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O que pode ser aprendido sobre alfabetização artística através da dança? Um ensaio especulativo

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RESUMO – O que pode ser aprendido sobre alfabetização artística através da dança? Um ensaio especulativo – Neste ensaio visual, discutimos a Dança na Cidade, um curso que examina as múltiplas dimensões, contextos e propósitos da dança através de uma pedagogia inovadora. Com base em nossa pesquisa e prática como educadores de dança e artes visuais, desenvolvemos nosso curso e suas experiências de aprendizagem em torno de uma noção de alfabetização em dança, na qual interpretar e criar dança / movimento são considerados atos complementares, que ocorrem dentro de um contexto sociocultural. Nossa visão era desenvolver um curso que explorasse o amplo contexto da dança para criar uma oportunidade rara para os alunos se engajarem com uma forma de arte que costuma ser amplamente ignorada no ensino superior. Do nosso ponto de vista especulativo sobre a pedagogia da dança, demonstramos como a trajetória especulativa de cada aluno em nosso curso pode levar a imaginar e incorporar futuros e diferentes maneiras de conhecer a arte, a dança e o mundo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Reflexividade. Alfabetização em dança. Aprendizagem com o corpo. Pedagogia especulativa.

ABSTRACT – What can be learned about arts literacy through dance? A speculative essay – In this visual essay, we discuss *Dance in the City*, a course that examines the multiple dimensions, contexts, and purposes of dance through an innovative pedagogy. Drawing upon our research and practice as dance and visual arts educators, we conceptualized our course and its learning experiences around a notion of *dance literacy* in which understanding and making dance/movement are complimentary acts that take place within a sociocultural context. Our vision was to develop a course that explored the broad context of dance to create a rare opportunity for students to engage with an otherwise largely ignored art form in higher education. From our speculative standpoint on dance pedagogy, we demonstrate how each student's speculative trajectory in our course can lead to imagining and embodying futures and different ways of knowing about art, dance, and the world.

KEY WORDS

Reflexivity. Dance literacy. Embodied learning. Speculative pedagogy.

This course emerged from a desire to connect areas of knowledge and experience that are often disconnected in the academy. As art educators, we engage in teaching, learning, and research practices that integrate various dimensions of experience. Flavia has worked as visual arts educator in elementary schools in Brazil and in American universities. Kimber spent her early career as a professional dancer and dancer educator working in communities and schools in the United States and has

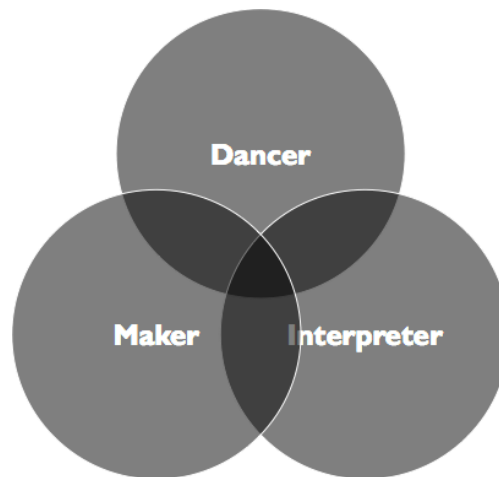
just finished her Ph.D. in aesthetic education. Our vision for “Dance in the City” was to develop a course that explored the broad context of dance to create a rare opportunity for students to engage an otherwise largely ignored artform in higher education. We designed the course so that students could examine multiple dimensions, contexts, and purposes of dance through an innovative pedagogy in which learning about dance transcended the conventional notions of appreciation toward embodied ways of knowing.

Drawing upon our research and practice as dance and visual arts educators, we conceptualized our course and its learning experiences around a notion of *dance literacy* in which understanding and making dance/movement are complimentary acts that take place within a sociocultural context. Dils (2007) makes an important distinction between dance appreciation and dance literacy. She writes that in order to appreciate dance, a viewer:

Has learned information about dance and acquired a value system; a literate viewer has not only learned information about dance, she has acquired skills and sensitivities that provide multiple modes of engagement with dance — kinesthetic, metaphoric, choreographic, critical, historical — and that allow her to critique her own understandings and values about art (DILS, 2007, p. 507).

