

Embodying transformation: Dance in Brazilian students' lives¹

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Abstract

This ongoing research illuminates elements of how diverse dance experiences are transforming lives of over 3000 students (ages 4-16) from low socio-economic backgrounds. While the focus of this study is on the meanings and experiential knowledge of Brazilian students, insights derived might be useful to dance students elsewhere. Participants attended 50-minute dance classes twice a week for at least six months. The classes offered possibilities to participants so that they could create, recreate, and appreciate a universe of different artistic forms and expressions. The investigation uses multi-modal approaches that include written and oral answers from children and adolescents, questionnaires, videotaped classes and performances, systematic on-site observations, and drawings about the impact of dance experiences with captions spoken to researchers. These were the source for analysis of young people's meanings of and growth in dance as an agent of transformation. Themes were identified by using a hermeneutic approach. The empowering aspect of this research is that I ask students to take seriously what they learned from experience. I present six of the themes that have appeared: dance and freedom, dance and emotional cognition, complexity, to play dance, to dance together, to share the artistic work. Last, I reflect on implications of these study's findings for embodied dance education.

Keywords: dance, education, Brazil, meanings, transformation

The context for the study

In Brazil, dance education is fundamentally guided by the National Parameters for Arts Education (Brasil, 1997), whose dance content is mainly based on Laban's choreology (1963, 1980), and it claims dance education should promote Freire's (2002) critical thinking. In my point of view, we need to review these parameters in relation to current research, particularly in neuroscience (e.g., Cross & Ticini, 2011; Damasio, 2010; Hagendoorn, 2010). Damasio (2010), for example, is against the idea that human consciousness and reasoning are separate from the body; for him, feelings are essential for our consciousness, which begins with a biological process created by a living organism. In accordance to this idea, Anderson (2003) argues:

Against the Cartesian claim that we are radically distinct from animals, uniquely possessed of a soul and its attendant powers of abstract reason, embodied cognition maintains our evolutionary continuity. We, like all animals, are essentially embodied agents, and our power of advanced cognition vitally depends on a substrate of abilities for

¹ Research funded by CAPES/PIBID/UFV, CNPq, FUNARBE, and FAPEMIG.

moving around in and coping with the world which we inherited from our evolutionary forbears. (p. 126)

Based on this kind of argument, I researched in my doctoral studies embodied dance education/EDE. Some of the principles guiding this proposal are: dance may enable the creation of an “embodied knowledge” generative environment; EDE implies being sensitive of and making connections to one’s own self-body, to the other, and to the environment (Vieira, 2007).

Some of the initial “bodystorms”² that motivated the development of this study are: how to improve the connections between EDE, research, and community projects; how to increase the dialogue between dance practices and theories on embodied cognition so that one nurtures each other; and how to honor my belief on Paulo Freire’s orientation that our role as educator is to mediate students’ process of awareness enhancement in order to promote personal and social transformations.³

To explore these questions, I started coordinating a dance project in 2008 that had been developed with students from 12 public high, elementary, and kindergarten schools in Vicosa, Brazil. These students had few opportunities to be involved in quality dance education prior to the experiences provided by this study. Therefore, the aim has been to offer them diverse dance possibilities exploring a particular dance education proposal (explained later), because I do not believe that all dance education proposals are transformative. One of the empowering and transformative aspects of this project is that we ask students to take seriously what they learned from the lived experiences provided. Therefore, this study illuminates elements of how diverse dance experiences are transforming lives of over 3000 students (ages 4-16) from low socio-economic backgrounds. While the focus of this study is on the meanings and experiential knowledge of Brazilian students, insights derived might be useful to dance students elsewhere.

Methodological procedures

I adopt Bond’s hybrid methodology called experiential inquiry (Bond, Frichtel, & Park, 2007),⁴ and van Manen’s (1997a) phenomenological hermeneutics. From these researchers, I learned that one can strengthen the relation between knowledge and action by foregrounding lived experience itself as a valid basis for both practical action and theorizing.

² “Bodystorm” is a term I coined in order to refer to bodily knowledge or mind and body working together in knowledge construction and perception. The term was coined during my first phenomenological investigation, “‘Swimming in the sea’: Reflections on being an international graduate student,” presented in a panel on Experiential Inquiry at the National Dance Education Organization Conference (Bond, Falk, Frichtel, Oort, & Vieira, 2004).

