

## **Dance and visual arts: A collaborative research between American and Brazilian art educators and students<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

How may identity be explored, adapted, and changed through collaborative art making? To delve into this question in a practical yet reflective manner, this interdisciplinary study was conducted as a partnership between researchers from Brazil and the United States. The investigation included two Brazilian and two American researchers and 75 students in dance and architecture from the Federal University of Vicosa/FUV (Brazil) and Illinois State University (USA). The initial challenge in this collaborative effort was to assemble students from cross-disciplinary art forms and cultural backgrounds in the construction of new knowledge and development of collaborative work. American students, along with faculty, came to FUV in Brazil for two weeks, sharing and exchanging artistic, academic, and cultural works, as well as knowledge and practices with their Brazilian counterparts. The study adopts a qualitative research paradigm and uses participant observation, individual and collective informal dialogues, student and teacher journals, photos and videos taken

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throughout the field work processes, such as: 1) dance classes; 2) creative laboratories with all teachers and students; and, 3) a structured improvisation performed at the theater. This collaborative research work remains in progress. After cycles of analysis, the findings from the fieldwork conducted suggests this kind of experience could be one possibility for exploring the collaborative process between artists from different nationalities and disciplines within the fine arts in order to promote hybrid, dynamic, and fluid constructions of identity that may challenge the maintenance of clearly demarcated identities in the face of transnational relations (Duffy, 2005). We also use Michelle Duffy's (2010) and Risner and Stinson's (2010) ideas of art and identity, which parallels our understanding of change; finally we use Vieira's (2007) notion of "productive loss" in portraying how we observed that students explored the sense of being between cultures and may have experienced "dislocation" in a positive manner. The students' accounts of their meaning-making express how the project expanded their identities as "partner-beings" throughout *twining experiences*, and how they embodied art as one important process through which identity may be constituted.

*Keywords:* dance, identity, exchange, university, collaboration

### **Act One: Coming Upon Body-to-Body**

This study, conducted at FUV, included teachers from both FUV and ISU, and artistic design students from the Department of Architecture and Urbanism/FUV, dance and somatics students from the Department of Arts and Humanities/FUV, and dance performance and dance education students from ISU. The study's "in constant progress" methodological procedures have sought to describe and interpret qualities and meanings of conducting dance projects in creative and collaborative ways. To advance this purpose, we conducted fieldwork in Brazil and collected qualitative data documenting the lived experience of arts faculty and students in higher education.

The qualitative research paradigm uses phenomenological hermeneutics combined with the description of lived experiences and interpretation of meanings (van Manen, 1997). Phenomenological data comes from the dance educators' and students' written and oral anecdotes about their teaching and learning experiences in Brazil. We also adopted dance

researcher Karen Bond's hybrid methodology, which she refers to as "experiential inquiry," to integrate perspectives of phenomenology, autobiography, and humanistic sociology within the creative process (Bond & Richard, 2005; Bond, Frichtel, & Park, 2007).

The American students and researchers Laurie Merriman and Sara Semonis visited Brazil and stayed at FUV for two weeks. During this period, students and faculty from both FUV and ISU shared educational, cultural, artistic, and professional understandings working together inside and outside the dance studio studying Brazilian folk dance, capoeira, contemporary dance, improvisation, and dance composition.

Data collected included participant observations, individual and collective informal dialogues, student and teacher journals, and photos and videos taken during the processes and at the showing.

Brazilian dance students wrote journals about their daily experiences throughout the project development. ISU students also were asked to maintain a reflective journal throughout their study abroad experience in Brazil, which included their responses to specific prompts such as their self-assessment of the following:

- Overall participation in daily activities and learning experiences.
- Engagement in the overall educational process of the study-abroad experience.
- Commitment to a better understanding of the people, culture, and dance of Brazil.
- Professionalism as emerging artists and individuals offering conclusions and connections on how their experiences and collective learning might supplement their current knowledge/education.

