

# Why Dance Literacy?

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[The dancer] used his weight to manipulate the sculpture. He swayed, pulled, flipped, bent, and climbed over and around the sculpture until it seemed as though his body was just an . . . extension of it.

[*Circle Walker*] reminded me of DaVinci's drawing showing the proportions of the human body ... it combined rigid geometric aspects of the sculpture with organic movement.

My favorite part was when the dancer was crawling upside down, hanging onto the frame, inches from the floor while the sculpture rolled over him.

Eleventh grade language arts students wrote these bits of dance description and interpretation. They are responding to a videotape of *Circle Walker*, a dance created by Alan Boeding in 1985.<sup>1</sup> The dance is a duet between a man and a large, mobile, metal sculpture that looks a bit like a giant dream catcher rotated on some central pivot into perpendicular halves. As the students describe, the piece is an exchange of muscle and energy, as the dancer initiates and guides, enjoys and responds to the sculpture's motion (Fleck 2005).<sup>2</sup>

I begin here in hope that the reader will consider the contents of the writings and their potential for teaching dance. In the writings, students begin to attend to the kinesthetic properties of dance – bodily position, deployment of weight, sense of tension or freedom in the muscles – and to retell their experience in words. They describe the images called up by the dance through metaphors, venture their own opinions, and form meaning by drawing on their past experiences of motion, everyday life, and other subject areas. They are learning about dance while sharpening their language skills and beginning to engage in the cross-disciplinary, cross-experience thinking that builds understanding and sparks creativity (Robinson 2006).

The question that is my title – *Why dance literacy?* – is inspired by a comment made after I delivered a 2007 conference paper in which I discussed the terms 'dance appreciation' and 'dance literacy'. An audience member worried that my preferred term – literacy – had a harsh ring and seemed to create a distance from art, while cosying up (inappropriately?) with language and

reading. For dance readers familiar with the work of Tina Hong (2000) or the curriculum development project *Accelerated Motion: Towards a New Dance Literacy* the use of the term won't be surprising.<sup>3</sup> Nor will it be to educators familiar with the work of Henry Giroux (1992a and b) and Elliot Eisner (1998) who discuss literacy as the ability to shape and understand meanings available in any number of expressive systems including language, media, the arts, and popular culture (see especially Eisner 1998, p. 12). On the one hand, the concept of dance literacy is important as it calls into question the centrality of particular forms of literacy in schooling.<sup>4</sup> On the other, applying the term 'literacy' to dance dignifies an arts practice that has been traditionally ignored within schools and calls us to ask questions about its potential contribution as a way of knowing and field of inquiry in general education.

In using the term 'dance literacy', I also recognise the broad, interdependent bodily and intellectual skills, sensitivities, and knowledges needed to create and understand dance. What Howard Gardner's (1983, 1993) concept of multiple intelligences did for our recognition that people might be 'dance smart,' the idea of literacy does for our recognition of dance as a field of human achievement with established knowledges, practices, and literatures.

### **Recovering the body**

I see reading and writing, those activities most associated with the term literacy, as vital to our abilities to think, create and share information, and to participate in society. I believe that dancing affords those same possibilities. What might it mean, not only for dance-interested people like me, but for all students, to move the expressive body in from the margins of schooling?

I hesitate to suggest that movement experience is necessary to learning, as people have varying degrees of mobility and differing sensory acuities, but it's clear that we integrate sensory information, thought, emotions, and actions to assign meaning to experience and in making experience meaningful. In *Homo Aestheticus* (1995), Ellen Dissanyake makes the claim that

[T]he best and most comprehensive way to regard most experiences is to recognize that they are simultaneously perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and operational. Thoughts and percepts have emotional concomitants; emotions and percepts are mental events; thoughts and emotions are often induced by perceptions; many percepts, thoughts, and emotions presuppose or lead to action.

(p. 30)

At the very least, movement provides another means of connecting up experience through the body (as would touching, seeing, hearing, smelling, and voicing), that helps students understand the materials, ideas, and information found in schooling.<sup>5</sup>

Karen Kransky, in her 2004 dissertation, *Imagery, Affect, and the Embodied Mind: Implications for Reading and Responding to Literature*, and Madeline Grumet, whose 1988 book *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* is an important source for Kransky, explore the roots of reading in human action and the

pleasures and possibilities of moving reading back into action. Grumet introduces the term 'bodyreading' as an extension of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'body-subject', which holds that we perceive and comprehend everyday experience through the body and its relationship to the world.