³ Although it is not my objective in this paper to further discuss transformation, I think is interesting to present Slatery’s (2006) point of view on this topic when he discusses the post-modern curriculum in education. For him, *Accumulative* change assumes predictable, controlled, and well-defined incremental changes. *Transformative* change, occurring in an open system, is exemplified by quantum physics with its unpredictable, spontaneous leaps.

⁴ “Experiential Inquiry” integrates perspectives of phenomenology, autobiography, and humanistic sociology with creative process.

Periodic meetings are held between the project team and students' parents and teachers so that they will know the community's context, needs, and desires. I consider myself, a university teacher, and the dance undergraduate students, who are also members of the project team, as outsiders of each community in which we work. Therefore, we need to know the students and their family lives if we really want to honor Freire's (2002) orientation that any educational proposal cannot be apart from the community's context. At these meetings, the entire project team fits into the everyday running of the schools: all team members – coordinator, supervisor and dance students – enter into dialogue with parents and teachers and we talk about various educational aspects, including the project actions that have been developed. We also collect their criticisms, comments and suggestions for improving our artistic-pedagogical work. During these moments of interaction between the project team and the school leaders and teachers, we discuss and jointly decide with the school community interdisciplinary themes that will be developed in our dance activities so that teachers may also explore these ideas in their own classes (e.g., literature, biology, history, and so forth). One recent example is a meeting held before classes had begun in 2012, when the project team decided with the school members the next theme to be developed in the dance classes: the relationships between environment and ecological issues and the arts. These meetings are also important moments to share with the school community the students' data, including drawings, which was collected and analyzed by the project team.

Participants attended 50-minute dance classes twice a week for at least six months. The classes offered possibilities to participants so that they could create, recreate, and appreciate a universe of different artistic forms and expressions, and exercise what Damasio (2010) calls neural maps. According to Damasio (2000), our neural maps can be affected in two ways: by the way of concrete processes and entities, that is, by actual information from the environment, and through images from our mental actions constituted by past memories and plans we make for the future. Our interactions with the environment make us produce images even when we are not aware of it, which, in turn, generates emotions (Damasio, 2003). Emotional cognition, fundamental in human consciousness, is also an important component of EDE, I believe.

Diverse activities during the dance classes are planned to stimulate children's ability to create neural maps (Damasio, 2010). For example, through somatic education, children massage each other with their eyes closed, while exercising tactile images; they build auditory images while listening to the sound of the Brazilian indigenous instrument "rain stick" played by the teacher – with their eyes closed and with the entire body engaged in the activity by dancing to the sounds. The students also learned codified and complex dance steps that challenged their comfort zones.

To stimulate the dialogue between the dance content and social matters, the students created choreographies in response to issues such as natural environment conservation. For example, at the carnival parade at the school, promoted by the project team, children created costumes and drum sticks made out of newspaper; they also assisted with the dance show scenary made out of cardboard boxes.

The project team also took the participants to visit places where they might expand their knowledge of the reality where they live, and then connect knowledge produced in these sites to

the artistic reality constructed at their dance classes. One example occurred when students visited and danced in the large and well-equipped studio of the Dance Undergraduate program at the Federal University of Vicosa. Other trips were to the botanical garden, where they learned more about tropical plants and their conservation, and the Museum of Zoology, where some students compared their body size to those of other animals.

To stimulate participants' neuroimaging of visual maps, they watched videos at school as well as live performances at the school and the theater, and in alternative spaces such as streets and squares. On many of the occasions, we observed participants engaging in dance appreciation while activating their mirror neurons (Damasio, 2010) by reproducing the dances they were contemplating.

The participants also had chances to share with the public their own choreography. These artistic showings happened during the Arts Weeks (at the middle of each semester beginning in 2011) and the Dance Festival (at the end of every semester).

The research multi-modal approaches include data collected prior to and after the field work: participants' written and oral answers to questionnaires, videotaped classes and performances, systematic on-site observations, and drawings representing the impact of the dance experiences on them, with their captions spoken to researchers.⁵ These were the source for analysis of children's and adolescents' meanings of and growth in dance as an agent of transformation. Themes were identified by using a hermeneutic approach.

Findings

Here I only present participants' drawings and voices collected after the field work had finished. The pictures were taken during one of the many activities developed. To honor participants' meanings, and to allow readers interpret themselves the results, I refrain myself from presenting any further interpretation besides having already categorized data in themes.

⁵ All participants (students, their teachers, and parents) were initially invited to take part in this study. The students' parents and their teachers who agreed to participate signed a "Consent Form" in which I explained to them the research approach and purpose. Teachers and students' parents agreed to have their own and their children's data (oral and written responses, as well as pictures) published for academic purposes.