Experiential findings of the study are presented through participant anecdotes. The collaborative interdisciplinary movement and visual art learning opportunities developed throughout this two-week period generated data that was analyzed through cycles.

## Act Two: Body-to-Body Journeys

Born out of a desire to expose students to a collective artistic “problem to solve,” this project was initially inspired by a visual art component including motif and development (shared between visual arts and dance disciplines) and expanded to further integrate nine additional elements to explore through improvisation. Inspired by Bond’s (2007) ideas that dance can open possibilities to build an aesthetic community, the students jointly participated in classes including contact improvisation, visual arts techniques and Pilates; they were also divided into groups consisting of students of architecture and dance from FUV and ISU. Each group of dancers initially used the work of architecture students (drawings) to inspire their movement choices that contributed to the development of the final piece (image 1). At the same time, the architecture students performed another set of pictorial works, which, in turn, inspired the dancers in their choice of gestures, movements, spatial interactions, and contacts for the composition of a structured improvisation.

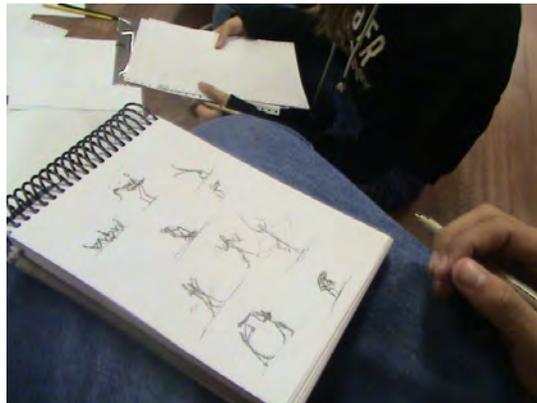


Image 1: Architecture student’s drawing of the dancers’ movement.

Both dancers and visual artists influenced each other continuously throughout the process (image 2).



Image 2: Professor Merriman and American dance students in bodily communication with Brazilian architecture students.

Each group of dancers created movement representing the project's central goal — cultural and artistic exchange. The piece, *Nostalgia of Colors*, performed at the theater (image 3), was co-created by the entire group from a collaborative perspective. The teachers prompted students to develop this work in a reflective manner so that they could enhance the metacognitive aspect of autonomous and collective experience.



Image 3: American and Brazilian dance students dancing with ribbons the piece *Nostalgia of Colors*.

Elements included concepts common to both dancers and visual artists such as the use of positive and negative space, color and tone, symmetry and asymmetry, among others.

Exploration of “self” or “identity” was expressed in each student’s movement print, previous knowledge, comfort level, and personal aesthetic. It was a fascinating process to observe as each group consisting of dancers and artists from UFV and dancers from ISU developed their structured improvisation. Each group was asked to select attire or costumes reflecting the artwork generated throughout the process (image 4).



Image 4: Costumes reflected the artwork generated throughout the process.

The added element of sound was included in the public performance of this joint project. Music, representative of both countries across diverse genres, was selected and further influenced the improvisational process of the performers. Some students also illustrated the art design by the architecture students on their faces for the performance of *Nostalgia of Colors* (image 5).



Image 5: One of the ISU students along with her group illustrated the art design on her face for the performance.

Upon their return to the American campus, students conducted an interactive presentation, publicly sharing their study-abroad experiences, including their personal challenges, successes, and expanded knowledge, as well as their enhanced understanding of the history, culture, heritage, and dance of Brazil. Brazilian dance students developed the performance *Nostalgia of Colors* further, changed its name to *Between Worlds*, and presented it in two places, at the Department of Architecture and at the FUV (image 6).



Image 6: *Between Worlds* being presented by the Brazilian dance students with the work of the architecture students as scenery.

