

2013

Let's Get Creative about Creativity in Dance Literacy: Why, Why Not, and How?

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Recommended Citation

Ashley, Linda (2013) "Let's Get Creative about Creativity in Dance Literacy: Why, Why Not, and How?," *Journal of Movement Arts Literacy*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/jmal/vol1/iss1/1>

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Let's Get Creative about Creativity in Dance Literacy: Why, Why Not, and How?

Abstract

This article is written in the interests of opening up dialogue and generating debate about the relationship between dance literacy and the role of creativity in dance education. It aims to provoke discussion amongst dance educators who may, or may not, currently value or be aware of, the benefits that graphic movement notation can play in learning and teaching in, through and about dance. This article, however, is not an exhaustive examination of the educational value of graphic movement notation, as that information is readily available from many different sources including dance educators, anthropologists of dance, dance historians and so forth. Questions that are of concern here include: Why should graphic notation play a more prevalent role in dance education? Why not graphic notation? What may be grounding current resistance towards its inclusion? What benefits could accrue from creative making of graphic movement notation for teachers, learners and the status of dance education itself? How can we make graphic notation more creative? Such lines of inquiry can give rise to some interesting educational, historical and pedagogical matters.

Keywords

dance literacy, creativity, dance education, notation

Introduction: A Surprising Oversight?

Creativity, described as a “familiar and trusted friend” (Chappell 2001, 98), is often perceived of as being the heart of a western legacy of dance education that has developed through the 20th century from pioneers such as European, Rudolf Laban. Connell’s (2009) research that sampled all secondary teachers with responsibility for dance in secondary schools in Yorkshire—the largest county in England—reported that “The emphasis on creativity as an important attribute to dance was shown clearly with 63% of the respondents recognising creativity as an important word associated with dance” (118). Also, the selection of “creativity” as the topic for a 2009 special issue of the journal *Research in Dance Education* illustrates continuing “interest and recent developments in creativity in education theorising in the UK and more widely” (Rolfe 2009, 96). Dance education also inherits ideologies from another early 20th century legacy, the progressive, liberal education generated by American educator John Dewey, amongst others. Highlighting a western worldview of holism, dance education prioritises the well being of individual learners, bestowing benefits on discovery-learning in the creative process of dance making such as ownership, increasing interest in learning, and improving confidence.

Recently, however, Moffett (2012) drew attention to how dance was disassociated from having capacity to provide Higher Order Thought (HOT), as identified in thinking skills such as synthesizing, evaluating, analytic reasoning, problem solving, finding solutions, and understanding concepts. Rather than an evaluation statement in which the latter were listed, Moffett was provided with a replacement by her university College of Education that emphasized how her dance students should demonstrate “creative ability by completing tasks that achieve their purpose while reflecting insightful individuality” (2). As Moffett explains, the dance making and movement analysis processes she was teaching included HOT. Could there be a double standard operating when creative thinking is *in dance* that removes it from under the umbrella of HOT? “Creating new wholes” is listed in Blooms’ *Taxonomy of educational objectives* (1984) under the HOT “synthesis” category; there is no indication of epistemological specificity.

From my inquiry (Ashley 2010), this primary school teacher’s experience further highlights the separation of dance from the “academic”:

But you can see how dance can be scary for a lot of people [...] I’m sure that they have that enthusiasm but they’re not sure about how they’re meant to take it [...] A lot of our teachers have been trained at the university, or have done degrees and done the one year Grad Dip [in education...] so you can see that they haven’t had the opportunity to explore [...] It is a very academic kind of school. (p. 212)

Teachers also observed that music received greater funding, status, and time than dance in their schools:

We have a music specialist that the children go to for an hour every week, and it's very emphasised. We believe that through music they'll develop in their language and their maths. I'm Head of Arts, and the music has taken over. (p. 137)

Why, therefore, would dance teachers overlook including movement notation when music educators do not seem averse to their form of musical script? To those outside of dance education, such as music educators, it could seem to be a surprising oversight when it seems clear to some that:

Dance literacy is an integral component that contributes to the total education of a dancer, yet many of today's professional dancers cannot read or write dance. (Posey 1998, 117)

As Posey indicates, there is insufficient emphasis on this aspect of dance literacy in education. Other dance educators view learning graphic notation as completing dance education (Adshead-Lansdale 1981; Curran 2011; Gingrasso 2011).

