



Creating the Dance and Dancing Creatively: Exploring the Liminal Space of Choreography for Emergence

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Abstract:

In this paper, three dance scholars explore the tensions and bliss inherent in curriculum delivery through dance integration. It meets the call for a curriculum attuned to provoking encounters (Pinar & Grumet, 2015) through philosophical narration that interweaves experiences as dancers, dance educators, dance scholars and dance integrators. Personal vignettes unveil the sense-making of creative artists tasked with the duty to “deliver” curriculum, and as arts integration specialists tasked with the duty to share knowledge, with teachers, for designing learning through dance. The authors liken the inherent tensions to those of a tight rope walker balancing between forces pulled in opposite directions. They share their own encounters of pedagogical balance and counterbalance, of choreography and emergence, and of leading and following, as each relates to learning design. They also explore the duality of meeting curricular ends and unfolding endless possibilities (Aoki, 2005; Roth, 2014). Together, the authors find that their collective experience leads to three charges for curricular reform: 1) embed dance integration in teacher preparation; 2) infuse dance integration in K-12 curriculum; and 3) provide time for pedagogical experimentation through dance-based inquiry.

Keywords: dance curriculum; arts integration; dance integration; teachers as dance educators

Invitation

Imagine . . . that you can reach up in front of you and unzip the air, like a large tent door, and pull back the flaps to reveal a space for contemplation. This is where our paper is situated. It is a space that is neither named, nor defined, where years of dance and dance education merge as philosophical questions and curricular disquietude. Please come in and ponder with us, knowing this is not a place for answering, though some answers may be chanced upon together.

Introduction

Why teach dance in public education? Is it to transmit culture through traditional steps and styles; is it an opportunity for creative expression as part of a play or co-curricular performance; or is it a form of representation within which to embody knowledge about other subjects? As dance artists, dance researchers and dance teachers, also known as dance A/R/Tors (Irwin & De Cosson, 2004; Norris, 2017, Springgay, Irwin, & Leggo, 2007), we see all three reasons for dance in schools as equally valuable. At the same time, these reasons provide anti-rationale through a lens of social justice: Whose culture is, or is not, part of a dance-oriented cultural indoctrination? Who is, or is not, invited or able to creatively express and perform in dance; and who is, or is not, marginalized from thinking and representing ideas through dance in the classroom?

As dance A/R/Tors from Canada and New Zealand, we three have come to a unique intersection of learning in, about and through dance, and our work centers on the choreography of learning in the form of dance integration. From opposite sides of the world, we have somehow merged upon similar pedagogy. We draw upon our deep knowledge of dance and our own aesthetic attunedness to the design of movement-based learning experiences that achieve curricular outcomes in core subjects such as science, social studies, math, and more. All three of us provide professional development, and often work directly with students to frequently witness the discovery, wonder and delight as they encounter a lived curriculum from head to toe, inside and out (Aoki, 2005). Likewise, all three of us frequently lament the lack of opportunity for so many others who need, but never get the chance, to experience dance-based ways of knowing (Eisner, 2002), including so many teachers who are unaware of dance-based methods as pedagogy.

There is a growing body of evidence that dance education enhances experiential learning through somatic knowledge and embodied ways of knowing (Fortin, Vieira, & Tremplay, 2009; Green, 2002; 2007; Hanna, 2008; Snowber, 2012; 2016). Scholarly literature provides support for dance as a pedagogical tool for curricular delivery (Eisner, 2002; Griss, 1994; Martin, 2016) and as a valid way to “make meaning of the world through our bodily experiences” (Green, 2002, pg. 114). Indeed, studies have found that dance offers expressive, creative, cognitive and kinesthetic benefits for schools (Blumenfeld-Jones, 2009; Eisner, 2002; Gilbert, 2015; Green 2002), and that dance can be a method for engaging students and understanding the world (Bagley & Cancienne, 2001; Ricketts, Irwin, Leggo, Gouzouasis, Grauer, 2007; Snowber, 2016; Stinson, 1988; 1997). Despite the reported benefits of dance in education, very few opportunities exist for students to experience it.