In this study, we believe dance, just like music, taps into our emotional and intuitive selves, and this opens up a means of examining how emotions influence social interactions. We noticed both the dancers and visual artists were continually influenced by one another throughout the creative process since the defined roles of both groups, visual artists and dancers, impacted the artistic processes for individuals as well as their collaborative groups. We also observed that lack of a common language was not ultimately a barrier for bodily communication and connection. Furthermore, unexpected outcomes/happy incidents that came from this project included the profound engagement of all involved in the work, teachers and students alike.

### **Students' meaning-making**

American and Brazilian students have expressed numerous and consistent references to personal growth and increased understanding of identity as a direct result of these collective

experiences. Below are anecdotal reflections illustrating the positive impact this interdisciplinary, intercultural, collaborative artistic effort had on the students from ISU and FUV:

I loved this day. During the morning, we had a class with Professor Magalhaes and with the Americans; his class was very good. He explained to us the work his students will do. At night, we all met at the theater; we did great and productive work together, and it also ran so smoothly! I like my group and the movements we're creating together. (Female Brazilian student)

Professor Semonis taught us a very good class on Pilates. I loved this class! All the Americans are very nice and polite; it's very interesting to have this opportunity because there is no difference in terms of dance and movements. The artistic work and classes with the Americans are cool and very creative; we can learn and teach a lot. (Female Brazilian student)

The exchanges we had in classes were very good — the approach the Americans have is a little bit different from ours. But the most interesting thing was how we could interact with each other besides our differences. I could notice a growing maturity by the group in relation to improvisation and engagement. It was very important to me, this exchange with the Americans and the architecture students. (Female Brazilian student)

...I'm used to doing contact improvisation with strangers, but the language barrier added another element — at least at first. Once everyone got comfortable, it was just like working with anyone. We did an exercise back to back first. I feel like I kept hurting my partner because she was so thin, but I guess she was fine. We eventually got to a point where we were rolling over each other. I've found I'm more comfortable when I'm in control. But that is how I am in life in general, I suppose. We also did a cat exercise where we were crawling around the floor and exploring directions. Eventually, we started moving together head-

to-head, getting to a point where we were freely moving around but still head-to-head. My last partner and I got pretty adventurous; I couldn't really tell who was leading anymore. We are just moving together and it wasn't forced at all, it was great ... (American student)

The proposal was to build a structured improvisation performance from a "motif." Each member of my group (Brazilians and Americans) had a different motif, but we talked about our ideas, we agreed in some of them, disagreed in others, and it's amazing how we solved everything easily. (Brazilian dance student)

...We were assigned to groups mixing Americans and Brazilians and also some of the visual art students. We had to come up with our own individual phrase and base it off of Professor Magalhaes's work and then combine our individual phrases to make a group motif. It was interesting trying to communicate. Some dancers were new to improvisation but I can relate to how that feels. I hope our performance goes well and they don't get too nervous to perform. Working with the visual artists was also pretty cool because they would draw based on what we were doing and then we would let their work inspire our movement and so on. This experience has been just absolutely amazing ... but definitely challenged us to work together across cultures. The beautiful thing about dance is that the language of movement is universal. (American student)

At the beginning, the communication with the American students was a bit complicated because they don't speak Portuguese, but soon we adapted to the gestural language, and the understanding became very easy. (Brazilian dance student)

...we worked with our improv groups again. It was hard trying to structure our improv without making it choreographed. I was very thankful for (classmate) because she had us do some trust exercises so that we would get comfortable

with each other. It is hard when people are different in their levels of choreography or improv, but I feel like if you can trust your group and most of all yourself, all of the inhibitions gradually disappear and I saw that start to happen with my group. Getting to actually interact and create with the Brazilian dancers has been one of my favorite experiences. I've started to think about how I will never be in this place with all these people again in my life and I'm realizing just how special this experience really is. How many times in my life will I get to say that I performed a structured improv in Brazil? ... I haven't really thought about this being my first structured improv performance but I'm really excited for it. Seeing the run of the whole thing was inspiring. It was great to watch how the ISU dancers moved with the FUV dancers. It was completely different and the same all at once. I'm really excited to see what happens on stage. (American student)

