

Body, language, curriculum: An investigation of meaning-making in dance education

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Abstract

This paper is an excerpt from a larger doctoral dissertation using a qualitative case study approach to investigate the teaching practices of two middle school dance educators in Ohio, USA. Beginning with a focus on the issue of content frameworks, curriculum documents that describe the elements of dance to be used in dance education settings, this research seeks to understand the ways that dance teachers implement them to promote meaning-making in dance education. In this study, one educator implemented a content framework that was based on Laban Movement Analysis, but which reflected her own understandings and choices regarding emphasis and sequencing. The curriculum in another dance classroom did not heavily emphasize the elements of dance, instead relying on a complex arrangement of signs mediated by the teacher, which did not clearly resemble the content frameworks established in curriculum documents. Building on the idea that both approaches promote excellence in dance education, a model of thinking about content frameworks, based on the ideas of an emerging lexicon and teachers as connoisseurs of dance-making, is developed. Implications for researching and creating a dance curriculum based on this understanding are considered, including the positioning of cultural characteristics of dance within content frameworks and the development of connoisseurship in future dance educators.

Keywords: curriculum, content frameworks, elements of dance, semiotics, middle school

In starting this research, I asked, “How do dance teachers speak about dance with their students?” When teaching, I noticed I spent a lot of time verbally guiding students through movement activities; when I deliberately introduced terminology, students would often choose to use the same words when describing their own experiences. Faced with multiple options for conceptualizing and teaching similar ideas, I wondered how other teachers might choose. The more specific question, “What terms, vocabularies, and analytical frameworks are implicitly and explicitly in place in dance classrooms?” also guided my research. I wanted to know, “How do these unfold in actual classroom practice, toward the ends of meaning-making in dance?” This idea of meaning-making can also be understood as *semiosis* within the philosophical domain of semiotics, which invites a larger conception beyond natural language and taxonomies to encompass all signs. Thus, I broadened my questions to include, “How are these part of a larger semiotic process in dance education?”

I was recently a member of our state curriculum writing team for dance. In this process, some challenges arose when we wanted to state that students should “use dance terminology” or “investigate dance concepts”; following that, the obvious questions are, “which terminology,” or “what concepts?” Knowing that this is very value-laden terrain, we were worried about imposing

our own favored vocabularies over other equally valid ones. I have also been part of a group looking at various content frameworks in dance. Although this can be approached as a theoretical task of document analysis, I find it important to consider how these unfold in classroom practice and how we can situate these curriculum efforts in real-life contexts.

Research methods

This study used a qualitative case study approach to investigate the teaching practices of two experienced educators at the middle school level who teach dance classes that were offered as part of the regular school day. This approach promotes in-depth, up-close experience with the phenomena under investigation and allows for changes in the research questions as the context becomes known. The concept of “triangulation” was used with multiple sources of data, including interviews, observations, and collection of related documents.

I chose two dance educators whom their peers regard as excellent, and who each have over 15 years of teaching practice, as well as graduate degrees and professional certification. One teaches in a private school for girls and the other works in an urban public school with an arts emphasis. As I worked with these dance teachers, my focus was to start with an assumption of excellence and to investigate the “myriad ways in which goodness can be expressed” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9).

What is “curriculum”?

Because the issue of content frameworks, the laying-out of the “elements of dance” and key components of dance-making, takes place in an overall project of curriculum design, it is helpful to revisit what we mean by *curriculum*. Often, people use this term to refer only to the planning of curriculum, or only to the documents and policies that forecast what should occur in the classroom, in addition to the tangible texts that support it.

