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Special Issue: Pedagogy in Theory and Practice in Laban Studies

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Special Issue: Pedagogy in Theory and Practice in Laban Studies

Abstract

This article, by the editor, introduces a Special Issue on pedagogy using Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and notation. The author parallels Rudolf Laban's approach to artistic inquiry, which he called a "thought round," to critical pedagogy, which emerged in the latter half of the 20th century. Theoretical background on the topic of pedagogical theory and practice regarding dance-based dance literacy using reflexivity is explored. LMA, Labanotation, Kinetography Laban, and Motif Notation are discussed in relation to Five Standards of Literacy Pedagogy. The author introduces three articles featured in this special issue that focus on theoretical, philosophical, and epistemological perspectives on pedagogical practices within the realm of Laban Studies.

Keywords

Critical Pedagogy, Kinetography Laban, Laban, Labanotation, Motif Notation, Pedagogy, Reflexivity

Dance-based Dance Literacy using Reflexivity with LMA and Notation

Rudolf Laban lived a life of reflection, reflexivity, exploration, and creativity. Developing and supporting theory and his community of performers were at the root of a complex interchange in his teaching approaches. These interchanges were rich in what is now known as “critical pedagogy,”¹ a term coined in the latter half of the 20th century along with philosophical theories discussed by Michael Apple, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Joe Kincheloe, Peter McLaren, and Patti Lather, to name a few. Critical pedagogue and professor of rhetoric, Ira Shor, writing since the latter 20th century, defines critical pedagogy as:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse.²

While critical pedagogy as a term had not been coined during Laban’s time, I posit that his creative and educational approaches were inherently a practice of critical pedagogy, and using LMA and dance notation were tools in this practice. Critical pedagogy within Laban Studies engages relationships between teaching and learning in a continuous process of unlearning, learning, relearning, reflection, analysis, and evaluation. The tenets of critical pedagogy provide the means through which teachers and students co-construct knowledge and students can take ownership of their learning by way of LMA and dance notation. As an introduction to this special issue on pedagogy in theory and practice of Laban Studies, I will briefly discuss reflexivity and critical pedagogy and referring primarily to the perspective of teaching and learning using Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and dance notation toward dance-based dance literacy.

Kathryn Dawson and Daniel Kelin, educators in theater, describe reflexivity as introspection and reflection, but with an increased level of scrutiny. It requires a willingness to review, update, or reformulate personal beliefs and assumptions to consider what informs who we are as individuals in relation to the world, a process deemed critical for the artist’s craft.³ For Laban, reflexivity was

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum), 1970.

2. Ira Shor, *Empowering Education: Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 129.

3. Kathryn Dawson and Daniel A. Kelin, *The Reflexive Teaching Artist: Collected Wisdom from the Drama/Theatre Field* (Chicago: Intellect, 2014), 35.

likely an everyday practice. Stefanie Sachsenmaier⁴ states that what we now call “reflexivity” Laban described as a “thought round,” in which dance is understood and experienced through the body, mind, and spirit. Laban states,

The form in which I dress my insights gained from a thousand dances, conversations with dancers, writing about dance and movement, further from the teaching rehearsing of dance, is the ‘thought round’ [, and] to grasp thought as a physical, mental and spiritual [*körperlich-seelisch-geistig*] movement is the basic task of the person who creates a ‘thought round’.⁵

Reflexivity is a tenet of critical pedagogy that is referred to primarily in discussions of teaching and learning. Laban honored the body, the intellectual understanding of dance, and the spirit, and he was interested in empowering the dancer to understand the self, the dance, the dancing, and each other through reflexivity. This idea of a “thought round” is a process that includes the physical, mental, and spiritual exploration through dance using LMA, Labanotation/Kinetography, and Motif Notation. This thought round using the tools of Laban Studies provides a method toward achieving dance-based dance literacy.

