

## **Dance as art, experience, and knowledge: A case study of undergraduate student experience**

Susan W. Stinson

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

email: [sue\\_stinson@uncg.edu](mailto:sue_stinson@uncg.edu)

with Liora Bresler

University of Illinois, Champaign, USA

email: [liora@illinois.edu](mailto:liora@illinois.edu)

### **Abstract**

This paper is the first stage in a collaborative action research project exploring how undergraduate students make sense of their experiences observing contemporary dance performances. The 12 student participants, ages 18-22, were enrolled in an honors general education course titled “Art, Experience, and Knowledge” in 2011 at a Midwestern (USA) university. All but three students were Euro-American. One of the young women in the class was a dance major, four students were from arts-related areas, and others majored in science and engineering. The course was designed to help students become more mindful when experiencing the arts, and more aware of aesthetic qualities in the world around them. As part of the course requirements, students attended two dance concerts, one by internationally known choreographer Mark Morris. Four guest presenters in the course specifically facilitated skills in watching dance. Required readings included John Dewey (1934/1980), Harry Broudy (1979), Elliott Eisner (1982, 2009), Maxine Greene (2001), Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005), and Susan Stinson (1991, 2002). Stinson was also one of the guest presenters, and attended Mark Morris’s concert twice with her co-researcher.

Data for the study consisted primarily of four reflective papers for each of the students, all integrating assigned readings and insights derived from the guest teachers with their experiences of the artworks. In the analysis, the co-researchers looked for emergent themes revealing how students were making their way through the very different performances and how they were thinking about dance in relation to their own lives. This paper, written by Stinson, takes a case study approach (Blatter, 2012); it focuses on data from the one dance major in the course, and raises issues that go well beyond a single student. In the tradition of action research, the author questions her own assumptions and values regarding how students sense and make sense of dance performances.

*Keywords:* action research, undergraduate education, aesthetic education, dance appreciation

I decided to teach dance because I loved the way I felt when dancing, and wanted to share this feeling with others. During most of my career spent preparing dance educators, I emphasized experiencing dance movement from the inside more than teaching steps or exercises. When Discipline-Based Arts Education was a trend in the 1980’s, I protested that history, criticism, and aesthetics were given equal weight to creating, and that performing was left out entirely.

Whenever I participated in writing dance education philosophy statements, I emphasized the centrality of the lived experience of dancing.

My “confession” to this bias may seem surprising since my own research has centered on writing, especially related to student experience, as well as humanistic and social justice issues in dance education. I have attended hundreds of dance performances, often more from loyalty than interest, but being in the audience is rarely powerful for me. I still prefer to watch dance up close so I can feel myself dancing. When writing, I try to facilitate a similar personal and somatic relationship with my reading audience.

In recent years, with more emphasis on critical thinking in the dance curriculum and more dance works available online, I have been trying to get better at analyzing and appreciating choreography, and have taught students to do likewise. Collaboration with colleagues (Dils & Stinson, 2009) has been an essential part of my journey. In 2011, I began collaborating with Dr. Liora Bresler, who has taught undergraduate and graduate courses related to arts education and aesthetic dimensions of curriculum for over 20 years. Her honors course for undergraduates became the site for our research; this paper offers a case study (Blatter, 2012) focusing on the one dance major enrolled. Mia<sup>1</sup>, a freshman, was similar to first-year dance majors at my own university. Multiple readings of her course papers and discussions with Liora caused me to question my own values and practices related to art, experience, and knowledge.

### **Seeing, sensing, interpreting visual art**

Mia’s first paper fulfilled an assignment to visit a major art museum and spend at least 30 minutes with two different works, one triggering attraction and the other, dislike or neutrality. This particular assignment generated fascinating papers from almost every student in the course. Mia reflected on her encounter with the painting that attracted her, using rich language, including many somatic images. For example:

This is not a painting that yells at you from across the room. Instead it peaks [*sic*] your interest with its quiet intensity and keeps it through its detail and uniqueness, tempting you to figure out its meaning almost as if it was flirting.