Given the omnipresence of dance studios in our communities, dance education is clearly valued in society; and yet, dance rarely makes it into the formal curriculum of public education. When it does, as in New Zealand and parts of Canada, it is often left to the generalist teacher. In both of our countries, we have met amazing arts educators and generalist teachers who deliver the dance curriculum with style. Unfortunately, they are a rare minority, and even when dance is in the curriculum, we often see it become minimized, perhaps as part of the school's musical production, or worse, not taught at all (Snook & Buck, 2014). Overall, there is still no accepted place for dance in our schools, and it has been relegated to the studios as a gendered (mostly female), extra-curricular privilege for those who can afford it, with the rest of the kids excluded from the embodied encounters that only dance can provide.

As dance A/R/Tors, we know this is wrong. We know that to embody knowledge is to experience something live and through the senses, and that embodied learning moves the learner to knowing beyond language. Through debriefing and written reflection, embodied experience can be described, but the essence of the somatic knowledge felt throughout the body is lost. To write about it is like taking a photograph of leaping dancers. It may look impressive, but that photo does not communicate how it feels to leap! We know that the somatic, the subliminal and the sublime (Aoki, 2005) of a dance-full life can only be reaped with adequate preparation and time. For us, to know the world through dance is to know that dance is essential to knowing the world. Conversely, not knowing this perpetuates an educational system largely devoid of embodied ways of knowing and a system that neglects much of our physical humanity in our learning. As dancers, we see with our tongues, hear with our nostrils, know with our skin—indeed, to dance is to know a priori cognition.

What we are certain of is this: most students love dance, are engaged by it, and are meaningfully enriched with every opportunity to embody educational encounters. In our collective experience using dance in schools, we three have yet to find resistance amongst the students. At the time we wrote this paper, none of us could recall one student who did not ultimately respond positively. Not one. As such, we feel a shared obligation to advocate for equitable access to dance education for all, including adequate teacher education to do so. We put forward a charge to create a curriculum attuned to provoking encounters (Pinar & Grumet, 2015) through dance, as part of a public education in such a way that dance education becomes a staple in teacher preparation. We come to this through a variety of our own memories, experiences and encounters, and we invite you to join us in our ponderings as we explore the tensions and bliss inherent in curriculum delivery through dance integration.

Balance and Counterbalance

In our work, dancing the curriculum in schools, we have encountered a variety of teacher reactions: excitement, welcoming, intrigue, fear, resentment, and (worst of all) ambivalence. Each of us has been invited in by principals for different reasons: because they were passionate about the arts; because they wanted to challenge their teachers; because they knew their students were hungry for it; and so forth. In some cases, we have been brought in by principals who impose dance

integration on their staff as the last hope to repair low standardized test scores. We often work with teachers who have never taken a dance class, or only understand dance from the studio-socialized routines (learn, rehearse, perfect, perform). Our job is to move teachers beyond this notion of dance as a product, and to help them understand the processes of the artistry of instructional design (Martin, 2017).

Through our collective years, the three of us have arrived at our own ways of delivering curriculum through dance, and we are able to walk teachers through the process, step-by-step, to help them see that the real creative work happens in the dance making, and not in the dance itself. The process is the focus, through which meaning is constructed, and the product (the dance) is actually a by-product of the learning (Martin, 2016). As creative dance A/R/Tors, we each have different processes, but they are similar in the way we provide a framework for co-creating physical representations of concepts and ideas that culminate in a dance. When working directly with students, teachers are often unaware of the cognitive intensity of our work, and the artistic decisions we make along the way. Many dance-artists who work with schools keep this as a mystery, perhaps motivated by job security, or perhaps (more likely) because they may not be cognizant of their process in a way that they can teach. In the end, the consequence of the mystique is that dance integration remains outside normative teaching, not to gain footing as mainstream until it is demystified and accessible to all.

Vignette: Snook and Buck on Dance and Doing

In our professional development with teachers, we begin by establishing what we mean by dance integration. There are many different meanings and this can be problematic in developing an understanding in a particular school situation (Snook, 2017). In line with Martin (2016), who draws on the ideas of Rabkin and Redmond (2015) and Eisner (2002), we define arts integration as “the regular use of the arts as a tool for learning and representing knowledge within another subject . . . arts and academics being taught together, with each reinforcing the other” (Martin, 2016, pg. 3). We place heavy emphasis on the process, and the artistry, although there is no expectation for students to be “good” performers. We teach a child-centered process, where the content of the lessons is based on discovery (Bresler, cited in Giguere, 2011). There is a dual focus on learning in a particular subject area and on artistic learning in dance.

