How to match dance and assessment: An unlikely pair?

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Abstract

Our proposal is to analyze the phenomenon of dance's assessment tools concerning choreography and some of the intangible concepts such as "creativity, risk, originality or artistic thinking" (Kranicke & Pruitt, 2012, p. 113). The main concern in the relation between the creative process guided by the teacher and the product achieved and analyzed by the student is the question of "What if?" and "What did I achieve?" The questions and concerns addressed here are: a) What processes and tools can be used to help deepen our knowledge and understanding of dance as a reflective practice? (Tembrioti & Tsangaridou, 2014)?; b) How to assess creativity and help students became more creative in their work. (Brookhart, 2013; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013); and c) How to assess vulnerabilities and mistakes, and deal with the unknown or even with some constraints that are often part of an opportunity to improve dance's creative competencies? (Elisondo, Donolo, & Rinaudo, 2013; Lee, 2013). We have adopted a case study approach of university dance students as the starting point in our research. The analysis was based on qualitative methods of gathering information: participation observation; self-viewing students; and content analysis of the learning students' portfolios and logbooks. We concluded that the use of meta-cognitive strategies seems favorable (Biasutti, 2013) and more thorough because of the right questions being posed throughout the process, and also due to the assistance of the rubrics and their defined criteria and achievement levels. Students present a high level and detailed analysis of their creative process, revealing reflective competencies. This study has highlighted the role of dance assessment play as a strategic learning tool in choreography, thinking, searching, and making. It is in fact a paradigm shift to consider dance and assessment as a facilitator for learning openly "new ways of seeing, doing, and reflecting" (Monteiro, 2012, p. 92).

Keywords: assessment, tools, choreography, creativity, constraints

Are Dance and Assessment an Unlikely Pair?

We all know that assessment in dance is a controversial issue and even a scary task, especially if we think that to assess is to grade and qualify this performing art. How to deal, then, with the inevitable subjectivity? In our opinion, this way of thinking is very narrow. Grading could be select and elect, but it is much more than this. It can be a learning tool. That's why it is important to share some thoughts within the context of creating dance and to think about this process, to generate movement ideas, and to refine and shape them (Humphreys & Kimbrell, 2013).

And a question comes to mind: What if? Let's imagine: What if dance and assessment become lovers? Or as friends, can both dance and assessment take a 5 o'clock tea or another drink together? Why not? More seriously, however, is the main question: What is most important for teaching, and essentially for learning? We are talking about formative assessment. Hattie and Timperley (2007) characterized formative assessment as three questions to be asked by teachers and students: Where are we going? Where are we now? Where to go next? And then there is the addition, from us, of another question: How do you go? What do you get and what do you need? Why to go? So we want to consider assessment as a learning-strategy facilitator, which allows us to identify where students are in their education, where they need to go, and the best way to get there, as Andersson (2014) pointed out. We could say that assessment for learning is currently a concept. As teachers, we should leave our footprint in the teaching methods, strategies, approaches, and tasks we plan, implement, refine, and restructure in order to help students learn.

According to the Experiential Learning Theory, learning is experience, and following Kolb's system, there are two decisions in our learning process: (1) how do we approach experience (do we prefer to see or to do?); (2) how is our emotional answer to experience (do we prefer to think or to feel?). It is not obviously a black or white option, but a continuum for perception, our emotional answer (1), and a continuum to process (e.g., how we approach a task), (2).

There are of course other paradigms and models concerning learning and its relation to creativity, namely humanism, and viewing learning as the student's central issue. With a humanistic point of view, we see learners with affective and cognitive needs, and we view learning as a personal act to fulfill one's potential. But there's also the so-called "21st Century Skills," the P21 (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009), or another model, the Multi-Intelligences

Theory by Howard Gardner, learning models that are based on learning innovation skills, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, making connections, and problem solving. The important thing is not how we teach, but how we teach students to learn (Gardner, 2010). Finally, we highlight the Affordance Theory, seeing affordances as possibilities for action, pointing "both ways, to the environment and to the observer" (Gibson, 1979, p. 129).

In summary, all of these strategies, among others, can contribute to explaining how to work and deal with creativity. We implement the affordance and P21 perspectives to deal with creativity in a choreographic context.

Creative processes

As Zeng, Proctor, and Salvendy (2011) point out, some research about creativity establishes a parallel with divergent thinking, but we know that parallel thinking does not capture all aspects of the creative process. And to be creative is not an abstraction. We need to produce, to do something, as the author Sir Ken Robinson said in his Ted Talk "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" in 2007 when he asked if we can assess creativity. And probably the foremost characteristic of creative students is that they put things together in new ways (Brookhart, 2010). The creative process involves three distinct but related concepts: being imaginative, creative, and innovative.