Dance and freedom



Figure 1. “Dance is to feel free as if I were flying with balloons” (9-year old boy; left); “When I dance, I fly on the high sky with balloons.” (7-year old girl; center); “Dancing is to let one self free” (8-year old boy, right).

Dance and emotional cognition

“Today is the big day: we’re going to present our choreography at the theater!
I have been so excited that I couldn’t sleep last night!” (13-year old girl)



Figure 2. Dancing and being surrounded by several hearts (5-year old girl, left); heart beats and jumps out of the 6-year old boy body (center); dancing in a natural setting, and a big heart with the word ‘dance’ inside of it (9-year old boy , right).



Figure 3. Dancing, counting the rhythm and the caption: ‘a pain on my belly’, because the 8-year old girl was nervous during the dance showing (left); “[When I dance] I am deeply moved” (7-year old girl, right).

Complexity

“Learning the dance steps the teacher brings is a challenge I like. Creating and copying are the two very good!” (8-year old boy)

“I like to create my own movements, but I also like to follow my dance teacher.” (12-year old girl)



Figure 4. The children create their own movements (left), and copy the teacher’s movements (right).

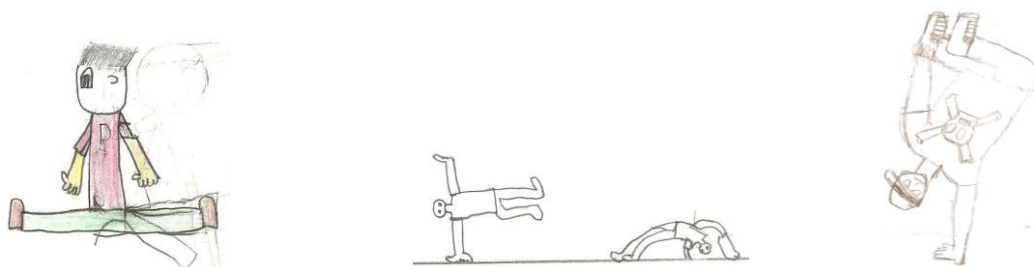


Figure 5. Performing complex movements: 10-year old boy (left); 11-year old (center); 14-year old performing a hand stand while dancing (right).



Figure 6. 9-year old girl dancing a ballet phrase on pointe shoes (left); dancing with a cap, tutu and ballet point shoes (13-year old boy, right).

To play dance

Next, I present the voices of several children through a poetic depiction (Glesne, 1997).

*Dance classes reminds me of happy moments in my life
It's fun doing the high level with my knees, then with my legs and I end the sequence with my nose*

*Hoping, spinning around, being the bear...
In doing all this there's much more joy in coming to the school!
While dancing with my classmates I feel the bliss is in the air.
It's like a game dancing with the rainbow ribbons/barangandao arco-iris: doing them myself, throwing them up to the sky and trying to catch them before they reach the floor
I learned to play dancing!*



Figure 7. Dancing with a big smile: “I give dance a grade ten in ten” (16-year old boy, left); “I’m jumping from joy” (15-year old boy, center); the 8-year old boy draws himself as a big letter ‘A’ dancing, which stands for the Portuguese word ‘alegria’ meaning joy (right).



Figure 8. Caption, “*Dancing is fun*”, and the sound of laughing coming from his mouth: “*Rara*” (14-year old boy, left); 8-year old boy dancing on the theater, under the lights, and caption: ‘*Lots of joy*’ (right).

To dance together

“I like to do other things with my colleagues, but what I like most is to dance with them. When we all are moving, there’s no fight, no competition and I feel life could be a non-ending dance.” (9-year old boy)

“When we dance altogether, we move as if we were one only and big body.” (12-year old girl)



Figure 9. Dancing with her peers (4-year old girl, left); dancing together (center and right).

To share the artistic work

Allowing participants to show their dances is an important component of our EDE proposal. Our aim is not to train professional dancers or to form artists, but to have young people exposed to lived experiences in dance that may open new windows for personal and social transformations to occur. They create most of the movements and help to do the props and scenario.