We use dance to teach core subjects because we know that the arts provide a pathway to deep learning. This is supported by cutting-edge neuroscience showing that when a student learns by doing, a group of neurons in the brain fire together to create connections, impacting on student perception (Hanna, 2008). We have witnessed how dance catalyzes student consciousness. Their bodies are their minds, and their knowledge is not only stored in the brain, but physically experienced and embodied in their being. To know something on the somatic, sensory level is to consider it beyond logic alone, which taps into our humanity in ways that move us closer to a just and caring world (Greene, 2000).

Utility and Artistry

As dance A/R/Tors, we inquire about our own processes in practice, and have come to see that our challenge is in teaching teachers how to design the learning in such a way that it is embodied, while also embedding numerous opportunities for student creativity, self-expression, and for the emergence of unexpected, transformative encounters. For us, it is a balance to which we are attuned, admittedly from years and years of aesthetic practice, and a balance that is very difficult to teach. This tension between the artistry and practicality of lesson planning pulls us into a vortex where we circle around intentions of enlightening teachers with an authentically embodied curriculum, and around our duty to satisfy them with a list of hands-on activities for immediate use. We are often asked to make it easy and accessible. In this we struggle: to make enough sense of what we do that it seems doable, knowing that the sense-making process itself is the prize. Our quandary is this: how do we teach dance for instrumental purposes, in such a way that we do not sabotage the inherent artistry?

We find ourselves in a liminal space, as funambulists or tight rope walkers, teetering back and forth across a taut wire—a continuum between choreographic control and authentic, artistic emergence. At the same time, we, ourselves are the ones who pull from the ends, deciding how to create enough slack for the unexpected, yet tight enough to sustain the work. We have the knowledge, experience and skills to just give teachers an easy way to use dance in the classroom, yet we sense a moral obligation to help the teachers, and their students, come to their own aesthetic ways of encountering the world.

Vignette: Martin on Choreography and Emergence

As a dance A/R/Tor who provides teacher preparation in post-secondary arts education as well as professional development in schools, I approach my practice as an artistic teacher (Martin, 2017). I role-model how to choreograph learning experiences within a structured framework that scaffolds learning through dance-based methods, while also being flexible enough for student agency to make artistic decisions (Martin, 2018; Martin & Calvert, 2018). As an arts integrator, I use dance, instrumentally, to teach learning outcomes in other subjects, and I am often trying to make sense of my own intentions of providing a top quality artistic experience versus a top quality dance that showcases student learning to parents.

My choreographic process is rich and rewarding. I begin with curricular outcomes (such as understanding the similarities and differences between predator and prey in science), and then consider the appropriate context and dance-based methods to explore them (such as representing a jungle encounter between creatures through hip hop). Most of my work is based on creative movement improvisation techniques, physicalization of concepts through poses (tableaux), and movement patterns representative of concepts and relationships being explored. This is the easy part to describe to teachers. The more challenging part (and, for me, the more rewarding) is the artistic process of determining what concepts or ideas should be physically represented, how and when they

should be represented within a movement sequence, and to what music (almost always the decision that gives the work an artistic boost for its sensory allure). In my process, the structure of the music often determines the structure of the dance, and I listen to songs that resonate with the theme being explored, then break them down into sets of counts or sound bites for choreographic work.

These time chunks become blocks of time for ideas to be physically expressed, and I use my imagination to consider concepts that can be rendered in physical form. Imagination is integral to my process, as I visualize potential themes that will shape the work, and how I will facilitate movement patterns as they shift from one physical image to another. This artistic part of the work is creatively gratifying, often putting me in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) where I emerge from lesson planning feeling refreshed rather than drained.

The imaginative-creative encounter is the reason I want more teachers to know this work. Choreography engages our minds in ways that are cognitively rewarding. If we can capture that for ourselves, we can provide similar experiences for our students. They will not only be coming to school to learn about things—they will be coming to learn how to use their minds to visualize what they know and create something new.

Alternately, I could easily choreograph learning encounters where students are used as my artistic medium to create the dance in my mind—but to what end? Most certainly, they would embody knowledge and achieve learning outcomes through means other than the traditional reading, writing, speaking and listening, and that would be valuable—but what of their artistry? What of their imaginative-creative encounters? In order for students to experience the artistic, cognitive benefits of dance integration, they too need to have opportunities to imagine, visualize and create. To empower this, I choose to relinquish some of my power as choreographer, and embed opportunities for student decision making throughout the dance-based activities. I also like to leave spaces for freestyle, where student can just do their own thing—whatever feels right—moving in their own way to the beat. I provide the structure but they make the creative decisions.