And sometimes we want to open new doors with old keys. How can we?" you might ask. Developing creativity requires effort, work, and risk, as well as new ways and new mistakes. That is why if we want students' creative behaviors, we must provoke their happening. How? One way is by the notion of critical areas leading to the emergence or need of new behaviors. Adaptation is a dynamic concept that occurs when students achieve their goals. How students handle the clues provided by their teacher, and how they select part of the material (e.g., movement, action, gesture, feeling, mood, space, time, dynamic, embodied learning, kinesthesia, empathy, etc.) while searching different ways to exhibit it is what we considered more interesting in this creative process and what we want to discuss here.

You could say that this making is more like reshaping, but you will see that it is not. In process, it transforms a student's identity into his/her own signature. And how can we do that? We can provoke new opportunities for action because perception drives action, as the affordance theory suggests. And this means also that the student has to be out of his/her comfort zone,

adhering to the constraints we propose.

How can we lead them to this critical zone? As we said before, we need to create the manipulation of task constraints so that innovative and meaningful behaviors can emerge toward the creation of new opportunities for action. This new opportunity by a moving body, like an "invitation for action," is what "affordance" means. It's a balance between adaptability (e.g., interaction between a person and their practical context, and variability (spatial, temporal, instrumental, and human). One way to develop it is through a metacognitive strategy, like a plan of action, using explicit teaching methods that must accurately represent the learning task.

So in our work, we use these types of strategies and procedures combined with some assessment tools, and we want to look deeper into some of the intangible concepts such as "creativity, risk, originality or artistic thinking" (Kranicke & Pruitt, 2012, p. 113). We all know that the guiding force behind learning should be creativity, risk-taking, originality, or artistic thinking, and the assessment tools should support the learning process.

In order to implement this study, we would like to present the research questions following the studies of Tembrioti and Tsangaridou (2014); Brookhart (2013); Kaufman and Beghetto (2013); Elisondo, Donolo, and Rinaudo (2013): What processes and tools can be used to help deepen the knowledge and understanding of dance as a reflective practice? Does the assessment tool clearly communicate the assessment's tasks and goals? Does the assessment tool invite the students to be engaged? Do the students find meaning in the assessment task? How can we assess creativity in this process and help students became more creative in their work? How should we assess the unknown and its constraints as an opportunity to improve creative dance competencies?

Recent research indicates that metacognitively aware learners are more strategic and perform better than unaware learners, allowing students to plan, sequence, and monitor their learning in order to improve performance. Students need to develop *creative metacognition*, a combination of contextual knowledge and creative self-knowledge.

Continuous knowledge of cognition corresponds to what students already know about themselves and also to the conditions under which strategies are most useful for them. The metacognitive exercise of figuring out how they know what they know about the learning that took place can be not only an invaluable learning tool, but can also help participants take responsibility for their own learning, allowing them to "think about thinking." That's what

metacognition is all about.

Basically, we want to analyze and use reflective skills, allowing for innovation and continuous research with the potential to provide the flow cycle of the five potential benefits of assessment (Kniffin & Baert, 2015, p. 15):

COMMUNICATION — Does the assessment tool clearly communicate the assessment tasks, goals, and scoring rubrics, thus creating a strong *communication* bridge between the teacher and the students? If the communication bridge is weak, can it be strengthened?

ENGAGEMENT — Does the assessment task provide opportunities for *engagement* by offering various developmentally appropriate challenge levels that are closely associated with the assessment goals? In short, does the assessment tool invite the students to be engaged?

OWNERSHIP — Is the assessment tool clear enough that it will allow students to be actively involved in the assessment tasks? Hence, does the tool allow for students to take *ownership* of their own learning?

VALUE — Do students find meaning in the assessment task? Therefore, does the tool display an authentic assessment task that increases the likelihood for students to *value* the assessment as part of the learning process?

REFLECTION — Are the assessment tasks and goals coupled with open-ended *reflection* questions that will help students to create meaningful connections to enhance their own learning within the activity?

The reflective process called Eyes See/Mind Sees helps students to make meaning of choreographed movement studies (Kimbrell, 2012).

Some valuable assessment tools
We would like to talk about our experience with graduate students of dance choosing

their own paths in creative skills in choreography-making. Over the last three years, we implemented several strategies, procedures, and assessment tools among dance graduates in order to achieve a positive impact on creative skills in choreography according to each student's identity and own path. The first thing we need to do is to be willing to create questions in order to have a plan, even if the plan is not to have a plan! You may ask what questions we can ask that will yield useful information about student learning. How do they learn, how can we help them, what strategies, actions, and tasks should we implement? For me, as for other authors, talking about assessment is talking about learning, memory, transfer, adaptability, identity, and considering learners as owners of their own achievement. So, how can we help them? I think that the portfolio is one of the invaluable tools for it.

