online creative collaboration. However, some groups were unable or unwilling to give that level of commitment, and for them the establishment of communications and relationships was less successful. Equally, it became evident that these students had varying levels of experience of working creatively in the choreographic process, and this issue is discussed later in this article. The project has also demonstrated the need for a review of pre-project commitment requirements and in-project facilitation procedures that will improve the creative experience of the online participants. This model is still under development, and *Eurodancs* has provided essential findings that will feed the progression of this research.

In terms of fulfilling the artistic aspect of the project, the 40-minute dance product was performed at 2 showings for the ELIA Conference 2002. 21 dancers from 6 countries appeared on stage together, and the dance was well received by the audiences at both performances. The choreography was largely based on the material that had been developed online, with some additional material from Wayne McGregor. The dancers reacted very positively to this culmination of their experiences. This poem written during the final week in Dublin by a *Eurodancs* dancer indicates a personal reaction to the project:

Take dancers from all over Europe.  
Add Internet plus creativity.  
Subtract prejudices.  
Add Wayne McGregor with maximum speed.  
Divide into 21 moving bodies.  
The result is *Eurodancs*.

Similar reactions were voiced in almost all the participants' written responses at this time.

The Snugfit software was in its early prototype stage for this project, and therefore there were some problems associated with its reliability. However, the majority of participants were able to use the software with little difficulty and their feedback supplied useful information for further developments. Snugfit, under its new name 'Proscenium Artspace', is now moving on to the next stage of development, and it is hoped that a reliable version will be on the market in the next couple of years. Eurodancs has provided an invaluable testing ground for this groundbreaking software design.

### Choreography teaching in the academies, and the development of new educational methods and processes in HE

For the students of the universities and dance academies taking part in the project, the challenges were threefold. First, in being able to engage in creative solutions to choreographic problem-solving; in articulating their own dance processes and concerns in English on the website, and in the actual demands of the rehearsal process and performance in Dublin. An important issue arises in relation to the question, are they learning choreography, and if so, what is being taught in choreography class? Are these students who are currently in dance training

- learning how to choreograph
- learning how to analyse and evaluate dance, and
- learning how to present their findings clearly?

Within the group of 26 students involved in the Eurodancs project, there were evident distinctions between those training in professional and educational domains in relation to their approaches to teaching and learning. There are some precedents here. Historically, in professional dance contexts including vocational dance training, dancers evidently learn about choreography, even if they have little opportunity to do so formally. The 'osmosis' occurs through daily immersion in technique classes, in rehearsals with choreographers or répétiteurs where the concern is with the making of new works or with the re-construction of existing choreography, and through the regular performance of completed works. Dancers have tended to become choreographers through what is termed the apprentice method, drawing upon their personal experiences as dancers in relation to the 'master' choreographers.

By contrast the tendency in the higher educational context has been that the focus of the choreography class rests on the student's engagement with the creative process and the development of understanding and application of the methods, concepts and principles of dance and choreography. There are of course some notable exceptions, as seen in the curricula of a number of colleges or academies now engaged in university validated degree or diploma programmes.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons for these differences are both philosophical and pragmatic, based more on tradition, convention and expectation than on the perceived needs of students. Among professional vocational teachers there is a well-grounded perception that it is difficult to fuse notions of curiosity, range of interest, critical faculty and knowledge of interrelationship of components with rigorous technical training, or what might be termed the mechanics, of the professional dancer.

A contra-perception can be said to apply in some spheres of the university sector, where the level and intensity of technical training may be limited or is supplemented out of programme time. The lack of technical competency which is normally aided by learning repertoire or technical studies renders students incapable of reaching a level of performance proficiency which would allow them to join a professional company, or even to fully demonstrate the qualities of the choreographies that they, or others, have created. Leaving aside the objectives of each institute/programme, and the personal desires of each student, it stands to reason that in the current climate a balanced approach should be advocated, whereby the principles of technical mastery, critical faculty and creativity can be pulled into correspondence.