The showing meant a lot because I could grow up and learn. (Brazilian student)

The dance showing was great. I particularly learned a lot in relation to improvisation as well as to establishing relationships with the American and Brazilian colleagues. I also learned to respect human diversity. (Brazilian student)

We worked with the Americans' ways of fulfilling "positive and negative" space; they didn't know this. I was happy to realize that our group taught them something they will never forget. (Brazilian student)

...I had never improvised on stage in front of people before, let alone with people I just met and in a different country. I love performing. There is nothing like the lights hitting your face and seeing the audience. I love everything about that moment: the adrenaline, the nerves, the excitement, everything. I definitely felt that today. I was the first one to be exposed from under the sheet so I legitimately set the stage. Our motif did not go well at all, but it was improv so it

didn't matter too much. Improving on stage was an incredible experience. I loved the bond that I felt with everyone on stage. I was just having fun playing around. I think change performance might be something I should explore more [in our] SCC [Student Choreographed Concert]. This experience, even as short as it was, I think will help my performance ability. I always get so frustrated when I do something wrong but having no real set choreography up on stage made me realize there really is no reason to get flustered. Just move on to the next thing and let it roll off your shoulders. (American student)

This artistic work developed along with the architecture students was very important for me because I came to know and to understand how dance is connected to painting. Dance is not only related to music and to a showing on a stage; it is well beyond what I could had never imagined. (Brazilian student)

We agree with Michelle Duffy's (2010) and Risner and Stinson's (2010) ideas of art and identity, which parallels our understanding of change, that is, this artistic experience was powerful enough to stimulate transformations in our students. Although we acknowledge that the time spent physically together was limited, spiritual connections remained in each of us. Vieira's (2007) notion of "productive loss" is also important in this study because it portrays how students explored the sense of being between cultures and how they may have experienced "dislocation" in a positive manner.

Students' meanings, in general, express what we have observed during the fieldwork, including sentiments on how the project expanded their identities as "partner-beings" throughout twinning experiences, and how they also embodied art as one important process through which identity may be constituted. We agree with Smith (2000) that dance is not a packaging and subsequent expression of identity. Rather, it is one important process through which identity may be constituted.

These findings suggest this kind of experience could be one possibility to explore the collaborative process between artists from different nationalities and disciplines within the fine arts in order to promote hybrid, dynamic, and fluid constructions of identity that may challenge the maintenance of clearly demarcated identities in the face of transnational

relations (Duffy, 2005).

### **Act Three: Body-to-Body Thoughts**

Shared experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, have helped to shape and even challenge individual notions of identity for all participants. We also noticed spending time together, both in and out of the classroom, afforded students opportunities to build lasting professional and personal relationships. All participants have exchanged email messages and Facebook comments and photos since this first visit.

The classroom extended outside the walls of the inspired dance building to the community and beyond. We observed the Americans learning the powerful history and diversity of the Brazilian people, and the Brazilians learning more about the American culture, as well, and by their living together, it allowed any “fear” and “prejudice” to dissipate. We believe identity for individuals of any age or stage of their lives is arguably a “work in progress,” as identity is malleable and continually develops throughout one’s life. For young adults living on their own in a college environment, identity development remains particularly fluid as they negotiate familial beliefs with new social constructs and external forces. Contextual influences, such as experiencing a new culture, language, food, and heritage through a short-term study abroad visit to Vicosa, Brazil, has impacted the construct of identity for the dancers and faculty of Illinois State, and vice versa. The Brazilian students gained new understandings through this collaboration by exploring the sense of being between different cultures; moreover, this journey has allowed them to experience the artistic world at the university as a space in which the feeling of “being dislocated at home” could be productively enacted.

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