Laban shaped his inquiry and research in dance and movement to support research into life overall, to support living life fully.⁶ Ironically, dancers sometimes tend to consider LMA or dance notation to be beyond the scope of their normal dance training, unless meaning making through reflexivity is imbedded in theory and dance notation instruction. My question is, if reflexivity is desired, “How do we take strong theoretical systems such as Labanotation/Kinetography, and/or LMA into a classroom and practice a pedagogy that is reflexive rather than focused on authority and dominance?” Laban’s approach would be to model reflexivity within the community. The tenets of critical pedagogy provide the means through which students can take ownership of their learning with Laban Studies, and in which teachers and students co-construct knowledge⁷ with reflexivity in community.

Implying that Laban’s early focus on dance notation seemed not to be explicitly connected to reflexivity and community, Akiko Yuzurihara expresses

4. Stefanie Sachsenmaier, “The World of the Dancer (1920).” In *The Laban Sourcebook*, ed. Dick McCaw (New York: Routledge, 2011), 42.

5. Rudolf Laban, *Die Welt des Tanzers* [*The World of Dancers*] (Stuttgart: Verlag von Walter Seifert, 1920), 14–15.

6. Sachsenmaier, “The World of the Dancer (1920),” 43.

7. Mary F. Belenky, Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger, and Jill M. Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 217.

that Laban's overarching goal was to get Kinetographie codified so that future dancers could perform scored dance works.⁸ Yet we know Laban also wanted to develop a system of communication so dancers and movement educators could use dance notation to deepen understanding of themselves in relation to others and the world. Laban's goals were practical and far reaching. In addition to capturing his dances on paper by representing movement with notation, he felt the need to create a system of graphic writing that provided deep meaning. He states this need in his treatise in the Preface of *Choreutics*,⁹ written in the autumn of 1939, while at Dartington Hall, in Devon, England.

Movement is one of man's languages and as such it must be consciously mastered. We must try to find its real structure and the choreological order [—the grammar and syntax of the language of movement of both the outer form of movement and the inner mental and emotional content—] within it through which movement becomes penetrable, meaningful and understandable. In an attempt to do this, it has been found necessary to use various graphic signs, because words can never be entirely adequate in dealing with the changing nature of the subject before us.¹⁰

Laban inspired Albrecht Knust, Ann Hutchinson Guest, Valerie Preston Dunlop, and their protégés to further develop notation theory and its applications. There was a time when notation courses were taught as a subject of study common in higher education dance degree programs; however, these courses have been diminishing. I hear tales from some notation teachers about how notation courses are being trimmed from curricula or they, themselves, have decided to abandon teaching Labanotation because no one seems interested. There may be a possibility that this assumed “lack of interest” in LMA and/or notation could be linked to LMA or notation being taught as a discrete topic in curricula that warranted little opportunity for students' to relate it to their whole life experience. Empowering students through engagement with notation and pedagogical approaches can be the work of the current notation users, and returning to Laban's tenets of community and reflexivity toward personal meaning making may provide some stability and mobility with these aims.

Additionally, if we teach LMA or dance notation as a tool for understanding dance in a narrow way or one that is only for the few, we potentially lose sight of Laban's goal of having his theories help every dancer to

8. Akiko Yuzurihara, “Historical and Contemporary Schrifftanz: Rudolf Laban and Postmodern Choreography,” *Dance Chronicle* 37, no. 3, (2014): 296.

9. Rudolph Laban, *Choreutics*. Annotated and Edited by Lisa Ullmann. 1966. (Reprint, Dance Books: Alton, Hampton, UK, 2011).

10. *Ibid*, viii.

understand him or herself, others, and the world. Meaning making using Laban's theories is the content of his work; the context in which we engage in his content is the key to dance-based dance literacy for all dancers. Dance notation has to help students to comprehend something contextually that they are not likely to be able to access or understand using their current dance practices.

Laban and his colleagues challenged traditional views and practices, but now Laban's system is codified. This codification creates a new challenge that was not an issue in Laban's time; a codified system means it is complete, and students are faced with learning a system from another time and, hence, are not engaging in the development of that system. Gordon Curl, reviewer of *The Laban Sourcebook*,¹¹ criticizes the scope of the book because none of the eleven chapter authors questioned the content of Laban's works that we are teaching.¹² For example, he said because dance styles are so different today compared to Laban's time maybe teaching Choreutics is no longer relevant. The problem to me seems to be not about whether Choreutics, or any other part of Laban Studies, is outmoded; it seems to be more about the pedagogical application used to unpack and engage in experience using Choreutics. If Choreutics is taught as theory only to be memorized, then the level of student engagement will likely be reduced. I propose that by creating experiences in which students engage in reflexivity in a context that encourages personal meaning-making, students will more likely relate to the content. In hindsight, the personal meaning making is the *theory* of Laban Studies.

