

What's worth assessing in K-12 dance education?

Susan W. Stinson

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

email: sue_stinson@uncg.edu

Abstract

Assessment is one of the most difficult issues facing dance education, often dismissed as inappropriate for the art form and contradictory to student-centered approaches to learning. At the 2009 daCi conference in Jamaica, this author presented a paper as part of an international panel, in which she critically reflected on emerging requirements for outcomes-based assessment in K-12 dance education in the USA. She questioned the source of her own values that are in conflict with “a world that seems to care more about standardization, rationality, efficiency, and effectiveness.” She concluded at that time that assessment of student outcomes is not just a way to think about effective teaching, but, even more important, can be a starting place for inquiry about what matters most in dance education.

This paper is a sequel to the 2009 one, following up after two years of using new standards for K-12 students in dance and new requirements for licensure of public school dance educators, all emphasizing achievement of pre-determined and measureable outcomes. The author recognizes that the objectives easiest to assess in this manner are the most trivial ones, but she also considers to what extent the field's resistance to formal assessment might be preventing discovery of more promising possibilities. Her paper explores what learning goals in dance might be important enough to justify the labor intensive investment in formal assessment, and suggests guidelines for developing those assessments.

Keywords: assessment, standards, critical reflection, values in dance education

When I was enrolled in doctoral work in curriculum theory in the 1980s, one of the most compelling questions was, “What's worth knowing?” (Postman & Weingartner, 1994). This question, whether explicit or not, still underlies all decisions about what to teach. In dance, sometimes we simply teach what we know and are good at. Sometimes we teach whatever the students want. Sometimes external accrediting groups determine content.

In the USA during the mid-1990s, emphasis on what students should learn led to the development of voluntary National Standards in all subject areas, including dance. The latest version, called Core Standards, is now underway; all states are expected to adopt them. Today, however, the concern at all levels of public education is not just what students should learn, but how we know whether or not they have learned it. Even dance educators are now being required to provide quantifiable data as evidence for whether or not students have met the standards.

Having served on committees to develop standards in dance at the national and state levels, I am now experiencing their use for a very different purpose: not as guidelines to help dance educators appropriately challenge students, but as bars over which students must vault on their way to high school graduation. All of our university students who wish to become licensed dance educators must develop skills in pre-assessment, formative, and summative assessment, in order to gather evidence as to whether their students have met the mandated standards in dance.

If prospective dance teachers do not have evidence that their students have met designated standards, we cannot recommend them for licensure.

Yet, while morally opposed to some uses of assessment, I agree that it is an important part of the learning process.¹ For too long, we have made claims about what students are learning in dance without really knowing for sure. When examining my own practice in higher education, I have been humbled to realize that occasionally students even learned the opposite of what I thought I was teaching (Stinson, 2009). So, like other assessment advocates, I think it is important to ask, “How do we know what students are learning in dance?” and “What is the evidence?”

However, obtaining good evidence and analyzing it well are challenging. At my university, we now spend a large portion of instructional time helping prospective teachers to develop check sheets and rubrics for assessing whether or not their students have met the standards-based learning outcomes, and to analyze the pre-assessment, formative, and summative data. This means that far less time is spent dealing with philosophical issues and all of the other important topics needed to develop good teachers.

Of course, if standardized tests were used to evaluate student achievement in dance, teachers would not need to spend so much time developing their own. A few other countries have standardized assessments, and my state is now developing them. Before long, dance educators will spend less time designing rubrics, but there will be even more pressure to focus on what the rubrics are assessing, since teachers will be evaluated according to the scores of their students.

Yet, most of the dance skills and knowledge being assessed seem to me pretty trivial in the overall scheme of things. Because our student teachers now must have hard evidence that all their students have met a standard within a single 3-4 week unit, there is great motivation to focus on the “small stuff”: skills and knowledge that 5-18 year-olds do not know to start with but can be learned within a short instructional period. Facilitating this feels like I am selling my soul.