Even though the emphasis on creativity has afforded a place in education for dance since the early 20th century, it seems not necessarily to our advantage when academic parity is at issue. As Stinson (2010) has indicated, politicians and others need to critically question their own educational paradigms, but so do we. If creative dance and associated movement analysis in a practice-led mission statement are currently insufficient for attaining academic parity, are there other ways of strengthening our profile? Could the inclusion of graphic movement notation strengthen advocacy for the status of dance education in the eyes of our academic "others"? This particular question is highly pertinent as dance educators strive for equal recognition for dance alongside other curricular areas, including the other arts.

Warburton's (2000) research suggests that graphic notation provides opportunities for analytical thinking. Emphasising the need for a symbol system that depicts key concepts of each specific epistemological domain, Warburton researched the role and importance of notation in dance education, suggesting that notation helped the children, aged 8 to 9, to analyse and perform accurate reproductions of movements from their own creative improvisations. Although verbal description was found to be necessary, Warburton's results showed it not to be the most effective standalone teaching strategy when learning to analyse, understand, and remember dances.

Another in-depth empirical study by Heiland (2009) with 53 non-dance major college students combined dance making with symbol usage and revealed that many students enjoyed the approach and it "enhanced students' ability to create, analyze, and communicate about dance quickly and accurately" (31). Heiland suggests that these students' progress with symbol use and dance was also influenced by them being non-dance majors who held no biases against notation.

In combining Motif Notation symbols for movement concepts such as floor pathways, travelling, stillness, bending, and stretching with creative dance for a group of children aged 5 to 7, Posey (1998) found some

correlation between the learners' ability to write down their own dance sequences and their literacy of combining letters into words and numbers: "Dance symbols were a very natural addition to their studies" (120). Arguably, an indication that HOT crosses literacy borders when notation is taught could strengthen the academic profile of dance education. Could more overtly demonstrating analytical rigour, as suggested in Heiland's, Posey's and Warburton's inquiries, support dance to attain the same credibility as music, that has been literate for about one thousand years, not to mention numeracy and language literacy?

Although graphic notation has been taught through creative dance (Bucek 1998; Curran 2011; Heiland 2009; Hutchinson Guest 2003), my interest lies in two possibilities that could emerge by getting more creative with teaching notation itself. First, such teaching could assist in dispelling the mythical dichotomous split that can separate analytical, conceptual HOT from dance literacy. Second, it could empower dance educators to build on what they already know and teach.

Following this introduction, a brief overview of dance education in New Zealand, where I work, is presented, and draws attention to how appropriate analogies can be made with the position of dance literacy in New Zealand for international readers. The main discussion section of this article follows and is framed by two key questions:

1. How can creative, discovery-based learning interface with learning about graphic movement notation as a concept?
2. With a proviso that [1] is possible, how could learning about movement as graphic symbol improve the status of dance within education more generally?

These questions also provide starting points for provocations that could stimulate debate in, and beyond, the movement arts literacy community.

Dance Literacy in *The New Zealand Curriculum*

The concept of literacy underpinning the arts in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2007, hereafter referred to as the *NZC*) draws on a concept of multiliteracies mainly derived from The New London Group (1996). Multiple literacies are recognised as occurring in different fields such as science and media, hypothetically placing the arts in an equitable position in education and society (Hong-Joe 2002). It is an underpinning that is also noted as part of dance education in the USA (Heiland 2011).