Kransky discusses the body as important to cognition and to the pleasure that we find in reading. The body is most evident in the early years of teaching reading, as teachers ask children to expressively sound out phonemes, clap out syllables, or respond physically to the rhymes and rhythms of children's literature. But then the body disappears. As Kransky (2004, p. 96) maintains,

[M]odern schooling has functioned in ways that excise the body and the sensual from anything we deem has educational merit for children. Casting aside the phenomenal experience of the reader to accommodate instruction based on a hierarchy of discrete skills and the demand of aligning with policy makers' criteria for 'scientifically-based evidence,' the aesthetics of bodyreading remains exiled as a curriculum project worthy of pursuit.

Drawing on the work of Grumet, Suzanne Langer (1953) and Mark Sadoski and Allan Paivio (2001), Kransky presents the idea that language has emotional and imagistic roots, perhaps based in rituals that linked sounds and actions. She points out, for example, that monks use chanting, or ruminative reading, to rehear and re-experience text. For Kransky, reading is a means of grounding ourselves; a way to bring ourselves back to our emotions and experiences.

Grumet (1998, pp. 132-133) points out the etymology of reading, finding it linked to ruminating (to thinking things over), to giving and receiving counsel, and to explaining the mysterious or obscure. She reminds us that our independent, isolated contact with words begins with the warmly communicative, voice and touch-rich, act of being read to as children. Calling on theories (deconstruction and reader-response) that point to the partiality and multiplicity of texts and the importance of the reader to meaning, Grumet wonders why adult critics may know the pleasures of textual interpretation, while school children are often locked into finding and understanding standard interpretations in the literature they read. Grumet sees a solution in bringing together action and text.

Performance simultaneously confirms and undermines the text. The body of the actor, like the body of the text, stumbles into ambiguity, insinuating more than words can say with gesture, movement, intonation. Mimesis tumbles into transformation, and meaning, taken from the text, rescued from the underworld of negotiation, becomes the very ground of action.

(p. 149)

To restate Grumet's ideas: action makes the student an 'actor' in both theatrical and sociological senses. Her interpretation of the text, as well as her body, gestures, and voice, are considered alongside text and become vital to its meanings. She knows that she is capable of performing—of making a commitment to be present in a public space, and therefore to the text she will

enact and to the people who will receive her performance. She understands that she can influence the intellectual and social discourses of the classroom.

If movement is considered a literacy, what might this do for children who have difficulty reading and writing, but not in expressing themselves physically? This nugget of possibility is included by Christopher Kliewer, Douglas Biklen, and Christi Kasa-Hendrickson in their 2006 article 'Who May Be Literate? Disability and Resistance to the Cultural Denial of Competence':

On Isaac's first day of school, Robbins brought out the book [*Where the Wild Things Are*]. The children listened intently to the familiar story while Isaac sat, a stuffed Max character in his arms, gleefully awaiting each turn of the page. When Robbins got to the illustrations where the character Max engages in dancing rumpus, Isaac could no longer contain himself. He leapt to his feet and began dancing along with the book. Rather than demanding Isaac take his seat, [the teacher] had all of the children start rumpusing! We observed the spinning, giggling children with a degree of wonder, having never considered the possibility of dancing to books at all.

In his previous, segregated program, Isaac's literate possibility was rendered invisible. Amazingly, within 1 hour of starting a new school, Isaac had directly influenced the choice of literature, been part of a peer group focused intently on a book, and demonstrated dance and movement as a mode of symbolic communication that could augment and enhance text and illustrations. In doing so, Isaac took on the role of leader and experienced great literate joy.  
(p. 173)<sup>6</sup>

Would we change our sense of who succeeds in schooling if we valued fluency in nonverbal behavior and in dance?

Dance might also be an important contributor to the cross-disciplinary dialogues that foster both creative and critical thinking. In a compelling, twenty-minute video of his February 2006 TEDTalks presentation, 'Do Schools Kill Creativity?' Ken Robinson discusses intelligence, creativity, and the necessity of the arts to schooling that develops children's creative capacities. Robinson sees traditional public schooling as a product of both industrialisation and academia, of the need to train people for jobs and to attend college. Instead, Robinson says, we need schooling that honors intelligence, which we know to be diverse, dynamic, and distinct. As Robinson (2006) states,

Children need math and they need dance and they need to experience and think across disciplinary lines. Creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value. ... More often than not it comes through the interaction of different interdisciplinary ways of seeing things.