I propose that if we are going to spend so much time designing and implementing assessments, we ought to focus on what really matters. While it is relatively easy to determine whether students can make shapes on different levels, identify three characteristics of Graham choreography, or demonstrate a correct tendu, focusing on these small skills takes us away from what is more important. More radically, I suggest that the most significant skills in K-12 dance education are not learning to dance in any specific style or genre, make dances, or respond to dance (after all, many people live very satisfying lives without them), but such activities can be entrances to learning what does matter.

For me, what matters most are important life skills that cannot be accomplished in one lesson or one unit of 3-4 weeks, but, rather, require extended periods of time to develop. To assess such learning, we need to develop rubrics that can be used by teachers over a multi-year period, sophisticated enough to reveal progress over time, knowing that there are also plateaus in student development of which we should be aware (and be concerned when kids do not eventually progress).

¹ See Schmid, 2003.

Below is my current list of what I would hope that all school-aged students would learn in dance. While some items are not dance-specific, I think that dance is an especially appropriate place for learning them. I have written them in first person, as though I were the learner, rather than in the typical language of standards. In making this list, I was reminded of a statement by Virginia Tanner in an interview during the first international conference of Dance and the Child in 1978: “I am making people, not dancers.” After presenting my goals, I will compare them to a recent list developed by educational and business leaders, and then suggest how they might be assessed.

If I were a student, by the end of my public school dance education, I should be able to demonstrate these skills:

1. Self-management in Dance

- To stop myself from moving without excess tension or falling down.
- To both calm and energize myself, so I am not a victim of my impulses.
- To be my own teacher – to tell myself what to do and when, being conscious of the impact of my choices (on my work and on others).
- To stay fully attentive and on-task, finding ways to personally connect and challenge myself.
- To remain engaged even when it gets hard.
- To push myself beyond what I already know and like to do.

2. Performing and Attending in Dance

- To pay attention – to the obvious as well as the subtle, to what I see and what I feel somatically.
- To be fully present in my body. This means being able to move with clear intention and focus, not just going through the motions: able both to enter a space in a way that commands attention and demonstrates confidence, and to move in a way that does not call attention to myself.
- To have an impact upon someone else through communicating verbally and nonverbally.
- To attend respectfully to other people’s dances and ideas about dance.

3. Creating and Communicating in and about Dance

- To recognize the connectedness of the body and movement to the physical world and to ideas.
- To look at the same thing (a piece of choreography, a movement) from multiple perspectives and be able to articulate them.
- To imagine something that doesn’t exist and work to create it.
- To recognize that something can be different than it is, and contribute ideas for making it better.
- To ask and pursue my own questions, ones that don’t have easy answers.

I know the objections: These are very admirable goals, but...

- This isn’t what schools want: high test scores are the valued currency.
- These skills cannot be assessed.

- These are not the skills most valued by the dance community.

Interestingly enough, when we look at the latest thinking about what schools want, and what the businesses and corporations that hire graduates want, it is not all that different from my list. I have found the work of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills especially insightful. This group was formed in 2002 through the efforts of entities that included the U.S. Department of Education and a number of large corporations, including AOL Time Warner, Apple Computer, Cisco Systems, Dell, Microsoft, the National Education Association, and SAP (a German software company). Many state school systems in the USA are now members of this organization (<http://www.p21.org/about-us/strategic-council-members>). In words taken from their website,

P21 ... advocates for 21st century readiness for every student. As the United States continues to compete in a global economy that demands innovation, P21 and its members provide tools and resources to help the U.S. education system keep up by fusing the 3Rs and 4Cs (critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation).

Although I have never been an advocate for corporate capitalism, I find myself agreeing with P21 educational goals even while I feel concern about the degree to which they are more about preparing a workforce than about educating human beings to live a meaningful life. With this caveat, what they call the “4C’s” seem like important skills about which we as dance educators could readily agree, ones definitely worth assessing.