Assuming a postmodern perspective on dance literacy, the *NZC* positions dance making as writing and interpretation of dance as reading alongside a culturally pluralist worldview and a western progressive, liberal, educational ideology. A modern dance legacy is a further influence, for instance, Laban's movement terminology is woven throughout the document, referred to as the dance elements, Body, Space, Time, Effort energy, and Relationships. However, as noted by Lepczyk (2009), Laban's terms and

concepts are used in dance education globally, but the source and background are rarely mentioned, and, in this regard, the NZC is no exception. Therefore, it is unsurprising to note that there is no expectation to include the study of movement notation. On the other hand, the curriculum is not a syllabus and so the inclusion of graphic notation is not ruled out.

Currently, traces of graphic notation in New Zealand dance education are few. A CD-ROM resource, *Creative Explorer* (Creative NZ 1997), annotated film footage of Neil Ieremia's choreography for his company *Black Grace* with an inventive form of graphic movement notation, is to be read by students in trying out their own creative ideas. There was also use of graphic notation in the video resource *Dancing the Long White Cloud* (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2002), that went to all New Zealand schools for teachers' professional development during the implementation phase of the curriculum. The video episode showed students, aged 9 to 10, being given some suggestions for symbols from Motif Notation, plus they could invent their own graphics to record their dance motifs created on a theme of sport. However, there are no traces of any uses of graphic notation in the plethora of dance education resources currently provided by the New Zealand Ministry of Education.

New Zealand dance educators, however, are currently battling against political bipolar-policy-disorder, as a previous government's favouring of arts education swings to the present day ministerial preference for language literacy and numeracy (Melchior 2013). Meanwhile, even though dance educators make a strong case that numeracy and language literacies can be taught through dance (Bolwell 2011; Moore and Linder 2012), dance education is struggling for status.

Graphic Movement Notation in Dance Education: Why?

Graphic movement notation, as a generic concept, is envisaged here as a relatively untapped legacy for dance literacy. Could it be timely politically to install notation in dance education as both a creative and conceptual learning experience? What benefits could it bring?

First, in requiring analytical reasoning, learning about the concept of graphic movement symbols has potential to further increase inclusiveness of current pedagogy with its dominant emphasis on divergent thinking in dance making. Stähle-Varney's findings (2001), that dance notation offers a "more varied way to learn dance," can help pupils that are "non-kinetically oriented" (112) resonate. Posey (1998) found that when she incorporated graphic notation "boys were especially empowered" (121; also see Kipling-Brown 1998a). Both Heiland (2009) and Megill (2011) found that graphic notation had appeal for visual, logical, mathematical learners. Activating analytical activities such as graphically notating dance movement, information technology applications, and mathematical puzzles could provide enjoyable creative experiences for students who could have lesser physical motivation in dance.

Second, a broader range of teachers could be encouraged to embrace the wider possibilities of dance into their work. Teachers, who do not have the physical expertise to demonstrate dance, may find making or reading simple scores useful as a form of dance literacy to further facilitate learning about dance. Computer software for notation being easily accessed online, free of charge, could engage the scientific, digital technological and mathematical education communities, encouraging mutually beneficial cross-curricular studies and possibly elevate the status of dance amongst staff who may not usually interface with it.

Third, graphic notation of movement already plays a vital part in ethnography and anthropology of dance, professional documentation of theatre dance, and in some dance research. Labanotation is, however, also used in other industries such as ergonomics and physical therapy. Laban himself created diverse applications. What of robotics? By finding approaches that stimulate students to experience more analytical thinking using signs and symbols, the skills that dance literate students might acquire could be of value to innovation in other fields of knowledge and research.

Moreover, if teachers were disposed to include a more overtly analytical dimension to their teaching they could advocate more efficaciously for dance education as being fully holistic. In highlighting such benefits, the status of dance as a literate way of knowing could also be elevated in the eyes of other stakeholders such as education managers, parents, and politicians.

