

Dance Education as the Practice of Living¹

Susan W. Stinson

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

Contact: sue_stinson@uncg.edu

Abstract

In this example of personal narrative research, the author reflects upon a long career as a dance educator and how the lessons she learned through dancing, creating, interpreting, and teaching dance, all apply to living. With an understanding of dance as a state of consciousness, paying attention to internal and external relationships becomes critical. Other lessons include the need for both discipline and letting go, courage and humility, community and solitude, planning and spontaneity, joy and moral praxis. The author expresses hope that this paper will contribute to a deeper conversation about what can be learned in dance and why it matters.

Keywords: dance education, reflective practice, personal narrative

Introduction

This presentation started out as a book chapter I was asked to write about how my work in the arts had affected my understanding of research. At the time of the invitation, I was at a transition from my work as a dance educator and scholar to retirement, so I wrote about how my life in dance had guided my teaching, how both became incorporated into my understanding of research, and how all are related to the larger project of living (Stinson, 2015, a and b). Due to time limitations and the emphasis of this conference, I'll focus my comments on lessons derived from dancing, dance-making, and interpreting dance, as well as teaching, and how I think they apply not just to my life, but to all endeavors that matter, for all of us and for our students.

When people ask me if I “still dance,” I tell them that I stopped performing and making dances many years ago. But as a former dancer — or perhaps a forever dancer — I found that I could have similar experiences outside the dance studio, in teaching, research, and more. Here are some of the lessons from dance that I took with me into other parts of my life.

Lessons from Dancing

When I began teaching dance to children, I noticed that sometimes they appeared to be dancing and sometimes just moving around. Since I called myself a *dance* teacher and not a *movement* teacher, I wondered how I could facilitate more of the former. Eventually I came to understand dancing as a state of consciousness, one that involves being fully present in the moment, something that is popularly known today as *mindfulness*. I experience myself dancing whenever I pay attention to what the movement feels like on the inside (something we now call *somatic awareness*) as well as what it looks like on the outside. (As I taught children, dancers know that a shape is not just the outline of what they make with their bodies, but also what is going on inside, with their muscles.) In my teaching of children, I was quite explicit about the difference between just moving and dancing, and found that even 3-5-year-olds could make the distinction (Stinson, 1988, 2002).

In this state of consciousness I call dancing, I am more attuned not only to who I am, but to others and the world beyond. For example, I notice curves and angles around me while feeling them inside myself, perceiving the world through my whole body, not just my eyes.

Similarly, basic dance movements of advancing and retreating, rising and sinking, tensing and relaxing, bending/straightening/stretching, closing and opening, balancing and falling — all are basic organizing principles in the physical world that I can see around me if only I *notice*. Paying attention to my internal state while experiencing these principles as a mover, offers me further understanding of how they are working in other aspects of my life. For example, exploring the need to go off balance and then fall in order to move beyond where I am physically helps give me courage to experience the risk of doing so in other ways. I know in my body that taking a single step requires going off balance: We can't go anywhere unless we are willing to fall, a metaphor that I have applied throughout my adult life — and indeed I have fallen, and failed, plenty of times. Through reflection on these experiences, I came to know my body as a laboratory for learning not just about myself, but also about the world.

But I learned far more in the art I lived in for so long. Through dancing, I experienced the joy of feeling fully alive, reminding me that such states are possible and worth cultivating, and not just while dancing. One can easily go through life on automatic, as though *anaesthetized* to joy as well as other feelings, and the aesthetic experience can be a powerful wake-up to consciousness. How can we help make ourselves come alive, and cultivate joy in ourselves and

others, even when we are not dancing in a traditional sense? This is one of those questions I ask myself more frequently as I get older, but I suggest that it is important for younger folk as well.

I don't wish to imply, though, that all of my dancing was joyful, for being alive also means times of struggle and even despair, just as in other parts of life. It required courage to make myself vulnerable and publicly visible as a dancer, just as it does now when speaking or writing. High school students in my research have told me that this kind of courage is something they expect to use in their futures, as I have in mine.