There are usually three components that typically make up a dance portfolio: content knowledge; work samples with final products as well as drafts, rehearsals, and stimuli; reflective writing about thoughts, their process, and their product, which contributes to the student's self-assessment. But it helps both the student and the teacher to understand how and what he or she has learned. In fact, it is a collection of a student's achievements over a period of time, providing diagnostic information in order to inform instruction, as well as the progress of growth and learning. Moreover, the portfolio might also count as a project for that particular topic of study. It is both form and content that are important issues that contribute to the development of a student's creative way of thinking and doing.

We can say that the portfolio's main advantages demonstrate a) that the student "can do" what has been taught rather than showing that the learner "knows" what has been taught; b) engages students actively; c) provides goals for student learning; d) fosters student-teacher communication and depth of exploration; e) enhances the understanding of the educational process in the community.

As a process, the portfolio is the journey that matters most in terms of reflection and discussing the continuum process product. In composition class, for example, different stages of the process may be required. And a logbook seems also a very adequate tool. We know that subjective assessment can be a scary task, but these diary-like logbook entries give students a chance to explore and express their experience that contributes to their reflective and metacognitive behavior. As we said, it is predominantly a learning tool that gives students a chance to express, examine, and explore their experience.

What matters most?

If you remember, that was the question we considered more important in terms of teaching and, essentially, of learning. Through a learning contract, we defend peer relations among students with their cooperation with the teacher. Restriction strategies also seem to promote innovation and the development of creative skills. A student's learning portfolio, logbooks, and rubrics seem like an invaluable education tool; students present a high level and detailed analysis of their creative process showing reflective competencies concerning their final work. Additionally, all of the tools allow a communication bridge of sorts between teacher and student.

The use of metacognitive strategies seems favorable as we can read in Biasutti (2013) and is better accomplished by putting the right questions throughout the process with the help of an adequate assessment tool. In summary, metacognitive strategies help students understand the way they learn. We can and should amplify students' creative possibilities by asking "what if?" as well as "what did I achieve?" This is the main concern in regard to the creative process guided by the teacher and the product achieved and analyzed by the students. As we said, we intend to contribute both to enhance creative possibilities for students and to the subjacent information between the modes of perception given by the teacher and the perceptive product created by the students, their awareness and self-control.

It is in fact a paradigm shift in teaching to discover, research, support, and develop evidence of dance learning. To open "new ways of seeing, doing and reflecting" (Monteiro, 2012, p. 92) about assessment by questioning and discussing a choreographer's creative choices, by using nonjudgmental observations to guide the subsequent choices made during the creative process, and by acknowledging the nonhierarchical and interdependent roles of the teacher and learner in order to contribute to the definition of a flexible way in the teaching-learning dance process. That is why we defend a peer relation among students and the cooperation between them and the teacher through a learning contract. We believe that identifying these common methods used to formatively assess student choreography can be helpful in determining appropriate methods for documenting evaluations of creative work.

Never-ending research

In order to answer our research questions, we can say that our approach seems to have a positive impact on the students' creativity, perception, and artistic thinking. Students believed it helped to

deepen their knowledge and understanding of dance as a reflective practice. They highlighted the value of the portfolio and logbooks as innovative tools that utilize an original method of growing and learning about dance. They felt very engaged and recognized the meaning of the assessment tasks.

We concluded that students have shown a high and elaborate level of analysis throughout their creative process, evincing reflective skills in their choreography-making. On the other hand, their restriction strategies that we teachers have implemented, after initial embarrassment and difficulty, helped to promote innovation, daring, and research for innovative answers. A final remark they made involved the time allowed for ideas to incubate, which is a crucial aspect in their creative processes.

Basically, we hope to develop a type of student who is active and curious, and who will compose and create original choreographies. A type of student who is responsive to diverse situations and different constraints. In sum, students with sensitivity and awareness and who is ready to take risks. The teacher should indeed consider presenting several choreographic problems to his/her students. The way the problem is posed often requires dancers to invent an image or scenario for themselves. The most important things include posing questions, researching, and having a constant curiosity of the world.

This is a case study which, in its scope, has focused on what is more than a sequence of steps or routines. Students understood that dealing with the unknown and constraints was an opportunity to improve their creative competencies in dance. They were open and responsive to diverse perspectives and also comfortable with more than one correct answer. And this was good! In the end, the four keywords about facilitating learning through assessment are diversity, adaptability, variability, and individuality. We think it is in fact a paradigm shift to discover, research, support, and develop evidences of dance learning. Teachers need to be creative, to dare and to risk to have the right to ask students the same.

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