In most countries, professional dancer/performers work in an essentially short-term and challenging environment where new forms and languages of dance quickly evolve, and where dancers are required to take part in a wide range of didactic and democratic creative, choreographic processes. Today new pedagogic approaches to the learning and teaching of choreography in the tertiary sector are being further developed, appropriate to the perceived career contexts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some draw upon an historical investigation of the choreographer-dancer relationship in the theatre domain, in classical ballet and modern dance. Others are influenced by developments in education domains, identifying specific consensus practice at particular times and in particular contexts: for example, the modern educational dance practices initiated by the principles of Rudolf Laban. Tutor-led and student-led projects can give equal opportunity for both directorial *and* facilitatory choreographic approaches. The previous disconnection between professional vocational training and educational approaches to learning and teaching of dance is gradually disappearing. Today, within the dynamic context of artistic and interactive roles of dancer and choreographer, the intelligent application of general principles, rather than formulaic paradigms, is considered key.

What breadth of skills and understandings are required by dancer/choreographers in today's environment? A brief evaluation of the dance culture of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century suggests a changing, evolving and eclectic context for the dance artist-practitioner. Technology, continuing experimentation, collaborative ventures, site-specific initiatives and the growth of minority arts and diversification all contribute.<sup>2</sup> It can thus be argued that the skills, understandings and experiences embedded in *current* dance education practice need regular modification, and

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<sup>1</sup> Laban, London Contemporary Dance School, College of Dance in Stockholm, Fontys Academy, Tilburg, etc

<sup>2</sup> See for example the range of performances and dance activities described in 2001 in such periodicals as *Animated*, *Dance Theatre Journal* and *Dance Now*, and those critiqued in the *Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Observer* and *Sunday Times* broad-sheets.

objective reconsideration of what constitutes appropriate preparation for future dancers and choreographers. Notions of adaptability and flexibility are important: dancers obviously require technical facility and mastery that can be modified and adapted safely to the needs of successive choreographers. The repertoire performed by the (British) Royal Ballet in the 2001-2002 season, for example, included works by Ek, Baynes, Forsythe and Duarte, as well as those by Wheeldon, Nureyev, Cranko, Ashton and Macmillan.<sup>3</sup> Equally, the BerlinBallett performance of *baRock* in Berlin in December 2002 included works by Bagouet, Miller, Galili and Li. Increasingly choreographers seek a range of opportunities that allow them to move between genres such as contemporary dance, opera, community dance, musicals, and ballet, where they can hone and apply their skills, develop their vocabularies and adapt their respective processes.<sup>4</sup> Dancers need to understand and to be able to supplement new work; skills of improvisation and knowledge of compositional processes can aid their comprehension of, and contribution to the choreographic process. Artistic boundaries are blurred, and contemporary dance makers now incorporate an extraordinary eclectic range of styles, forms and techniques.

#### Technology as a tool for artistic development

The Internet technology and specifically the Snugfit software provided a platform for the choreographic process in Eurodancers that has its own specific qualities. There were limitations in that the dancers all had to work with small movies on the web page to share their ideas and inspirations. However, these were far outweighed by the advantages of the process.

The model uses the Snugfit software to create a web site where the dancers and choreo-coordinators share their ideas and develop the dance. But unlike other platforms for creativity, this model preserves the process as it takes place. The nature of Eurodancers is that all participants must communicate their processes and their work to each other in an asynchronous format. This means that it must be recorded online for others to view at any time, rather than being limited to the period of actual rehearsal. Therefore, the ongoing work forms a trail of web pages that mark the creative decisions, dead-ends and moments of inspiration for the dancers and others to re-visit. What is lost in the studio through the ephemerality of the moment is preserved on the web site as concrete video and text. This provides a unique opportunity to discover and analyse the creative process after the event, so that dancers can examine and learn from their actions, and artists and scholars can begin to study that most elusive of acts.

Another element of the asynchronous recording online is that the groups must be able to articulate clearly what they were doing in their rehearsals, both through the movement choices made on the video and through the accompanying explanatory text that describes their processes. This encourages a reflective approach to communication, since there is time to author rehearsal records carefully to provide maximum clarity in presentation. This is a valuable experience both for the student and the professional dancer since in trying to communicate exactly what processes were employed, the dancer has to interrogate personal actions and reflect upon them. This approach promotes questioning and contemplation, which encourages perception of one's own creative process that can result in personal growth. At the same time, the act of viewing other dancers' creative work online feeds back into the rehearsal process, so that all are trying different methods of working in response to each other. This too provides opportunity for the dancer to extend and enrich personal understandings of choreography.