On another note about tradition, Dixie Durr¹³ expressed that for too long the field of dance lacked a credible tool for documenting and researching dance, and that one of the key things that Labanotation provides is "credibility to the areas of movement and dance that have long and rightly been criticized for their lack of research and documentation . . ." I do believe Laban Studies and Labanotation heighten scholarly respectability, but we cannot maintain this respect if we do not bring dance notation to dancers through a reflexive process that provides ways for people to adopt it into their lives beyond the classroom. Literacy, the ability to understand ways of making meaning in and through movement and the ability to read and write notated dance, cannot be a tool that we pull down from the shelf now and then. Literacy must be a change in perspective that encompasses everything we do, so users find it imperative, relevant, and indispensable.

11. Dick McCaw, *The Laban Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

12. Gordon Curl, "Book Reviews: *The Laban Sourcebook*, by Dick McCaw," *Research in Dance Education* 13, no. 2 (May 2012): 329–330.

13. Dixie Durr, "Labanotation: Language or Script?" *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 1, no. 3 (1981): 135.

Professor of semiotics, Gunther Kress, expresses that semiotic systems, such as Labanotation, “. . . are deployed according to cultural histories and individuals’ interest in particular social interactions with their distribution of power. . . .”¹⁴ Using Kress’ ideas, in the present theoretical understanding among semiotics theorists, Labanotation is in action when it is being used, and, Kress argues, a transformative theory of semiotics would require that Labanotation is only in action if the users are employing resources and changing and reshaping their use of the symbolic system to frame and serve their own creative interests.¹⁵

The capacity of design [or rather creativity] through the (re-) shaping of the potentials of existing resources is the goal . . . Use is replaced by remaking, which is transformation; and the notion of the semiotic system is now replaced by that of a dynamic, constantly remade and re-organised set of semiotic resources.¹⁶

When personal interest is the motivating force driving use of the semiotic system, “. . . then the shape of existing resources of representation can be explained entirely without any split between the agency of the individual and the determinative power of cultural forms and social structures.”¹⁷ When a person wishes to use a semiotic system in order to communicate for oneself or to others, the person uses representational modes that work best for his or her purposes, selecting and using the tools that seem to best represent the message. This act is about what Kress calls Design or what I would call creativity, and it represents the participant’s transformation, hence engagement.¹⁸

The root of making dance-based dance literacy accessible must start with teachers. Social activist and feminist, bell hooks, states that teachers must be aware of themselves as practitioners and as human beings if they wish to teach students in a non-threatening, anti-discriminatory way.¹⁹ Self-actualization should be the goal of the teacher as well as the students. For Laban, a “thought round” was about critical thinking about dance with embodiment and inquiry into dance. How can we continue to bring students authentically into this process with LMU and dance notation without demonstrating authority and dominance? Dawson and Kelin say it is possible by using pedagogical reflexivity to focus our teaching. To

14. Gunther Kress, “Design and Transformation: New Theories of Meaning.” In *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, ed. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (New York: Routledge, 2000), 157.

15. Ibid., 156.

16. Ibid., 156–57.

17. Ibid., 157.

18. Ibid.

19. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* New York: Routledge, 1994.

support engagement with dance notation in the dance community, we can examine teaching strategies, activities, lesson plans, and training methods used and, subsequently, determine how effectively students engage in and benefit from those choices, and we can question the success of our teaching approaches.²⁰ To engage students with reflexive practices, we can begin by employing these types of activities with LMA and notation: movement experiences with embodiment as meaning making; making associations to dance and to life; inciting symbolic interpretations; observing, reflecting, identifying, analyzing, and meta-analyzing; generating, creating, and applying; and documenting, reading, writing, and sharing.