However, if we return to Goodlad (1979), an influential scholar in curriculum studies, we are reminded that curricula exist within multiple intersecting domains: the *ideal*, being the ideologies that influence our thinking about what is worth knowing and teaching; the *formal*, or the clear documents, policies, and texts; the *operational*, or the curriculum that actually gets shared in the classroom; the curriculum that the teacher *perceives* herself to be teaching; and the curriculum that students *experience*. Collectively, curriculum is really about the lived experience of the entire learning community, a wide-encompassing definition that allows for multiple conceptions, but also makes study challenging. Therefore, while categorization schemes, such as Goodlad’s, provide an important reminder that any one instantiation of curriculum cannot stand for the whole, we also must be mindful not to rely on them as an oversimplification of an infinitely complex process.

I primarily focused on the operational curriculum: that which I was able to witness in the classroom and performances, and the perceived curriculum as the teachers recounted it to me. Although the experienced curriculum of the students is incredibly important, it was beyond the scope of my capabilities in this project. Investigating just this slice of curriculum helped illuminate the complex nature of curriculum and also firmly laid to rest any illusions I might have held that formal curriculum documents are easily or directly translated into classroom practice.

Content frameworks and formal curricula

The necessity of content frameworks for dance within the formal curriculum is not surprising. They clearly delineate the “what” of dance, and serve an important function in communicating what students should know and be able to do. In the United States, many of the content frameworks that are in use have been influenced by the work of Rudolph Laban, Margaret H'Doubler, their colleagues and students, and the many other pioneers in the field of creative dance. Many of our curriculum documents clearly draw upon frameworks that are organized around elements such as body, space, shape, time, movement qualities, and relationships. The specific components that are subsumed under each category, and the way these are arranged, show differences that some might perceive as minimal, while others, well-versed in the nuances of particular categorization schemes, find quite substantial.

When I looked at how these various frameworks are implemented in the lessons taught by the two teachers I worked with, I sometimes saw little resemblance to the clear structures laid out in many of the content frameworks or the curriculum guidelines that are ostensibly guiding their work, such as our state and national dance standards.

Observations in the dance classes

One middle school dance class was primarily focused on contemporary technique. It is a one-semester course that must prepare students with some foundational skills so that they may participate in the high school dance program. The teacher, whom I will call Kate, has significant training in Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and in teaching technique based on LMA. It was very apparent that LMA permeates her class and forms a significant component of her work. This is a deliberate choice for several reasons: her students enter with very little prior school-based dance experience and she needs to make movement concepts accessible and help them to become confident, efficient movers. Her own experience working with LMA has led her to appreciate it as an ideal tool for accomplishing these goals.

Even here, where LMA, an established framework, is clearly being implemented in a thoughtful, sequential, and developmentally-appropriate manner, it is not as clear or balanced as many content frameworks would suggest. While a framework alone does not specify sequence, it is interesting to note which ideas are presented as foundational to others. In Kate's class, *space* served as a primary entry point, with students learning movements drawn from Laban's dimensional scale and in the horizontal, vertical, and saggittal planes. Body patterning from Bartenieff Fundamentals was emphasized, particularly in the warm-ups, and together these led into explorations of three-dimensional space, with attention to shaping, such as arcing and spoking, terms frequently used in her early lessons. As I watched her classes unfold, the emphasis on space – both as a technical element and later as a metaphorical idea spurring imagery for improvisation – seemed crucial. In contrast, *relationship* as a broad theme was almost never explicitly explored when I observed, though students did ample partnering and group work activities.

In Janet's curriculum at the other school, the “elements of dance,” as discrete categories to be referenced in a lesson, were far less visible. This is due in part to the fact that courses at this school are mostly a full-year in duration. I observed during the second half of the year, as

students were preparing choreography for a performance. Janet indicated that her earlier lessons had referenced these concepts more directly, but during my observations, the elements of dance did not seem to be a large part of the discourse in this classroom. If I had to impose them for purposes of loosely categorizing what I observed, broadly speaking, *body* would have been the primary emphasis in terms of body actions generated and replicated in the process of creating choreography. *Relationship*, although again not explicitly framed as a lesson goal, was significant in that as students prepared for performances, the spatial relationships among dancers were frequently referenced. *Time*, *space*, *shape*, and *movement qualities* were all certainly present – how could they not be? – but served neither as a focal point of instruction nor as a key element for developing choreography.