Sand was used in its creation. This unusual element created a physical relationship between the painting and me; I wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch it.

It was [as] if I was on the floor of the forest looking up through the thickness of tree branches to glimpse little bits of sparkling blue sky.

The ... novelty of finding something so full of movement in a silent wood brought a smile to my lips.

After her compelling description, Mia shifted into an interpretive mode, but her writing about personal meanings she found in the work matched the intensity of her somatic response.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym

The painting to which she initially felt what she called “aversion” did not generate somatic or emotional response, but Mia dissected the details of the painting carefully, in search of meaning. Drawing on art history sources, she eventually suggested that there might be a religious meaning to the work: “Thoughts of transcendence lead me to think of a higher purpose for our lives, due to my Catholic upbringing, and I believe this makes sense especially in the work's allusion to the Italian Renaissance.”

I wondered whether the absence of somatic description in her response to the second painting might be a clue as to why she was not attracted to it, wondering whether her own bodily response lets her know when she is attracted to art. But I was charmed by her thinking and her commitment to engaging with both paintings. In reading her paper and those of her peers, I wished that students could linger similarly with dance works.

### **A dancer's response to performance**

After Mia's initial paper, I looked forward to reading about the first two performances assigned, including a faculty dance concert. She stated in her introduction, “I have viewed many dance performances in my life. Yet each new performance I see is still exciting and has fresh and interesting perspectives to offer me.” However, in Mia's six-page paper, she wrote almost nothing about the dances or her experience of them. I found myself questioning why.

Since Mia had interacted little with assigned readings in her first paper, I understood why she did more in this one. But even when she was in dialogue with the ideas of Elliot Eisner (1982, 2009) and Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005), she did not connect her responses to the performances. For example, she quoted a source related to somatic responses to art, but did not describe her own somatic responses to the performances. I wondered whether such sensibility had been part of Mia's dance education.

There had been two guest dance presenters before this second paper was due, and students were expected to respond to their ideas. Mia said only a little about the presentations, sharing one idea she had learned from each, but not applying them when writing. For example, she related that she had learned it was important to ask, “What does the dance mean to me personally?” but did not write about what any of the dances personally meant to her. She continued, “While most of the time the choreographer does have some deep meaning, what is most important about viewing dance is how it makes you feel,” yet wrote almost nothing about her felt responses.

Mia did write extensively about her experience of being a dancer, making a brief connection to the experience of watching the work:

As a dancer, the way I viewed the art gallery [and the performance] was, as you might expect, movement based ... the paintings I chose to analyze were ... conceived of [as] lines of motion<sup>2</sup> .... I felt the most comfortable and excited to watch [the dance concert] because I knew so much more about what would be happening. There was also an extra layer of meaning for me within each piece, as I knew the dancers and their personalities.

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<sup>2</sup> Mia did not actually mention lines of motion in her first paper.

I was puzzled. Why would a dance major who had shown her ability to describe visual art in such detail, relate her somatic and personal responses to particular works, and develop thoughtful interpretations, not do so when she had the opportunity to write about dance? Since so many of her peers who were new to dance had done far more in this regard, clearly Mia's failure to do this was not just a limitation of the temporality of dance. Did her personal relationships with the dancers keep her from seeing the dance? Thinking back to the first assignment, perhaps these particular dances simply did not generate a strong sense of attraction for Mia. Perhaps, like me, she found words describing a dance less compelling than her personal experience of it, but I wondered why she did not describe that experience.

Mia's next paper, in response to a Mark Morris performance, was more complex. She wrote a good deal about her response to Morris as an artist and to his choreography in general, assessing him as a "creative genius" who knows how to manipulate elements of the work. She added, "I can feel the connection between the dancers and myself, and I can feel that there is some profound connection between the choreographer and the movement." At the same time, she found room to be critical, writing that "He lacks a connection between the audience, himself, and his past," apparently because Morris' choreography is abstract rather than autobiographical.<sup>3</sup>