I admit I loved the hard physical work of dancing, and took pleasure in achieving greater strength and flexibility through discipline and commitment, even when I didn't achieve the unrealistic goal of "perfection." We hear much about discipline and commitment these days, as "habits of mind" all young people need to cultivate. But because of my strong work ethic, a harder lesson for me to learn was to stop pushing long enough to *allow* change to happen in my body, trusting that my inner body sensibility would work things out even when I did not consciously understand and could not make them happen through force of will and training. This is another lesson with important implications in other parts of life, as well.

Through dancing, I also learned to value both the sense of security achieved in following directions from an authority as well as the freedom of "making it up as you go along," and to appreciate that greater creativity can result from improvising within boundaries or a structure of some sort than from just doing whatever you feel like. I know that many business leaders (Partnership, 2009) have started recognizing the importance of both freedom and structure.

Further, business leaders seem to value another lesson I learned in dance, where I appreciated the community I experienced in dancing with others, as well as the times of solitude. I learned from good teachers, mentors, and colleagues, and also the inner teacher I had to cultivate within myself.

Lessons from Creating Dance

Going beyond dancing to choreography, most of the lessons from dancing still applied, but there were additional ones that I took into my life as an educator and researcher, and beyond. The process for creating a dance, of course, is quite similar to that used in other human creations, such as lesson plans or a research project. As a choreographer, I often went into an empty studio with some ideas, but without a clear sense of either form or content. (If either *is* initially clear, it

often changes before the work is complete.) One pays attention to the movement created or generated by dancers, and makes decisions about what does and does not fit. One looks for relationships, decides what is important, and eventually both form and content, and ultimately meaning, become clear. There is a good bit of messiness along the way, all trial and error. It was always an act of faith to go into the studio, trusting that a dance would result from my labors. How many times throughout life must we have the courage to begin a task even we are not sure of the outcome? As we get closer to the end of life, which we all do, such acts of faith take on more poignancy.

Just like when dancing, a choreographer must pay attention throughout so there is a heightened state of awareness during the process of creating original work. But if we want our work to be meaningful to others and not just narcissistic “self-expression,” the awareness is both inner and outer: A good choreographer avoids falling too much in love with a creation and knows when to use the external eye of a critic. I think this is an important life lesson, as well. While young children don’t usually have such an external eye, part of maturity involves paying attention to how others perceive us while maintaining our own authenticity and integrity. As a personal example, I now have to figure out how much I want to resist stereotypes of the older woman, and how much I wish to embrace them!

Lessons from Interpreting Dance

In later years of my dance education career, with changes in the state-mandated curriculum for public school dance, I started to pay more attention to the practice of critically and reflectively *watching dance* as a member of an audience. An *engaged* observer invests a certain kind of attention. Some works are highly visceral and grab my attention, but with others, I have to choose to engage, to look for the treasures I might find, even with no guarantee that they will be there.

And beyond just staying awake, what about finding meaning? In some dances, meaning is readily apparent, but with others I have to make a conscious decision to raise my own questions in seeking to make sense of what is before me. Listening to meanings found by others in the same work, and questions they asked in order to find them, adds to my own efforts, but sometimes I have to accept my lack of understanding.

At my age, I am constantly faced by new developments — in technology, popular culture, and more — which seem foreign to me. Choosing to engage with my grandson's choice of a computer game requires me to use those skills I developed watching dances I didn't think I would like. I have learned much from this boy who is now 10 years old, as he patiently explains to me, and I still take him to dance performances.

The practice of watching dance performances also attunes me to the need for rhythm, which of course is part of dancing and dance-making, as well: There are times for being in the present moment, feeling myself *in* the dance as I watch it, and times for reflecting. Similarly, outside of dance, there are times just for living, and times for asking ourselves what it all means. Both seem important to a life well-lived.