Graphic Notation in Dance Education: Why Not?

Unfortunately, dance education has, on occasion, discarded the notation component of Laban's legacy—a point in case being the removal of it, as a longstanding incumbent, from the British school examination system at sixth form level—or has simply overlooked it. Several plausible explanations can be surmised as to why graphic movement notation is not a part of some dance educators' teaching. Initial reaction to the suggestion to include graphic notation in dance education is likely to be viewed by teachers as another burden on the already groaning school curriculum and their workloads. Why introduce such an apparently theoretical, abstract "extra" into dance education that is functioning fairly well without notation? My inquiry revealed many teachers preferred dance making over teaching about dance contextually, citing the reasons that it was too theoretical and took too much time. It is likely that the creative, divergent thinking in dance making that dominates some dance educators' praxis could create avoidance of the more convergent cognition that teachers may associate with notation.

Another barrier could be that notation seems inaccessible for dance educators who lack notation experience. Although this barrier may exist more for primary school teachers, there may be cases in many countries where it is experienced in other educational sectors.

Dance education makes mention of Mosston's (1981) Spectrum of Teaching Styles, identifying teacher-centred, knowledge reproductive

(behaviourist) learning at one end, and learner-centred, knowledge productive (creative, discovery) learning at the other (Gibbons 2007; Heiland 2011; Kassing and Jay 2003). In unpacking Mosston's spectrum in greater detail in my 2012 publication *Dancing with difference: culturally diverse dances in education*, I recommend engaging the full spectrum of Mosston's teaching styles as a starting point from which to launch learning experiences that overtly blend "knowledge productive with knowledge reproductive learning, and convergent with divergent thinking, [in order that] an element of 'real', creative, discovery learning about dance, without the necessity to make dance, is made possible" (225). Could identifying such teaching and learning provide an alternative teaching platform that teachers could find accessible? Learning graphic notation is ideally placed to profile the HOT that combines convergent with divergent thinking.

Teaching Graphic Notation Creatively and Conceptually: How?

If creativity is important for 21st century dance education, could structuring teaching in which learners can creatively make movement graphics provide a strategy that many teachers could implement? In relation to learner-centred pedagogy, getting creative with notation could, I believe, function to enhance current pedagogy and empower teachers to build on what they already know. Many dance educators, for instance, are already using Laban movement terminologies in the form of the dance elements on which graphic scripts can be based. Moreover, Heiland's (2011) point, that notation may be appropriately introduced into dance education at an early as age as possible, could be more attainable if teachers could feel comfortable introducing rudimentary approaches to notation as a concept.

I view graphic notation as full of potential for dance educators in offering a means of coming to understand dance via analytical, creative, practical, and conceptual ways of embodied knowing. As various advocates suggest (Gingrasso 2011; Heiland 2011) adding an element of playfulness, fun and creativity can enhance learning how to graphically notate, as well as foster understanding of dances and performing them. Reischman's view is also enlightening: "When I read Labanotation, I see and feel the movement" (1998, 123). In revealing a somatic relationship with the graphic symbols, she emphasises her use of notation is practice-driven.

I am not proposing that all teachers and children should necessarily learn Labanotation or Motif Notation, although the latter would be easy for anyone over the age of four. Learning an established set notation is an option, but I offer an idea for dance education in suggesting the application of divergent discovery to create graphic movement symbols. Indeed, recognition of Laban's own creative invention of his notation system, and others who have followed such as Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Ann Hutchinson Guest, highlights the apposite nature of the creative, critical, and practice-led learning that I am proposing. I envisage Laban's movement analysis and notation as infused with reason and creative imagination, being two sides of the same

coin. A creative approach to graphically notating dance, as a means of re-imagining dance education pedagogy for the study of dance, could, I suggest, develop analytical accounts that complete the dance literacy paradigm without detracting from the value of “creative” discovery learning from within a western progressive educational ideology.