The importance of this to the idea of dance literacy is that we not only honor and nurture those 'distinct' aspects of intelligence linked to dance practice (kinesthetic, spatial, and musical, for example) but that dance moves across interdisciplinary lines as well in integrative experiences. What might be gained, for example, in situating da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* and the *Circle Walker* dance in a math or science class where they might contribute to

discussions of geometric form, mathematical proportion, simple machines, and kinetic energy? And, further, to discussion of critical questions that might be useful in both dance and math such as the idealisation of natural forms through geometry?

Important as new ideas are, the ability to assess, reflect on, and think about the underlying assumptions of ideas and practices – critical thinking – is equally important for students. One well established critical discussion in dance studies is dance as a way of thinking about social and cultural expectations of the body. Petra Kuppers (2000, pp. 122-126), in her 'Accessible Education: Aesthetics, Bodies and Disability', demonstrates the power of rethinking our assumptions about the ballet body. Rather than considering the ballet body perfectly 'abled', she describes it as teetering on the edge of 'immateriality'. Kuppers makes a convincing argument by discussing the emphasis on thinness for ballet dancers and by analysing balletic movement which strives for weightlessness in the lifting of limbs and in jumps and clear lines, rather than speed or force. Thus, she sees that ballet bodies reveal a complex of fears and fascinations in western culture that have to do with hiding women's muscularity and physical forcefulness. The ballet body is not 'perfect' and certainly not 'normal', but built for a particular task that supports a certain value system.

Processes already at work in teen lives make social investigation of the body by drawing together dance observation, discussion, and interaction with various kinds of images and texts compelling. Authors throughout the 2006 collection *Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescent's Lives* contend that a primary form of teen literacy is reading the cross referenced, socially laden information in graphic novels, movies, television, and the like. These skills can be transferred to observing dances, with teens undertaking a rich critical dialogue about the bodies imaged in contemporary media, those seen in various forms of dance and movement practice, and the social values these represent. Considering the restrictive nature of most school-sanctioned bodily behaviors and the no holds barred imagery and behaviors presented through contemporary media, it seems important that young people learn to think in nuanced ways about their bodies and the potential of their bodies as tools for transformation and representation.

### **Dance literacy and dance in education in the United States**

As currently configured, dance is often taught as professional practice, which both honors the value of dance as an art form and leaves dance and dancers with few opportunities for conversations with other subject areas. Dance in colleges and universities in the United States, is usually centred in contemporary or modern dance (and occasionally in ballet or musical theatre). Students are taught dance technique and choreography and offered chances to practice their skills through performances. Other courses like history, criticism, somatics and technology for dance supplement this core curriculum (Hagood 2000). K-12 education in dance often recasts this model in age-appropriate ways, as students primarily study dance technique and make dances with some supplemental study that supports healthy living, an awareness of dance in other eras and places, and an ability to respond to

dancing in discussion and in writing (see the National Dance Standards, <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/teach/standards.cfm>).

Some dance educators don't see the necessity to reach beyond practice, either because of their own trainings or because of the history of dance in higher education. Many cling to the importance of dance as a professional arts practice as this distinction was difficult to achieve. Until the 1970s, dance was considered an adjunct to or women's aspect of physical education. Subsequent conceptual and methodological changes in higher education have fostered new approaches to dance, especially in scholarly areas. Dance researchers now work in many disciplines, among them dance, women's studies, literature, aesthetics, and cultural theory.

For some, the opening of these approaches creates a restlessness with traditional dance curriculum that focuses on the training of the body and the artist, without equally considering questions and perspectives that might bridge practice and theory, art making and scholarship, and create a more integrated dance culture (see for example, Daly (2000), Desmond (2000), Perpener (2000), and Sklar (2000)).

At the same time, arts educators have begun to think about the concept of multiple literacies as applied to dance in K-12 education. Tina Hong (2000, p. 7) in 'Developing Dance Literacy in the Postmodern: An Approach to Curriculum', sees literacy as contributing to a rethinking of disciplinary dance:

Learning in dance education is not to be undertaken in terms of a set of decontextualized skills and competencies to be mastered. Rather it should be understood as open ended and evolving confluences of knowledge, skills, understandings, and dispositions that are socially constructed and contextualized within social events and practices.

Hong sees the New Zealand curriculum as developed from a 'dance as art model or discipline-based model with the consequent content for teaching being drawn predominantly from Eurocentric and western theatre art dance forms' (pp. 12-13). She advocates a more equitable representation of dance styles that confirms the significance of past and current dances from other cultures, and the dances of popular and youth culture.