Through this decision making, students engage in critical/analytical thinking as they justify their choices, while also fostering creative/productive capacities by transcribing their ideas into physical form (Eisner, 2002). To choreograph emergence is to empower and engage students through mind, body and soul (Buck & Snook, 2017; Snowber, 2016). For teachers to do this, they need time and opportunity to fine tune how much to plan and un-plan—an essential skill if they are to present encounters where learning is truly alive (Greene, 2007).

Structure and Emergence

In the arts, there is a complex relationship between the creator and work created, especially in art forms that require a physical, human being to express the work. In dance, the choreographer often codifies decisions about physical positions, movement patterns and steps into dance notation, to be interpreted by an artistic director and danced by dancers. At each point in the process, from

creative ideation and codification to final performative work, there is less and less opportunity for emergence in what the work will become.

When using dance for teaching another subject, there are many creative decisions that the teacher can make in the name of creativity that are actually made in the name of control. To leave decisions unmade is to create an opening to the unexpected. It can mean letting go in order to share the co-creative wonders of exploring a learning topic together. It can also mean leaving things too loosely structured where students are confused and possibly even feel vulnerable by the perceived uncertainty. This must be acknowledged—called out—as a huge barrier for dance education in schools. To put it bluntly: dance scares the heck out of teachers who are not ready to fail in front of their students. *This* is where sense can be made of why dance is not mainstream in education: teacher fear of losing control.

In order for students to experience authentic emergence, teachers need to be equally open to emergent encounters, to co-create and ponder with their students rather than prescribing each step. The control is embedded within the relationship between teacher and student—a traditionally formal relationship with social barriers that define expert and novice as two separate entities who do not ponder life on the same level. In our experience, we have found that this relationship must be redefined and co-created with students, much like a relationship between dance partners where power is shared, in varying degrees of leading and following, negotiated through trust.

Risk and Control

Redefining the teacher/student hierarchy into a learning partnership can move teachers out of the headspace of lesson plans *for* their students, to planning encounters *with* their students through a shared curiosity. In dance, collaborative work in partners or in groups is a sense-making journey of its own, through experimentation of just how much power to share, and how much control to submit. It can only be learned through micro-lessons on failure and success. If teachers are not willing to experiment with emergence in their own pedagogical practice, and be open to learning from mistakes, they can expect their students to approach learning in the same, rigid way. To truly integrate dance in education requires teachers who carefully share power within a trusting framework of discovery. They require a willingness to undergo their own encounters with power dynamics as they experiment with uncertainty and risk. Recall the image of dance partners. Very few dancers would take a running leap in the air to be caught by someone they do not know, and that leap of faith is very much based on a relationship that balances trust with competence and shared risk.

Taking the leap into another dancer's arms is a calculated risk, and dancers know that you cannot experience the exhilaration of being weightless without knowing there is someone there to manage the inevitable gravity. When learning to partner, it is a careful, unspoken negotiation of testing the limits, and only when a dancer is certain of the partner's commitment and capability will s/he take the leap. Taking a leap with students, to reimagine the pedagogical relationship as a partnership, can be done in a similar way. Trust and a safe environment for uncertainty and risk need

to be established. If not, someone could be leaping into unready arms; but, when those arms are ready, and the partnership is tested and secure, the weightlessness of jumping into the unknown is the most exhilarating kind of learning imaginable (Aoki, 2005; Roth, 2014). Our charge as dance A/R/Tors is to help generalist teachers attain this kind of learning relationship with their students.

Vignette: Snook and Buck on Leading and Following

We worked with a small school in Northland, a large geographical area at the top of New Zealand's North Island. The school was in a low socio-economic, semi-rural area, and most of the students were indigenous. Student success at this school was low, and in order to improve it, the principal decided to have all of the teachers employ "arts integration" as the process through which all subject matter would be taught. He brought in a resident artist educator on a weekly basis, engaging us to work with his teachers and build confidence in this new directive.