Mia appreciated the technical challenge of the work, describing her pleasure in watching the "fast and exact" movement. She also connected with the dancers, noting that they "were all smiling, proud of themselves for getting the sequence right ... and just radiating happiness because of the playful choreography." She added a little more about the choreography: "My favorite part was the very last movement of the last piece. [It] was overflowing with joy and was the perfect closer." Mia continued to explain that only in this part of the concert did she respond kinesthetically: "I felt their energy. The stage was suddenly radiating an intense energy out into the auditorium." This statement seemed to affirm my previous thought that sensing her own bodily response was an indicator of her attraction to art. Mia elaborated:

I think that perhaps I still would have experienced this kinesthetic connection if Sue had not visited, but ... without her readings or her presentation ... I ... do not think I would have noted that my body was completely involved in my viewing experience during that moment and I do not think I would have realized how connected I was with the dancers; I was, in a sense, dancing with them. I was not simply a viewer.

While I indeed value this "inner experience" of a work, I found Mia's subsequent reflection to be so interesting that I questioned whether I had led students astray in directing their attention to somatic perception in watching dance. Referring to one of the assigned course readings, Mia wrote that writer Leo Tolstoy would question whether Mark Morris is an artist:

His pieces are beautiful but they are not necessarily trying to convey anything...he avoids communication about broader and controversial ideas...It is fascinating to watch the way he puts movements together with music, and this is enough for me to consider what he does art. However, his work does not

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<sup>3</sup>Morris did share stories from his own life in post-concert discussions.

necessarily make his audience think or feel past being charmed and this is not real art in Tolstoy's mind.

Mia seemed uncomfortable, however, with this assessment of Morris' work. She next identified an aesthetic value that she later developed more fully as a theme in her final paper, writing that harmony is the reason Morris' works are "so satisfying and pleasant." While this reference to pleasantness initially seemed superficial to me, Mia went further:

Tolstoy says art that is beautiful but does not elicit emotion is not real art. But he does not consider art that creates harmony. Dewey believes that emotion is the realization of a break in harmony, which means that if Mark is creating harmony on stage there is no emotion. I believe this to be true. When I am completely in step with my surroundings there is no room for emotion. All that exists is myself in the moment and a feeling of rightness. Perhaps for Tolstoy art that does not create strong emotions is not truly art, but for me creating something so beautiful that it creates a sense of harmony so great there is no space left for emotions is great art.

I started to see how Mia was beginning to integrate her newly recognized somatic experience of the work with her observation and analysis as a viewer. In her final synthesizing paper for the course, Mia reaffirmed her aesthetic value of harmony:

I used to pride myself on being able to discern powerful meanings from artworks ... I have discovered that grand meanings within artworks are not what I enjoy most. *I would much rather see a work that leaves my mind blank than one that sets my mind reeling. Harmony, an idea I keep returning to, has taken over my perception of the arts. I want to see a work that ... is so right ... that it makes me forget all about the wrongs in my life* [emphasis mine].

It appeared that later course experiences with Noh theater and a tea ceremony had further supported Mia's discovery of the importance of harmony, which she concluded was "a much better goal than to bring an audience to its feet through your flawless technique and emotional body language"; this clearly was a major shift in her consciousness.

### Reflections

Through multiple readings of Mia's papers and continued dialogue with Liora, my reactions kept evolving within the context of my own teaching of dance majors.<sup>4</sup> One way Mia, my students, and I often look at dance has to do with personal connections with the dancers. I find some pleasure in watching even very ordinary work by dancers and choreographers I care about. Jan

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<sup>4</sup> I taught a course for freshman majors for the first time soon after Liora and I began our research; assignments in the course included writing papers in response to multiple dance performances. I was also observing student teachers attempting to integrate dance technique, creative work, and critical watching of dance in high school classes.

Van Dyke (2010) discusses such relationships in a provocative article about diminishing audiences for concert dance: “The general rule seems to be that the audience for modern dance is other dancers and their friends” (p. 210), and that even other dancers and choreographers indicate that they go to concerts primarily to “support” each other. She wonders whether this indicates that “we are so jaded as viewers that we don’t enjoy watching dance,” or that “perhaps we do not find [the work] interesting” (p. 211).