Lessons from Teaching Dance

Building on what I knew from my dance experiences, becoming a teacher expanded who I was in ways that impacted my research and my life as a whole. I was still dancing in the traditional sense when I began teaching, but found, upon the arrival of a second child and a university tenure track position, that I could not do everything. I “stopped dancing,” but really didn't. Instead, I created a life as an educator that was still about a heightened consciousness, being as fully present in my body/mind as I was when performing. Before class, I put many hours into preparation, trying to create a time together that I hoped would satisfy my aesthetic sensibility (see Grumet, 1989) as well as help students learn. I found that the discipline and hard work of preparation allowed for spontaneity in the moment: I could put aside my lesson plan because I had done so much thinking and imagining ahead of time. As in improvised dancing, structure and boundaries gave me the security to improvise.

This, however, was a level of understanding I grew into. Initially, I felt like I was playing dress-up as a teacher, certain that I didn't know enough myself to teach others. Indeed, I became better at a variety of dance skills in the process of figuring out how to teach them. By the time I reached my mid-30s, I began to feel more legitimate in teaching children, but still felt like a fraud teaching university students about teaching. Gradually, I came to understand that my identity as an educator was not about being an expert with all the answers, but being a fellow traveler with my students: perhaps one who has been there before, but seeing with new eyes and thus seeing new things.

Even as this definition of my professorial role gave me more confidence, I continued questioning myself about everything I taught, recognizing all I did not know and would never know. This kind of reflection became the core of my life as a scholar, and also a way of approaching the world, always aware that there is more than one way of looking at a situation, more than one “right way.” Being certain I am right, like being perfectly in balance, means staying stuck in the same place (and never needing to do more thinking or listening). At some point, I became more accepting of uncertainty, and rather liked it.

Teaching also opened in me greater respect for appreciating skills and knowledge my students had that I didn’t. Once I no longer needed to feel like the ultimate expert, I could more easily learn from them. Akin to what I was discovering as a parent about the same time, teaching became not about reproducing myself, but, rather, helping students become who they chose to be. I regret that my ego sometimes got in the way, dressed up as the caring savior, for when seeing my students struggling with problems to which I had already found a good answer, there were times I too readily shortchanged their opportunities to make their own discoveries.

Even beyond specific pedagogical skills and technique, I attempted to be the kind of educator I hoped my own children would have, and the kind of person *I* wanted to live with. My previous experience teaching in a Quaker school had helped me value cultivating the inner teacher within every student. During my doctoral work, I drew inspiration from Martin Buber (1955, 1958), and became conscious of the difference between treating students as subjects and as objects. This led to even more intense questioning as to whether or not I was teaching — and thus living — in accordance with my values. While I often came up short, I valued the humility which resulted from this process; such humility was a constant companion in my professional work and in my life. Perhaps I am not the only one who wishes some people I find difficult would have more humility than arrogance.

I came to know the concept of Praxis through the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1983), as *reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it*. I saw my teaching of prospective educators as a way to transform the world of dance education, especially by bringing to light moral issues embedded in how we teach, as well as how young people experienced dance. While I frequently taught and wrote about social justice issues in dance education (e.g., Stinson, 1985; Risner and Stinson, 2010), however, I often wondered to what degree I was avoiding dealing with larger issues of social justice, hiding out in my own safe world of dance

education. Now that I am retired, I no longer have that hiding place, but I am trying to take the consciousness I developed as an educator into the larger social world.

Conclusions

As I indicated at the beginning, this presentation will not discuss how these lessons applied to my work as a researcher, which was the largest part of the book chapter. But regardless of whether or not you are a researcher, I trust that all dance educators care about trying to help students create a life well-lived, whether inside of dance or not. My presentation at the last daCi conference (Stinson, 2013) began to challenge what we consider essential for all students to learn in dance, and how we might assess such learning, and I have revised that presentation for still another book chapter (Stinson, 2015b, c). I hope that this presentation will help promote continued conversation.

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Susan W. Stinson, Dr. retired in 2013 from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she taught courses in dance education and research for 34 years and fulfilled roles as Department Head and Interim Dean. In 2012, she received the Outstanding Scholarly Research award from the Congress on Research in Dance and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Dance Education Organization (USA). She has published her scholarly work in multiple journals and book chapters, and has taught and presented her work throughout the USA and in a number of countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific.

¹This paper is a revised and abbreviated version of the chapter “Dance/Teaching/Research: The Practice of Living,” Stinson, 2015a and b.