When designing the course, we envisioned a model where students were not just learning *about* dance, but learning *through* dance, and identified three key areas of exploration, the student as an interpreter of dance, a maker of dances and as a dancer (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Source: Personal file

This model provided multiple pathways for students to cultivate a dynamic literacy in dance, and disrupted notions of art as being an object to observe or be appreciated.

This visual essay describes our collaboration designing and teaching this course and illustrates the experience through the examination of selected student projects, some of which are illustrated with images. We are aware that this course is innovative in couple of important ways: (a) it is based on the notion that the arts and dance in particular are better understood as cross-disciplinary practices that speak to our emotions, intellect, and various senses, and that require collaboration; (b) it embraces an embodied approach to teaching and learning, in which we seek to connect body and mind, and rely on reflexivity as a means to speculate on the implications of such connections for different areas of learning or professional activity.

Planning and preparation. During the fall of 2016 our new course was approved by the University Honors Program. The process involved review by a committee of professors and students who previously participated in honors seminars who recommended the course to be offered the next academic year (spring semester 2017).

This course is an exploration of the multiple facets of dance in Cincinnati, including classical ballet, ballroom dance, contemporary dance, hip hop, Latin Dance, and beyond. Students will become familiar with the history of dance,

read ethnographic accounts, and dance criticism, as well as interview local dancers and choreographers to better appreciate this ancient and complex art form. From observing to taking classes, attending performances to writing criticism, interviewing dancers to documenting their experiences, and creating dance studies, this course will raise awareness about the integral role of dance in our city and beyond (Dance in the City, Course Description).

Seeking to make the course accessible, we included the following statement along with the course description:

Dance is a form of embodied expression; therefore, engaging in the physical practice of dance is an essential aspect of understanding the art form. Students do not need any prior formal experience with dance instruction to take this class. All movement activities will be exploratory and building on each individual's knowledge and ability. A diversity of movement styles and the creation of unique embodied expression will be encouraged and championed. Any and all physical limitations will be accommodated and viewed as a contribution to the development of unique movement vocabularies.

We also met with academic advisors to address some of the preconceptions or prejudices they expected from students about enrolling in a dance class. It was an important meeting in which we were able to affirm our commitment to teach dance to any interested student, regardless of experience, ability, gender, or academic background. Fourteen students enrolled in the course from a variety of disciplines including, visual art, medicine, classics, engineering, electronic media, and business, 4 male and 10 female students.

A speculative collaboration. Trusting our affinity for transformative education experiences through the arts, we embarked in this collaboration. We developed a *speculative pedagogy for dance* that advanced open-ended outcomes, through active and creative teaching methods that included dialogue, creative reflections, and everyday dance studies. In this visual essay, we illustrate selected examples of students' work that illuminate the experience of the course and its outcomes for students.

Speculation 1: Creating deep reflexivity through the creative response process

As we engaged students in practices that cultivated literacy in dance, we wanted to provide opportunities for them to explore and express their understandings through creative practice. Each week a student volunteered to share what we defined as a

Creative Response to the reading materials, classroom discussions, films, movement practice experiences, and dance making explorations. The syllabus described this assignment as:

A **creative response** can entail any form of creative expression, either generated or curated by the students, such as a drawing, photograph, poem, writing, or video that captures or reflects the ideas discussed or evoked in class. Each creative response post should also include a short paragraph that describes what is included in the creative response and explains its relationship to the class experience. At the start of the following class, the students will talk about their creative response post with the course class.

Students explored various artistic mediums from poetry to drawing, collage, graphic design, and video. In designing this assignment, we invited the student to respond in creative ways. We deemed that the invitation to create artworks would set up reflection process that simultaneously encompassed a response to the experiences in the course and a subjective/interpretative stance that offered insights into self. We were inspired by Thorp (2016) proposition that these artworks can be approached as “discursive possibility, as speculation, as proposition – as an act of finding and exploration” that “might assert, or propose an argument or a critical relation or dimension; how it operates as an object in the world – how it is encountered by the viewer – its performative potential” (p.7).