In their publications, P21 further elaborates upon these 4 C’s as well as other basic skills, including Information and Technology Literacy and Media Literacy, and the personal attributes necessary to achieve them:

- Flexibility and adaptability
- Initiative and self direction
- Social and cross cultural skills
- Productivity and accountability
- Leadership and responsibility

So next I tried “mapping” the goals I suggested, ones that I originally thought radical, onto those being proposed by 21st century leaders. In the table that follows, I have included only those P-21 skills matching my own list, due to space limitations:

P-21	My proposal
<i>Innovation, Creativity</i>	<i>Creating and Communicating</i>
Developing, implementing, and communicating ideas to others.	Looking at the same thing (a piece of choreography, a movement) from multiple perspectives and articulating them.
Acting on creative ideas to make a tangible and useful contribution to the domain in which innovation occurs.	Imagining something that doesn’t exist and working to create it.

<p>Demonstrating originality and inventiveness in work.</p> <p>Being open and responsive to new and diverse perspectives.</p>	<p>Recognizing that something can be different than it is and contributing ideas for making it better.</p>
<p><i>Initiative and Self-Direction, Productivity and Accountability</i></p>	<p><i>Self Management</i></p>
<p>Monitoring one's own understanding and learning needs.</p>	<p>Stopping myself from moving without excess tension or falling down.</p> <p>Both calming and energizing myself, so I am not a victim of my impulses.</p>
<p>Going beyond basic mastery of skills and/or curriculum to explore and expand one's own learning and opportunities to gain expertise.</p>	<p>Pushing myself beyond what I already know and like to do.</p>
<p>Defining, prioritizing, and completing tasks without direct oversight.</p> <p>Demonstrating commitment to learning as a lifelong process.</p> <p>Setting and meeting appropriate standards and goals for delivering high-quality work on time.</p>	<p>Being my own teacher, telling myself what to do and when.</p> <p>Staying fully attentive and on-task, finding ways to personally connect and challenge myself).</p>
<p>Demonstrating diligence and a positive work ethic.</p>	<p>Remaining engaged even when it gets hard.</p>
<p><i>Leadership and Responsibility</i></p>	<p><i>Self-Management</i></p>
<p>Acting responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind.</p>	<p>Being conscious of the impact of my choices (on my work and on others).</p>
	<p><i>Performing and Attending</i></p>
<p>Using <i>interpersonal</i> ... skills to influence and guide others toward a goal.</p>	<p>Paying attention – to the obvious as well as the subtle, to what I see and what I feel somatically.</p> <p>To be fully present in my body. This means being able to move with clear intention and focus, not just going through the motions: able both to enter a space in a way that commands attention and demonstrates confidence, and to move in a way that does not call attention to myself.</p>

	Having an impact upon someone else through communicating verbally and nonverbally.
<i>Media Literacy</i>	
Examining how individuals interpret messages differently, how values and points of view are included or excluded, and how media can influence beliefs and behaviors.	Attending respectfully to other people's dances and ideas about dance.
<i>Critical Thinking and Problem Solving</i>	<i>Creating and Communicating</i>
Understanding the interconnections among systems.	Recognizing the connectedness of the body and movement to the physical world and to ideas.
Identifying and asking significant questions that clarify various points of view and lead to better solutions. Framing, analyzing and synthesizing information in order to solve problems and answer questions.	Asking and pursuing my own questions, ones that don't have easy answers.

So, remarkably enough, all of my proposed goals are addressed by the 21st century Partnership. And because schools want their graduates to achieve what businesses and corporations want, I think the argument that “This isn't what schools want” will not have much currency in the future.

Another argument I suggested to my proposed standards is, “They can't be assessed.” Certainly this argument is influenced by the extensive use of standardized tests throughout education, usually evaluating the least sophisticated skills and the lowest levels of knowledge in Bloom's taxonomy. But as schools continue the 21st century reformation, there is hope. In fact, there is a very interesting document on the P-21 website, mapping 21st century skills onto rich content from all arts education disciplines (http://www.p21.org/documents/P21_arts_map_final.pdf). This document creates a sample activity appropriate for arts education students that could facilitate students developing the skills and knowledge needed to meet each goal. Here is an example of Critical Thinking and Problem Solving suggested for the 8th grade:

Dance students investigate, identify, and discuss the key components of a successful dance composition and how that composition might be affected by the technical expertise of the dancers performing it. Students then view dance videos of varying styles and time periods and, working first individually and then together as a class, determine criteria for excellence in performance and composition. Students apply these criteria to future viewings of dance and their own compositions.