While Mia claims to find it “exciting” to watch new dance work, I was not surprised that she responded more to the dancing than the choreography. Having danced for many years, she had not yet studied choreography. Freshmen in the course I taught were similarly limited, so I was grateful to a teaching assistant who shared a toolkit for viewing dance developed by Brenda McCutchen (2008); using it definitely expanded my students’ ability to describe and analyze dance in subsequent papers.

Yet when I attended faculty and student performances all semester, ones that my students were addressing in their papers, I had to constantly remind myself to look with an analytical eye instead of only being present in the moment. I had asked my students to do both in their response papers, to describe their somatic response to the work and to describe the movement and form of the dance, and then to reflect on their own engagement in the work. I knew this would be difficult in responding to an ephemeral art form, and indeed some of the students found that they needed to watch a work twice to fulfill the assignment. Without giving them any introduction to dance phenomenology (Fraleigh, 1987, 1999; Parviainen, 1998; Sheets-Johnstone, 1966), I was hoping they would bring their own lived experience into watching and making sense of the dance.

Clearly, Liora’s course, offering guest teachers who led students in movement experiences as preparation for performances, tried to facilitate this process as well. I am convinced that somatic sensibility can help an audience member find a way into a work and be generative of the meaning-making process, but does not guarantee it. My own somatic response to Morris’ work did not generate much in the way of meaning or appreciation. But for Mia, becoming aware of her felt-connection with the dancers, the energy, and the movement, and her attraction to these feelings, helped her realize that she values an experience of harmony more than she values impressive technical skills of the dancers or finding new ideas. It is also apparent that the carefully-choreographed sequence of course experiences over a four-month period, including selected readings, helped Mia to make this shift.

So what does all of this mean for how I or anyone else might teach students to watch and respond to dance? Unlike in visual art, where one still image remains before us for extended experience and contemplation, a dance keeps moving and then disappears. In watching live dance performances, how is it possible to

- fully experience dance in the moment,
- recall enough of this experience to describe it later in words,
- perceive the movement and structure of the dance clearly enough to describe it, and then

- reflect on how one's lived experience of the work and the work itself combine to generate meaning?

I struggle to do all of this in one viewing of a work, so how dare I expect students to do it all? Yet I saw some successes in Liora's students and in mine. Should we as educators attempt to help our students (and ourselves) become more skillful at this kind of perception and reflection? If so, how? And is it important?

Studying the work of Mia and other students this semester makes clear that these skills can be better developed with continued practice over time. Exposure to analytic language and substantive readings aids the process. But I also wonder whether we as dance educators might do a better job of teaching movement skills and vocabulary in ways that not only train the body to dance, but also facilitate skills in sensing and making sense of dance from the other side of the curtain or screen, as an audience member. If we did so, perhaps we might help students transfer their ability to perceive and interpret more than dance, and thus find new relevance for dance education. I recognize that this last statement is a big stretch. But one of the values of action research is that it can help us imagine what might be, not just what is.

I conclude with gratitude to Mia for her thought-provoking papers, and especially to Liora, for inviting me to share in the course, the hours of spoken and written conversations about our discoveries, the suggestions she made for this paper, and her collegueship as we continue our collaborative journey.

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**Dr. Sue Stinson** is Professor of Dance and Interim Dean of the School of Music, Theatre and Dance at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She has published her scholarly work in multiple journals and book chapters, and presented in a number of countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific. Her research has focused on both theoretical issues in dance education and how young people 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.

**Dr. Liora Bresler** is Professor at the University of Illinois, Champaign, where her focus is on Arts, Aesthetic Education, and Qualitative Research. She is the editor of Springer's series "Landscapes: Arts, Aesthetics, and Education" and the co-founder of the *International Journal of Education and the Arts*. Bresler has published 100+ papers, book chapters, and books on the arts in education, including the edited *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (2007) and *Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds* (2004). Bresler has given keynote speeches, invited talks, seminars and short courses in over 30 countries in Europe, Asia, Australia, Africa, and the Americas.

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