Each creative response presented a synthesis of our approach to dance literacy, as it integrated the student’s experiences/perspectives as dancer, maker, and interpreter. We considered how a response to the embodied dance experiences in the course might allow a double articulation between theory and practice whereby theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time that practice is informed by theory. Theorizing out of practice, Bolt (2004) argues, is a very different proposition than merely applying theory to practice. We embraced this idea by devising pedagogical strategies that while rooted in dance have the potential to expand to other art disciplines in which a fundamental principle was to give voice to material thinking and to embody subjectivity in order to understand how knowledge is being generated through action and reflection

Figure 2



Source: Personal file

Stephanie's video collage embodied our explorations of how social dances are affected by different contexts as they move from the original historical and cultural context in which they were created to new situations and spaces. She selected several tango videos that illustrate the shifting aesthetics as tango--from the intricate and nuanced footwork performed in a milonga with an audience in the round, to the long extensions of limbs and acrobatic partnering of tango performed on the stage (Figure 2).

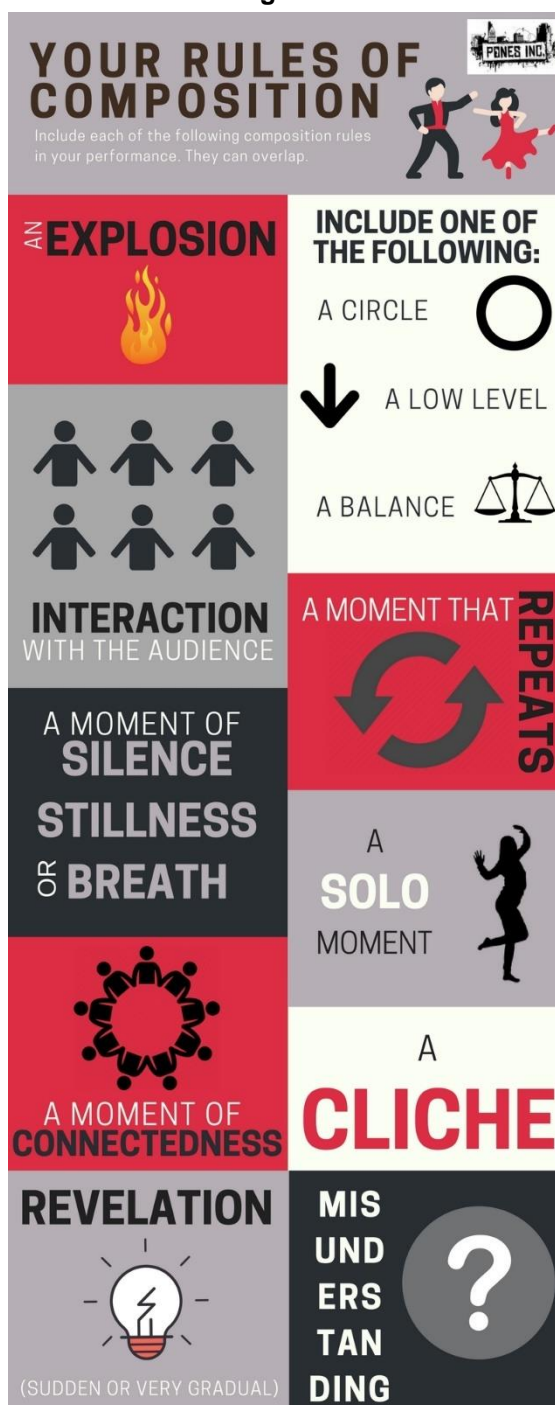
Figure 3



Source: Personal file

Farhan's collage in response to Agnes De Milles' ballet *Rodeo*, a modern choreography that celebrated the American West, includes layered iconic images of Western towns, characters, and historic events to offer context for this work. He placed an image of Agnes De Milles with her leg stretched in a modern 90 degree-angle pose at the center to highlight the work's departure from European ballets. The innovative spirit embodied in the American exploration of the West is echoed in *Rodeo*'s distinctively new movement vocabulary and thematic choice (Figure 3).