### **What's in it for students? What's in it for dance?**

At its boldest, then, dance literacy reconfigures the dance curriculum as a set of interconnected knowledges through which we understand the body and movement, how these operate in various dance traditions, and what meanings they might hold for us as individuals and societies. As an activity in which people participate as doers and observers, dance conceived of as a literacy might spill over into many subject areas with any number of outcomes: individual physical, creative, and intellectual accomplishment; improved problem solving skills in individual and group settings; improved observation and writing skills; critical understanding of the body and dance as social constructs; social integration; historical and cultural understanding; and sensual, critical, intellectual, and imaginative engagement. Dance

underscores the importance of bodily experience as an integrative agent in all learning.

In discussing her project working with *Circle Walker* and dance writing, Feck (2005, pp. 3-4) states that, in addition to serving as a way to heighten observation and recall skills and linguistic abilities, that dance writing 'holds untapped potential as a vital player in the overall project of understanding dance'. Calling dance in K-12 schooling and concert dance 'endangered species', Feck notes that both face increasing pressures. In schools, dance is often left out of the arts curriculum or the first subject area to go as budgets tighten. Increased affection for dance within the general public is important as concert dance faces stiff competition for audiences from films, television, and the Internet.

The idea of dance literacy is one means of accomplishing what Thomas Hagood (2000, pp. 317-319) calls for as he concludes his *A History of Dance in American Higher Education: Dance and the American University*:

We must help the ... field expand its notions of the merit and worth of dance related pedagogy, develop multicultural appreciation, and theoretical inquiry. Excellence in dance education must be referenced not only to professional art standards, but also to individual creativity, to cultural understandings, to theoretical appreciation, and to intellectual and kinesthetic development.

This doesn't preclude dance as professional practice, but it does move dancers beyond considering dance as 'my work' – which tends to ghettoise or rarify dance and dancers – and into thinking about dance as part of the social and cultural fabric. For dancers worried about losing the practice-based center of dance as art, I offer the image of the dancer and the Circle Walker, their interaction enhancing the ways in which each moves, and their emanations spilling out into our lives.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Some idea of the dance can be had by visiting Richfields Productions' website: <http://www.richfieldproductions.com/screening.html>. A clip of the dance (or something very like Boeding's dance) can be seen integrated into an advertisement: The Circle Walker Corporate Recruitment TV Spot. Imagine an extended version of the brief sample seen here, to music, without the fog, and extracted from the advertising context. Seeing the work contextualised this way makes an interesting case for the need for both media literacy and dance literacy. Within this corporate context, the dancer is discussed as an 'acrobat' and appears as a stand in for 'professionals in systems management and integration' who are 'harnessing' technology and, to my eyes, using the technology to soar above or to overcome. This sense that the man is in control of the machine is especially interesting as, according to the ad, the advertiser, Sperry, makes 'defense electronic systems'. Boeding's dance, in contrast, is a collaboration between dancer and device that has elements of danger and involves a careful monitoring and respect for the power of the device. Sorting out the

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relationship between the dance and the ad would be an interesting project. Boeding's name is not mentioned as part of the production of this ad and a date for the ad doesn't appear. Boeding's dance is dated 1985 and Sperry became part of Unisys in 1986. The ad may have existed before the dance.

<sup>2</sup> Candace Feck collected this data as part of a 2005 project in Columbus-area public schools. I appreciate her support of my current use of her data.

<sup>3</sup> My writing stems from my own experience of dance literacy as an academic working in the United States. As the scholars who reviewed my paper for the World Dance Alliance Proceedings remarked, scholars from Australia, New Zealand, India, and elsewhere around the world have made differing use of this term. An expanded treatment of this subject might compare these bodies of thought. The work of New Zealand-based scholar Tina Hong has been especially influential in the US. In the United States, use of the term 'dance literacy' includes the project Accelerated Motion: Towards a New Dance Literacy in America, <http://acceleratedmotion.wesleyan.edu/>, and writings by Loren Bucek (1998), and Brenda Pugh McCutchen (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Henry Giroux, in his 1992 'Resisting Difference: Cultural Studies and the Discourse of Critical Pedagogy,' lists 'cultural remapping' among six points for a liberatory 'border' pedagogy, for its attention to students and subjects marginalised in traditional schools.

<sup>5</sup> I am leaving important resources unexplored and potent connections unmade. See Mark Johnson's 1987 *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Sue Stinson for calling this article to my attention and for her help with this article.

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