In the teaching strategy that I am proposing, simple principles of movement notation can be learnt whilst dancing by analysing motifs or single movements from dances, especially bearing in mind Van Zile's (1985) reminder that notation “is no more complicated than the movement it documents” (45). There does not need to be a separate time to learn graphic symbols, and it need not take more time than current teaching strategies of verbal or written appraisal. Simple gestures from Maori *waiata* (action song) or Samoan *sasa* could be graphically written by most children and adults and integrated into learning experiences. In creatively making movement symbols, Laban's legacy has developed as an emergent pedagogy that is meaningful, sustainable, and respectful of cultural diversity.

Anthropologist of dance, Brenda Farnell (1994), used Labanotation to notate intricate hand gestures that are used with speaking in North American Assinibone Plains Sign Talk. Farnell creatively adjusted the Labanotation staff to incorporate columns for the hand gestures and the Assinibone cardinal compass, in order that the crucial cultural significances could be translated onto the page.¹ Her adaptation is instructive in this exploration of how to creatively develop graphic notation for dance education. One of the pragmatic features of the staff, that which appears on the right hand side of the script is what the mover is doing on the right, could provide some helpful basic structure from which learners can create their own graphic scripts. Numerical values and music scores could also be helpful in structuring creative and cross-curricular learning experiences when the object of the learning is to make new graphics to notate dance.

Imagine, choosing a favourite gesture or motif and drawing the body in motion as colourfully as possible on a large piece of paper—a calligraphic visual art experience. Goodridge (1999) provides many examples of pictorial representation of movement from diverse cultures that could stimulate ideas for students' own discovery of how to graphically record movements. I concur with Kipling Brown (1998b) who advocates for the application of Motif Notation as a way for students to come to know their own cultural “symbolologies” (99). I believe that a wide range of learners might enjoy creating their own graphic notation using learner-centred, discovery-based, physical learning that is analytical, conceptual, creative, and fun.

¹ Assinibone concepts of the cardinal directions, north, south, east and west, contrast with the European view of these as linear directions that stretch away from the person. To the Assinibone they are the tracks of the four winds coming towards a person.

Conclusion

In response to the two questions I posed in the introduction, first, I emphasise how teaching about graphic movement notation as a concept need not threaten individual creativity, creative dance, and inclusive and holistic pedagogy. I have described how this could play out in teaching that engages learners creatively and practically, combining divergent, convergent, critical, and analytical HOT. Furthermore, teachers who may have little or no notation expertise could find an entry point into previously difficult territory. Second, in highlighting analytical understandings about dance, the status of dance education could be enhanced by advocating for political and epistemological parity with the other literacies via collaborations across fields of knowledge.

Stinson (2010) has recently drawn attention to the need to develop dance educators who can think critically about their own and others' ideas because she believes that such thinking will help the field to move forward. Recognising our blind spots is something that Stinson appears to see as an essential part of shaping a profile for sustainable dance education. Graphic notation could well be one of those blind spots.

Could creative, discovery-based interaction with graphically recording movement assist learners in deepening their understanding of systems such as Labanotation and its uses in dance and in other fields of knowledge? Once some appreciation of the concept of graphic notation has been developed, the next step could be learning established systems of movement notation. One immediate challenge, amongst many, is the provision of notation in teachers' professional development, especially at a time, in New Zealand at least, in which the amount of time allotted for dance education is being reduced.

Nevertheless, I argue that experience of the concept of graphic movement notation completes dance literacy in depicting, physically embodying, and translating dance languages through meaningful symbols. Moreover, in creating graphic symbols we get creative about creativity beyond dance making, applying the notion of dance literacy in the fullest sense because educationally the aim is to raise awareness of the concept of graphic notation, just as the dance educational endeavour raises awareness of dance conceptually. Teachers' and learners' perceptions about learning to create graphic notation would bear further inquiry via action research and case studies.

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