Figure 4

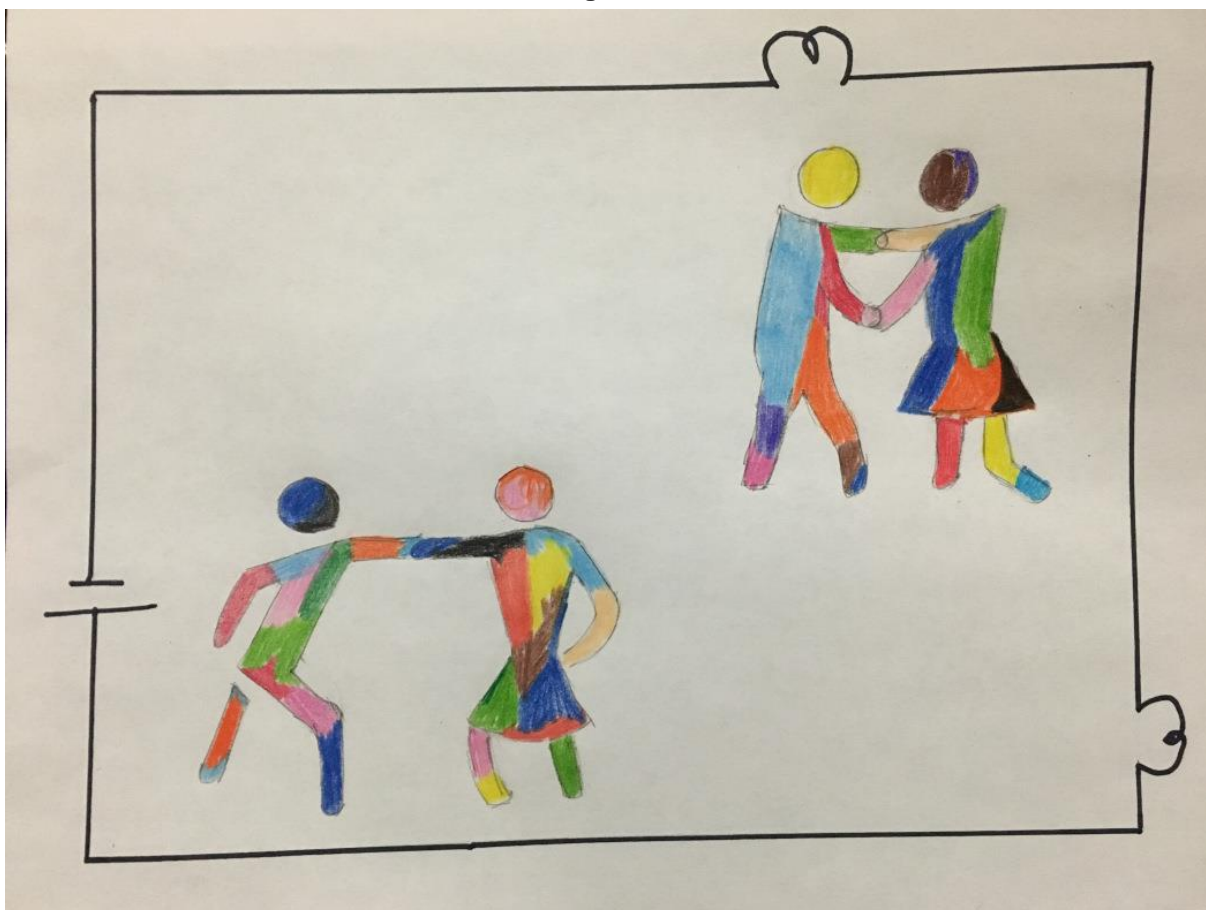


Source: Personal file

Kirsten's infographic (Figure 4) captures the experience of working with a guest choreographer, Kim Poppa, who presented her approach to engaging communities in creating dance. This creative response also illustrates transdisciplinary learning

because as a business major who frequently makes infographics, Kirsten applied that language to her new experiences in dance.