Janet’s class, then, really complicated my thinking about the issue of frameworks. There was plenty of text on the walls of her studio but very little in the way of an “elements of dance” chart as I had seen in other classrooms. Yet, a lot of rich teaching was happening in her class and a vocabulary was certainly present, though it was not clearly discernible and did not fall into a neat word>concept>movement structure that marks many content frameworks.

What I saw unfolding in Janet’s class resists any easy comparison with an existing framework. In one of our interviews, she discussed her dissatisfaction with the common “space-time-energy” understanding of dance, and mentioned that for a time, she did not even teach it in her classes. Recognizing that it had some utility and represented a vocabulary her students might need to be familiar with as they moved on to high school, she began to bring it back as part of her introductory lessons early in the school year. A written examination given to the 8th grade class referenced some of these same terms as well. But by and large, the sense I got from her classes was that any conception of dance elements as a driving force in the curriculum was largely absent.

I want to again reiterate that Janet is an incredibly skilled teacher, and that I entered her classroom with the intent of asking “what is good here?” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9) rather than imposing external ideas about what “should” happen in dance education. Indeed, approaching her classroom with a rubric that places extreme value on the “elements of dance” in any commonly published configuration would be to miss what is interesting and valuable about what is going on. To adequately think about the language and other signs I saw unfolding in Janet’s studio, I needed a different approach.

The emerging lexicon and teachers as connoisseurs

Interestingly, I found the work of dance critic Marcia Seigel (2007) to provide a different way of thinking about the “framework” I saw enacted in Janet’s class. Seigel explains her process of creating a “performance lexicon” for the dances she writes about, where she generates a list of features salient to a dance as she progresses through multiple viewings. The categories and terms used in her writing are not decided upon beforehand, but “emerge” from her interactions with the work. Seigel certainly relies on her observational skills developed partly through LMA training, but rejects LMA as a complete categorization scheme that can be adopted wholesale into the discussion of complex choreographies from diverse cultural positions.

While teachers are not critics, and thus Seigel's model is not a direct fit, we can find similarities. Both teachers and critics develop considerable expertise about dance as an art form and cultural phenomena, and have the task of helping others to understand, appreciate, and develop interest in it. Neither critics nor teachers are neutral conduits of information; both actively contribute to the construction of meaning through their work. While a critic's work may proceed somewhat linearly, for the dance teacher, a back-and-forth process of discussing and dancing means that she may never assert a finished statement about a work, and instead operates in an ongoing, open dialogue. Therefore, we need a more nuanced and flexible concept beyond simply adopting a "teacher-as-critic" understanding regarding the lexicon of a dance class.

To better think about what it is that teachers do, I first want to consider what it is that they are concerned with. While critics write primarily about finished works, teachers work in a process-oriented environment where they must discuss multiple aspects of dance. Here I propose to use the term *dance-making*, not as a synonym for the act of choreography or composition, but as a much larger construct encompassing all the ways that dances come into being as meaningful entities, including dancing, performing, improvising, viewing, writing, notating, teaching, learning, and so on.

Being so deeply concerned with dance-making, teachers – dance-makers themselves – become connoisseurs as they develop expertise and the abilities to perceive and attend to the qualities present. Connoisseurship is a term used by Eliot Eisner (1998), which he defines as "the means through which we come to know the complexities, nuances, and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have a special interest" (p. 68). Teachers attend to a myriad of qualities related to the multiple facets of dance-making; through their practice, they come to know a range of qualities and building on these, make judgments about their value (Eisner, 1998, p. 70). As connoisseurs of dance-making, teachers do, of course, need labels for the qualities they discern in the multiple processes they interact with. Here is where we return to the idea of the emerging lexicon.