We can focus students' engagement with LMA and dance notation through Laban's "thought rounds," so students embody, explore, engage, and question. Allowing students to steer the learning is part of critical pedagogy. This means we may need a shift in our pedagogical approaches, and this means we too must take risks. By aiming our dance notation teaching toward a reflexive practice, we may engage many dancers in the creative spirit of working with dance using LMA and notation.

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, at the University of California, Santa Cruz provides Five Standards of Effective Literacy Pedagogy that are aimed to support the education of linguistic and cultural minority students and those placed at risk by factors of race, poverty, and geographic location.²¹ The idea is to make literacy reflexive for these at risk students, rather than merely a set of semiotic codes. While our Laban Studies community is not at risk due to factors of race, poverty, or geographic location, LMA- and notation-literate dancers are a cultural minority within the field of dance because the semiotic system has often been situated in curricula in a way that does not give students agency for adapting and modifying the framework to serve the breadth of their needs. Dance notation has been praised for raising the reputation of dance to a scholarly level equal to that of music,²² but due to the lack of creative engagement with Laban Studies, it remains accessible most often to small circles of theoreticians who care about its accuracy possibly more than its flexibility, and, hence, many dancers remain in distant relationships with LMA and dance notation. We would be wise to bring our attention to the five Standards of Effective Literacy Pedagogy that are aimed to support the education of

20. Dawson and Kelin, *The Reflexive Teaching Artist: Collected Wisdom from the Drama/Theatre Field*, 31.

21. Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, University of California Santa Cruz, "Research Evidence: Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy and Student Outcomes." (Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, University of California Santa Cruz.) <http://crede.berkeley.edu/pdf/rr01.pdf>, 1997. 2.

22. Durr, "Labanotation: Language or Script?," 132–138.

linguistic and cultural minority students to inform how LMA and dance notation can move from a minority of dance learners to a majority.

These five standards—with my added focus on LMA and dance notation—are, (1) Engage in joint productive activity with teacher and students producing [with LMA and dance notation] together, (2) Develop language and literacy across the curriculum, [not just in LMA and dance notation classes], (3) Make meaning by connecting [dance-based dance literacy activities] with students' lives, (4) Teach complex thinking [with LMA and dance notation activities], (5) Teach [with LMA and dance notation] through conversation in community.²³ Meaning making in connection to students' lives and joint productive activity between teacher and students seems to be critical for dance notation to be valued and sustained.

Inside the Special Issue

Today's dance and movement educators enter a field that presents multiple challenges and diverse needs. This Special Issue on Pedagogy explores how the field of Laban Studies provides applications of Laban's work in dance education environments revealing pedagogical frameworks, philosophical theories, aesthetic structures, and pedagogical applications. The articles in this issue look at teaching philosophies, practices, and approaches within the canon of Laban Movement Analysis, Kinetography-Labanotation, and Motif Notation.

The first article, by Sherrie Barr, explores the writings of Laban and his collaborators through a pedagogical lens that reveals philosophical underpinnings of a transformative teaching-learning paradigm, one that shares characteristics with the field of critical pedagogy. From mining this literature, a platform to remediate Laban Studies as a pedagogical praxis in today's 20th century world comes to light.

The second article, by Livia Fuchs and János Fügedi, presents how Hungarian modern dancers—suppressed and restricted during the era of Communist control (1949–1989)—fortunately had used Laban-Kinetography to record their dances. Recently discovered Laban-Kinetography dance scores have been analyzed, thus providing new inroads into understanding long lost modern dance movement forms, concepts, and theories used by a canon of 1930s Hungarian modern dance choreography of the Szentpál School.

In this Special Issue on Pedagogy, we learn about authors' insights into pedagogical practices surrounding theoretical, philosophical, and epistemological perspectives that have guided pedagogical practices in Laban Studies. We learn how, in the diverse spectrum of dance/movement training, critical studies, and

23. *Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, University of California Santa Cruz*, 9–12.

education, Laban Studies pedagogy supports learners. The authors share how pedagogy in Laban Studies fosters teacher and student engagement with exploring, creating, reflecting, analyzing, communicating, and teaching with these movement-based theory systems. I hope you gain some new insights into your own work with Laban studies, so the discussion will continue to build bridges in our community.

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