Figure 5



Source: Personal file

Drawing on a circuits lesson in a physics course, Avani summarizes her understanding of the “swing out,” a movement where one partner rotates away from the other while maintaining a physical connection, as in an open circuit (Figure 5). After swinging out the partners come back together as the result of momentum, and they reestablish a closed circuit. This creative reflection suggests transdisciplinary learning where concepts from one area are used to understand another, such as physics and dance.

Speculation 2: Reclaiming the body in Higher Education

The experience of teaching this course reinforced our speculation that learning in Higher Education prioritizes discursive and analytical ways of expressing knowledge. Ross denounces that:

The body has been the hidden student in American classrooms. It has been absorbing lessons we weren't even aware were being taught. Responding in ways direct and obvious and hidden and recondite, it has shown itself as a product of academia, a product few were aware was being produced...Understanding how the body learns is a critical first step in making these inadvertent lessons of America's classrooms conscious and deliberate. (ROSS, 2004, p. 169)

This course was an opportunity to leverage the body as both subject and medium of learning. We designed the movement activities of the course to be inclusive, building upon each student's level of experience and ability. Students were never passive observers of dance, they were asked to interact with a variety of dance traditions and to engage in purposeful movement, from the very first day. Olivia, a student, described her experience as:

During the very first activity of the very first class, creativity was demanded from us. Coming up with a dance-like movement to the sound of my name and performing it for the class? That sounded like a method of torture to me. But surprisingly, as each person shared their own motion, the tension in my muscles eased. My body become more fluid, my mind less occupied. Somehow, through sharing and practicing our name gestures, we created a haven for creativity and dance to blossom.

To engage students in the transformation process of bringing not only awareness, but creative exploration into dance, we asked the students to create an Everyday Dance. The syllabus described the assignment as,

You will create, perform, and video yourself in an original piece of choreography in which you apply principles of dance to an everyday movement experience. Videos of your dance performance will be shared in class.

Prior to this assignment, the students had been engaging in learning social dances such as the tango and swing, as well as attending the ballet. In the Everyday Dance assignment, we were asking students to explore dance making from their everyday contexts. Stinson describes that "the aesthetic experience of dancing can

only come when we move with concentration and awareness; it is this which transforms everyday movement into dancing” (STINSON, 2004, p. 158). Below are links to two student Everyday Dance videos that illustrate the different ways students explored bringing awareness to pedestrian movements in order to create a dance composition.

Figure 6



Source: Personal file.

Cat, a film student, created a dramatic portrayal of her daily experience working in a bakery (Figure 6). Set to the music of Carmina Burana, a ballet the students’ attended at the beginning of the semester, she manipulates the video to slow down her movements and accentuate the connection between her kinetic energy and the spray of flour into the air.

Figure 7



Source: Personal file

Jake transformed the everyday movements of taking a shower into a rhythmic dance set atop a shower curtain (Figure 7). By examining common gestures, like smoothing the hands together, he created a movement vocabulary that turns a common experience into a dance.

Conclusion

We learned from our speculative pedagogical experience teaching Dance in the City that by developing dance literacy skills:

- Students engage in reflexive practices that (a) generate rich insights about self and others, (b) connect different areas of knowledge in relevant ways, and (c) unveil the process of creativity. Because dance is complex and interdisciplinary art form, it demands robust interpretive strategies and provides encompassing experiences that promote a reflexive stance, which is in many cases new for students.
- When the body occupies a central place in learning students develop a new awareness about its central role in their lives and careers. The

explorations in this course were grounded on the notion that creativity is an embodied process that can bridge and convey different ways of knowing.

From our speculative standpoint dance pedagogy, we sought to demonstrate in this visual essay how each student's speculative trajectory lead to imagining and embodying futures and different ways of knowing about art, dance, the world.

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Ph.D., spent her early career as a professional dancer, choreographer and dance educator and continues to explore embodiment as it relates to education and arts-based research methodologies. Her work rests at the intersection of many fields including documentary filmmaking, dance, and aesthetic education. She is currently an Assistant Director at the Center for the Enhancement for Teaching and Learning and teaches courses at the University of Cincinnati.

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