As teachers notice and guide their students to attend to different aspects of dance-making, these labels become important for categorizing and organizing information. This lexicon emerges continually when teachers respond to students, plan and present lessons, and verbalize their processes, and it is intimately connected to the dances being created and studied. One significant outcome of understanding dance educators as connoisseurs of dance-making, who develop an emerging lexicon through their teaching practice, is that such an orientation situates the teacher as an expert, not as recipient and deliverer of curriculum materials generated elsewhere. It challenges us to start with teachers, in dialogue with their students, if we are to really understand the frameworks as systems of signs being used in dance education.

Mapping the lexicon

As I progress from this point in my research, several possibilities emerge. By thinking about teachers' frameworks as emerging lexicons, I am then led to think about the challenge of "mapping" these lexicons at the moment I witnessed them. One difficulty in borrowing Seigel's (2007) notion of emerging lexicon is that it tends to traffic in words; to map out the lexicon of a dance classroom where the teacher is engaged in an ongoing, dynamic act of connoisseurship

necessitates a range of sign types including music, props, costuming, and arrangement of physical space as part of a multimodal lexicon.

As I begin to map Janet's lexicon, I notice that a recurring categorization she used was “African derived dance characteristics.” While attention to cultural dance forms is given in most US dance curriculum documents, these characteristics are not framed as part of the dance elements. Considering how this might shift into a primary analytical category has profound implications for our understanding of content and reminds us that seemingly neutral categories are not so. Indeed, the concept of culture – and therefore cultural characteristics – as primary “elements” in dance are not often included; instead, it is assumed that terms like Laban’s can be used adequately to neutrally describe the characteristics that are then classified as “cultural.”

Within Janet’s lexicon, verbal vocabulary concerned with movement was only a small part of the content. A number of the dances relied on props to establish and reinforce meaning not only for student performers, but for audience members as well. These props, along with some inclusion of popular music, created a robust framework of meaning and potentially could serve as entry points for discussion of dance with those outside the classroom. Props served as a very tangible symbol within the choreography that enabled Janet to communicate some of the more abstract themes of the dances, such as social justice. Rather than being an add-on to a construction of meaning that relied on explicit teaching of prescribed elements, the props and music that Janet used in her dance-making functioned as important signifiers that promoted a rich dance experience for her students that may not have been as accessible had formal vocabulary been the entry point.

Implications

The most significant implication of this work is to underline that creating curricula is a process of lived experience of learning. Researching and creating curricula cannot be separate endeavors. If we are to re-vision our formal curriculum documents, we cannot do so from a strictly theoretical stance based on entrenched models. Instead, we must attend to what experienced classroom teachers are actively creating in their classrooms and the ways that they work with students to create meaning in dance.

Such an approach has the potential to seriously challenge many of the curriculum models that have been in place. For instance, the separation of the “content” of dance as a list of formal elements from the “context” of dance, where culture resides, not only has the possibility of firmly establishing one while allowing the other to slip past unnoticed, but also does not reflect the way all teachers teach. Thoroughly considering the practices and perspectives of a range of dance teachers, including those from cultural minority groups and those who may be dissatisfied with current trends in dance education, would open the door for curriculum theorizing and creation on a more complex and inclusive plane.

Furthermore, this research also has implications for teacher education. Future teachers will best be served, not by being given a set of terms from which they may build lessons, but by engaging in opportunities that develop the skills and tools needed to become dance-making connoisseurs themselves. When teachers are able to evaluate ideas, appreciate the nuances of dance, and address the constraints and opportunities in their own contexts, then they may foster an emerging

lexicon in their own particular environments that responds to the needs and interests of all dance makers.

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All citations of this paper from this source should include the following information:

In S.W. Stinson, C. Svendler Nielsen & S-Y. Liu (Eds.), *Dance, young people and change: Proceedings of the daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit*. Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan, July 14th – 20th 2012. <http://www.ausdance.org/> [Accessed on xx date]
ISBN 978-1-875255-19-1