

Collaborative Embodied Performance: ecologies of skill

Preface

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Kath Bicknell & John Sutton

This book is about joint intelligence in action. In performance and the arts – dance, theatre, music, architecture – small groups of expert practitioners work together in rich, dynamic settings. In sport and martial arts, skilled individuals with distinct capacities coordinate or compete, constantly meshing with or responding to each other’s movements. In collaborative performance, people act together – sometimes, for a time – as if of one mind.

How does tightly-knit collaboration, in challenging skill-worlds, work? How do some skilled performers enact their craft under tight time pressures, while giving the impression they have all the time in the world? How do some people seem to know in advance what to do *together* – how to move or respond in just the right ways even in volatile, stressful, or rapidly-changing environments? If these questions interest you, or prompt you to ask related questions about your own areas of interest, this book is for you.

In bringing authors together to write ten chapters on collaborative embodied skills, we hope to attract readers who are performers and fans, teachers and coaches, practitioners and critics, students and researchers. The book assumes no specific background in any one academic discipline,

but draws on and seeks to contribute to many. Studying complex ecologies of skilled practice across distinctive, culturally unique environments, and tapping the experience of highly-trained specialists, our contributors examine the nature and mechanisms of collaborative performance in context.

Research groups too form their own unique cognitive ecologies. Individuals work together on projects which unfold over time in unpredictable ways, in changing and often challenging circumstances. Any thoroughly interdisciplinary group, like the one we've been part of over the years, develops in unexpected directions as institutional, intellectual, and interpersonal constraints shift. The hard, on-the-ground work of boundary-spanning research requires persistence, tolerance, and slow-brewing trust. It requires enormous luck in finding the right collaborators, people who can cope and flourish even when, as they say, outside their comfort zone. We have had much of that luck. Integrative, sustained interdisciplinary research is much more difficult – more time-consuming, more draining, more resource-intensive, more fragile – than is acknowledged in glib management or policy documents about dissolving silo mentalities. But when it does go well it brings pleasure and surprise on many fronts.

This book presents diverse but coherent new work on collaborative embodied performance from a thoroughly international and interdisciplinary cohort of fellow travellers, of many different backgrounds and career stages. We and our contributors – seventeen authors of ten chapters, plus five commentators – are participants in distinctive ongoing conversations about collaborative embodied skills. We very much hope that you, as readers, will feel welcome to join these conversations and be inspired to contest or expand on the case studies showcased here. Our authors' affiliations span anthropology, architecture, cognitive science, dance, literature, neuroscience, performance studies, philosophy, psychology, sociology and sport science, but they are driven by their topics rather than any one tradition. We took to referring to this book project as 'stuff we like by people we like', which reveals the fun we have had bringing it to fruition.

John began research on movement skills in individual expertise, with Doris McIlwain, in 2004. Our early and ongoing debates and collaborative projects with Wayne Christensen (about cognitive control and automaticity), Greg Downey (about neuroanthropology and culture), Andrew Geeves (about music, emotions, and performers' experiences), and Lyn Tribble (about skills in history) helped hugely as our group developed a theoretical focus on the idea of meshed control in performance, and a set of mixed methods to fuel what we called 'experience-near' case studies on skill in sport, yoga, dance, and music.

Kath Bicknell joined our group in 2013, adding further expertise in ethnography and performance studies to the interdisciplinary mix. She forged her own pathway into this interdisciplinary world, strongly shaped by staff and students in the University of Sydney's Department of Theatre and Performance Studies where she studied and worked between 2003 and 2012. Paul Dwyer and Kate Rossmannith ignited a lifelong passion for ethnography. J. Lowell Lewis's provocative seminars on embodiment fuelled a thirst for exploring an often-felt disconnect between lived experiences and theoretical debates. Ian Maxwell's encouragement toward curiosity-driven research, and interdisciplinary approaches to doing it, continues in this volume's afterword. Working closely with John and what we now call the *Cognitive Ecologies Lab* at Macquarie University has provided fun and fertile ground from which to explore cognitive and performance theory through embodied practice, ongoing collaboration and the many joyful, excited discussions that come with being part of a deeply engaged, interdisciplinary team.

After many attempts and the usual bewildered frustration, as an evolving and growing group we were awarded funding for work on skilled performance from the Australian Research Council (ARC). We were lucky in that philosophy and the cognitive sciences alike had seen dramatic expansions in interest in expertise and skilled performance, with increasing integration of

conceptual, experimental, and ethnographic approaches. Our search for and exploration of rich middle ground between over-intellectualist and more ‘mindless’ approaches to individual skill was joined by more and more theorists. For more than 15 years, Macquarie University provided solid support for our interdisciplinary research, both institutionally through the Department of Cognitive Science – Max Coltheart’s glorious experiment – and CEPET, the University Research Centre for Elite Performance, Expertise, and Training, and collegially over many years of collaborations, joint activities, and lively debates with our friends right across campus. Many students and visitors made vital contributions to challenge and to help sharpen our ideas. Our networks of allies, fellow-travellers, and critics continued to expand across disciplines and geographical locations. Despite other significant differences, we found many researchers sharing a fascinated commitment to thick, experience-near, immersive, practice-oriented, case-study-based approaches to performance.