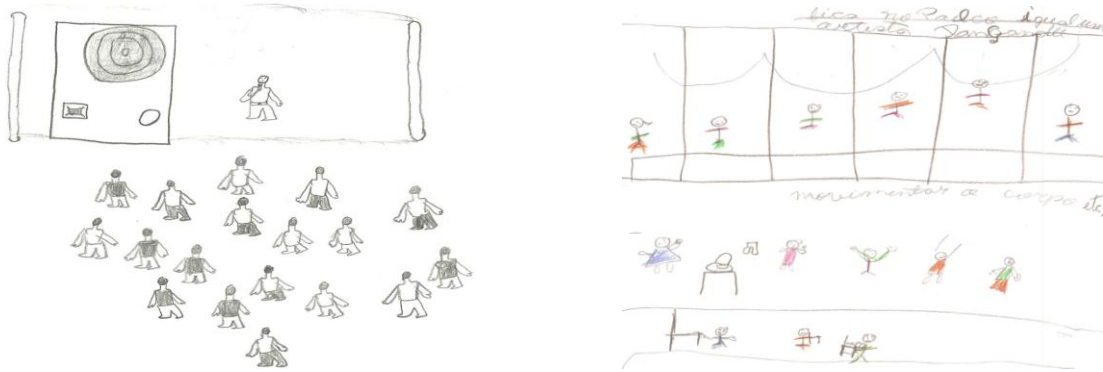


Figure 10. Students' drawings of them performing at the theater and the audience watching them.

“I loved to dance in the carnival parade and to see my teachers’ smiles while they watched us.”
(8-year old boy)



Figure 11. Participants dancing samba during the carnival parade at school and watched by their peers (left) and teachers, who smile of joy (right).

Next, I reflect on implications of these study’s findings for EDE.

Reflections in Process

These findings correlate to those of other dance researchers and educators (Anttila, 2003, 2004; Bond & Deans, 1997; Bond & Stinson, 2000/01, Bond & Etwaroo, 2004; Bond & Richard, 2005; Bond, Frichtel & Park, 2007). Maybe I have been too influenced by their research and looked for data similar to the ones they have found. If so, I need to practice more what phenomenologists call bracketing.⁶ Maybe there is, indeed, some transformations that are intrinsic to participants

⁶ Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (2002) address Husserl’s thoughts on *bracketing* (or *suspension* or *epoché*): *This is a radical shift in viewpoint of the everyday natural attitude until the practitioner is led back into the domain of pure transcendental subjectivity. Without this leading back, this reduction, genuine phenomenological insight would be impossible. Searching for foundations on which philosophers could ground their knowledge with certainty, Husserl proposed that reflection puts out of play all a priori theory, deduction, or assumptions from other disciplines such as the natural sciences, and purely describes what is given in experience. This essential process, called bracketing, is important to this study. I aspire to become as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and biases about young people’s meanings of dance, even though I realize that “in making experience*

engaged in EDE, regardless of their cultural context, we need to further research on with the caution that any transcultural remark always demands.

As I discussed in my dissertation (Vieira, 2007), EDE may come to life as a transformative experience of doing, or what Sklar (2001) identifies as a “transformation enacted upon oneself through the details [nuances] of work [dancing]” (p. 184). Transformative dance education is embodiment of one’s conscious inter-subjective intentionality, which embraces inner and outer life. Although Sklar (2001) does not speak of dance education but dancing, her discussion of the link between transformation and embodiment is salient to this study: “The potential for transformation lies in a property of *doing*: one does and feels oneself doing at the same time...it is an ultimate intimacy, a doing while being with oneself” (p. 184).

Furthermore, this study generates far more questions than it is able to answer: How do we best mediate EDE? Are the embodied cognition studies orienting us or making us look, once more, for ‘good’ scientific basis for our practices? What is the relationship between dance and transformations perceived in students? Could music or any other artistic language do the same?

Although these are some questions still to be explored, I have realized from the results of this four-year long investigation that Freire’s *Critical Thinking* (2002) is not only processed by our minds, as the author expected, but by our entire being, including emotional and kinesthetic dimensions. The research findings highlight the centrality of participants’ bodies in their ordering of dancing experiences. Therefore, the importance of embodiment in perceiving, knowing, and meaning making poses a challenge to the current focus on intellectual knowledge in dance education of young people.

Trying to bring these reflections to their final ‘bodystorms,’ I advocate for a poetic of transformation through EDE. By approaching transformation as metamorphosis of the holistic dancing body, a focus on *corpoetic*--corporality + poetic may be a sustainable mode of educating in and through dance.

By sharing transformational lived experiences, as I attempted to do in this paper, may open our eyes, bodies, hearts, minds and souls to imagine and create new possibilities for EDE.

phenomenologically transparent one cannot avoid a certain degree of abstraction and theorizing...” (van Manen, 1997b, p. 45).

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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