This arts map makes clear that rich projects to be carried out over time are the only way to get to the kind of learning necessary for the 21st century. However, it does not offer tools for actually determining the degree to which the goals have been met. I will next propose some possibilities for assessing students on a few of the goals I have suggested. I imagine a rubric simple enough that dance educators could chart a student's progress over time. With 25 or more students in a class, teachers could evaluate them on each item only once a month or even once a semester. I offer the following only to affirm that it is indeed possible to assess the kinds of goals I have proposed, recognizing that such instruments must be developed by those in the field who are doing the actual instruction of young people, then piloted and refined:

1. Student is able to quickly stop her/himself from moving without excess tension or falling down, in response to a designated signal.

Never

Occasionally

Consistently (Goal: Achieve consistency during early primary)

2. Being fully present in one's own body

Student moves without apparent awareness of their own movement – appears disengaged or disconnected when moving, “mushing around” without clarity of space, time, or energy.

Most of the time, student engages in action without apparent awareness of what they are doing. Student occasionally demonstrates clarity of space, time, or energy, but only in response to repeated prompts from a teacher, and not for consistent periods. (In a technique class, this may be indicated through applying a “correction” given by the teacher.)

Student consistently demonstrates kinesthetic awareness in movement and stillness in direct response to prompts from a teacher, and occasionally without such prompts.

Student consistently demonstrates kinesthetic awareness in movement and stillness, both with and without prompts by the teacher.

3. Imagining something that doesn't exist and working to create it

Student consistently solves movement problems in dance, following specific prompts from a teacher (i.e., create a movement sequence that includes low, middle, and high shapes and two different kinds of locomotor movement).

Student occasionally extends problem solving beyond the prompts given by a teacher, to create a movement study or dance (alone or in collaboration).

Student occasionally generates her or his own ideas for a dance or dance study, and follows through to create it, alone or in collaboration.

Student frequently generates her or his own ideas for a dance or dance study, whether or not it is assigned by the teacher, and follows through to create it, alone or in collaboration.

These brief examples, I hope, reveal that it is indeed possible to assess student learning of what I think matters most and what educational and business leaders claim to value the most. I trust

that committed groups of dance educators could create better rubrics than I have done alone, and that the goals themselves would become refined in the process.

Having addressed two of the three objections I raised at the beginning of this paper, this still leaves the third, the concern that “This list [of what’s worth assessing] doesn’t speak to the dance skills most valued by much of the dance community.” Does it? What matters most to you? What do you most deeply hope that every student will learn in dance education in the 21st century? And how will you know they are learning this? As I approach retirement from a long career in dance teacher education, it is my hope that the next generation of leaders in our field will continue to pursue these questions.

References

- Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2010). 21st century skills map: The arts. Retrieved from http://www.p21.org/documents/P21_arts_map_final.pdf
- Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. (1994). What’s worth knowing? In F. Mengert, K. Casey, D. Liston, D. Purpel, S. Shapiro (Eds.), *The institution of education* (2nd ed.) (pp. 231-244). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Schmid, D.W. (2003). Authentic assessment in the arts. *Journal of Dance Education*, 3(2), 65-73.
- Stinson, S.W. (2009). Music and theory: Reflecting on outcomes-based assessment. In T. Randall (Ed.), *Global perspectives on dance pedagogy: Research and practice. Proceedings of the Congress on Research in Dance 2009 Special Conference* (pp. 194-198). Leicester, UK: DeMontfort University.
- Tanner, V. (1978). Dance and the child: An international conference. VHS interview. Virginia Tanner papers MSS081, Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, University of North Carolina Greensboro.

© 2012, Susan Stinson

Dr. Sue Stinson is Professor of Dance at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA, and Interim Dean of the School of Music, Theatre and Dance. She has published her scholarly work in multiple journals and book chapters, and has taught and presented her work nationally and internationally. Her research has focused on both theoretical issues in dance education and how children and adolescents make meaning from their experiences in dance education. A founding member of daCi, she has served as international chair, conference co-chair, and research officer, and has delivered keynote addresses at several previous conferences.

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