It was becoming clear at this point that we needed to cast our net wider, to focus also on *collaborative* skills. The independent development of 4E (embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended) approaches to cognition had provided encouragement and tools for studying social and ecological dimensions of performance, but had been mainly applied to other cognitive domains like memory, decision-making, emotion, language, navigation, or tool use. The essays in this book expand the ‘cognitive ecologies’ framework to address skilled performance, with this specific extra focus on collaboration and joint action.

A number of our contributors gave talks at a workshop on collaborative embodied skills which John organised at Senate House in London in 2017, during a fellowship at the Institute of Philosophy. We were lucky to win a further ARC grant on this topic for 2018-2021. The concrete plan for this book took shape in enjoyable conversations we had at, and after, the 2019 Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities conference in Mainz, Germany. It was delightfully quick and easy to sign up our contributors. Indeed we soon realised how naturally and directly a second volume might

follow: we warmly invite readers to let us know of other directions and ideas that might fuel that next step.

It has been a pleasure throughout to work with Bloomsbury, and we are thrilled to publish this book in the *Performance and Science* series. In offering both enthusiastic encouragement and well-informed critical input, series editors John Lutterbie and Nicola Shaughnessy have helped us greatly from the start. Lara Bateman, Mark Dudgeon, Ella Wilson and all at Bloomsbury have made the publishing processes smooth throughout. We are very grateful for all this assistance. Many thanks too to Lux Eterna for the evocative cover photo (for more about the related film, *AURA NOX ANIMA* (2016), see chapter 2, by Sarah Pini).

The initial chapter drafts were written as we all endured lockdown in 2020. We ran three online workshops in August 2020 at which contributors presented work in progress across distinct time zones, generating feedback and cross-fertilisation. At the next stage, each chapter draft was reviewed by two peers, in many cases by one other contributor and one external expert. Our five commentators – well-established skill researchers in theatre, robotics, philosophy, performance studies, and psychology – played significant roles in these phases of project development, helping to sharpen all the chapters before completing the commentaries on resulting themes which you will read in the book. We have been pretty hands-on editors, engaging in iterative discussions with the contributors as each chapter went through multiple versions. It is our hope that despite the diversity of theories, concepts, and approaches in the volume, this close interaction between editors, chapter authors, and commentators has generated a genuine, and unusual, coherence of method and framework across diverse domains.

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Skills', for which we are very grateful. Such support for insistently interdisciplinary research is rare and precious. Doris McIlwain died in 2015, but her influence on this book is immense: we wish she could have participated. We are deeply appreciative of our entire team of authors and commentators, whose patience, commitment, and sheer brio saw us through some challenging times and brought us the deep, long-term buzz and pleasure of real collaborative action. We want to single out Wayne Christensen, Andrew Geeves, and McArthur Mingon for their help, their support, and their vision at different stages of this research – thank you. Special thanks too to Greg Downey and Lyn Tribble for comments on our editors' introduction. We are also very grateful to the following other friends, colleagues, students, referees and reviewers, critics, and collaborators who have directly encouraged and inspired, facilitated and contributed to our projects on skill along the way: Bruce Abernethy, Lucas Bietti, Max Cappuccio, Amanda Card, Andy Clark, J.M. Coetzee, Giovanna Colombetti, Ed Cooke, Rochelle Cox, Robin Dixon, Paul Dwyer, Matthew Elton, Regina Fabry, Damian Farrow, Ellen Fridland, Rasmus Gahrn-Andersen, Shaun Gallagher, Petra Gemeinboeck, Elle Geraghty, Celia Harris, Simon Hoffding, Dan Hutto, Jesus Ilundain, Samuel Jones, David Kaplan, Nick Keene, Paul Keil, Carla Lever, J. Lowell Lewis, Julie-Anne Long, Ole Lund, Glen McGillivray, Jeremy McKenna, Clare MacMahon, Lambros Malafouris, David Mann, Lars Marstaller, Judith Martens, Paul Mason, Rich Masters, Richard Menary, Barbara Montero, Sean Müller, Rebecca Olive, Garth Paine, David Papineau, Carlotta Pavese, Karen Pearlman, Gert-Jan Pepping, Beth Preston, Ian Renshaw, Anina Rich, Dan Richardson, Kate Rossmanith, Justine Shih-Pearson, Tim Sinclair, Line Simonsen, Phil Slater, Barry Smith, Ben Smith, Kim Sterelny, Bill Thompson, Anthony Uhlmann, Dave Ward, Glenn Warry, Alex Wessling, Mike Wheeler, Justine Whipper, and Kellie Williamson.

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