The Eurodancers model does not only challenge the dancer to be more reflective in their approach to creativity. The facilitator of the choreographic process is also affected by the characteristics of the asynchronous Internet medium. In the studio-based creative process, the choreographer working with the dancers may give stimuli or set tasks to generate movement content, much as the choreo-coordinators did with the Eurodancers participants. However, in the studio situation, the choreographer is present to adjust the task or provide different stimuli if the material that is produced is not as he or she had expected or intended. The choreographer can exert a subtle influence by modifying tasks or stimuli very slightly, sometimes with a profound effect upon the material created. Any instruction can be over-ridden at any time and another set in place as required. This immediate interaction with the dancers and with the material itself is a central part of the studio creative experience. The dancers are working within the medium coming up with movement ideas, but the choreographer is in the position of accepting or rejecting, manipulating, embellishing.

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<sup>3</sup> Debra Craine, 'Brace yourself for a Royal Shake-up', *The Times*, 6 June 2001.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in June/July 2000 Wayne McGregor made *Symbiont* for Edward Watson and Deborah Bull in the Royal Ballet's New Works season, and *The Field*, a community project for local children and adults performed at the Rex Cinema in Stratford East.

In the online process, the approach is different and in some ways it is far more challenging because its limitations. In the *Eurodانس* project, the choreo-coordinators only saw the movement at the end of each rehearsal on the web site. They were not able to be in the rehearsals, exerting the fine-tuning that the studio-based choreographer uses. Also, the dancers could not check back with the choreo-coordinators during the rehearsals for guidance or confirmation that they were working in the required manner. Therefore it was necessary to provide much clearer instructions for the dancers than might normally be given by the studio-based choreographer. This would support the dancers in their rehearsals so that they would not feel confused or lost, as well as ensuring that the outcome of the rehearsal would fit within the context of the developing dance work. It became apparent in the analysis of the *Eurodانس* project that the choreo-coordinators needed to give more clarity in their instructions, and one of the outcomes of this research is the review of the facilitation processes in the model. When appropriate methods of facilitation have been established it is clear that the model will provide a challenge to choreographers who wish to undertake this type of work, since it will stretch their abilities to set appropriate tasks and to facilitate the generation of movement. The model will encourage choreographers to find new ways to be explicit about movement generation tasks and to communicate their intentions to their dancers. Alternatively choreographers may actively choose to give loose instructions in order to experiment with new vocabularies. It will always be the case that different groups will interpret instructions in different ways, and this will lead to discoveries in movement language and style for dancers and choreographers. It is possible to undertake this model with groups coming from different dance styles, which would provide still more exciting and interesting challenges.

### Conclusions

Evidently, a project such as Eurodانس is rich in opportunities for all participants. For some of these young dancers in training, the cultural mix offered further stimulus to their understandings, and made them aware of cultural identity and difference in a manner not previously recognised. In addition to positive feedback from the students about the dance experiences, references were also made to specific kinds of dance vocabulary and dynamic range within European groupings, and to the range of languages spoken within and outside the rehearsal room. The challenge of learning movement initiated by others with distinct movement styles, and of making duet and trio dance material through the mechanisms of discussion and devising, allowed other forms of knowledge to be stimulated.

For the choreo-coordinators who are both engaged with the teaching of Dance in HE, a number of issues concerning the application of choreography in elearning contexts arose. Eurodانس has posed further research questions concerning the potential of online processes in formal pedagogic contexts, the value of intercultural experiences, and the balance between scholarship and artistry in performance practice. The performances in Dublin instigated a broad yet positive range of aesthetic responses from the Directors of academies and dance institutions, and these too are worthy of further interrogation and debate. Further, this experience has persuaded many ELIA members of the value of involving students of all disciplines in future ELIA conferences.