In the New Zealand curriculum, dance is actually one of the four arts disciplines under an arts umbrella (Ministry of Education, 2007), but is not often taught, due to a government focus on literacy and numeracy (Bolwell, 2011; Buck, 2003; Kaye, 2010; Snook, 2012). While some schools in New Zealand may employ an "arts teacher", it is generally left to classroom teachers to implement dance in their own classrooms. The idea of dance integration is not something that is promoted to teachers, nor something that many teachers would be aware of.

When we asked the principal at the school whether the teachers were supportive of dance integration, he assured us that they were all "on board". This, however, was not necessarily the case. At a staff meeting, the teachers appeared angry as they directed challenging questions at us, seeming less interested in the answers, and more at being heard. They were clearly in defence mode, feeling protective of their own work, and resistant to a forced change. Following the meeting, we were assured that the questioning was simply a matter of teachers trying to understand what it was that they were expected to do. They were prepared to go along with a directive from their principal, but they were not necessarily happy about it.

From the beginning, we could see that tensions existed at a basic level when teachers were charged with delivering a curriculum through dance. The teachers seemed to fall back on deep-rooted meanings of dance as performance, which inhibited their ability to deliver a meaningful expression of dance alive through the curriculum. Teachers had their own embedded beliefs around teaching and learning, that were quite resistant to change, and many just wanted to continue to teach "the old way". This was especially true during stressful periods, when we saw teachers regress back to how they, themselves, were taught. Snook's research states: "A lack of experience stemmed from the fact that teachers had not experienced dance when they were students in schools" (2012, p. 204). We acknowledge that a great deal of support is needed in order to instigate change.

The teachers' uncertainty of what to expect, and what was expected of them, was our evident barrier. In our work, we see this all the time. The concept of arts integration alone is difficult to grasp, and beyond that, the how and the what to teach is the mystery behind the veil. To demystify the

approach, we conducted a full day of professional development for teachers using practical activities that allowed the teachers to learn by doing, and in turn, retain an understanding of the process and lessons learned. This was a success, with all teachers appearing to have fun, and several taking the activities forward into their own classrooms. In fact, this was a turning point in the teachers' attitude toward dance integration. The arts teacher working with the school reported benefits: students becoming more accepting of each other and working together more happily; boys once reluctant in oral language becoming engaged and showing exceptional ability in arts subjects; and two students who were detached and shy developing confidence to, in one case, display leadership qualities and in the other, make valuable contributions. Six months later, one of the teachers acknowledged how angry she had been at that first meeting and explained that she simply hadn't understood what was expected of her. Now that she was using dance integration in her classroom, she could see the benefits.

We believe that for dance integration to be sustainable, teachers themselves must have ownership of the work, and take the lead. Even if they take on the mindset of facilitating a learning partnership with their students, they still want to feel like they have control first, before letting some of it go. To empower the teachers, we knew that we needed to shift from the first day's process of designing the lesson plans for them, to a partnership with them where we engaged them in the planning process. This was the only way to make sure the practice continued once we were gone.

We also learned that it was important to diminish the austerity associated with our specialty or expertise. From what we've seen, part of the fear factor of dance in education is the sense of disempowerment experienced by generalist teachers who do not yet know the pedagogy. Obviously, if dance integration is to be sustainable in primary classrooms, it is important to empower the generalist classroom teacher. The teachers at the school shared with us that they felt more empowered by professional development where they learned by doing.

While there is much to be gained by experts working in classrooms when projects are conducted over several years, we have concerns about what happens to dance in other schools where there are not the funds available to employ artists.

Charges for Curriculum Reform

To recapitulate, our collective experience as dance A/R/Tors tells us that in order for dance to become normative in schools, we need to demystify the artistry. We have come to know that *doing* through dance is an effective way to teach, and have articulated our struggle with owning the power to design lesson plans for teachers versus working with teachers so they and their students may encounter the imaginative-creative. We have come to learn that the most effective way to experiment with pedagogy is to approach teaching as a learning partnership, where power is shared between the teacher and students, as with partners in dance. Last, we have come to know that, ultimately, the expertise of dance integration needs to reside with the teachers, in order for them to feel empowered, and through this, the mystery of the process will be dismantled.

Hence, our first charge for curricular reform is to embed dance integration into teacher preparation programs so teachers can come to schools ready and able to design learning through dance. We have seen how, once teachers experience the power of embodied knowledge, they become advocates for this way of knowing. Dance is fun. It is effective. And the largest barrier is fear of the unknown—so let's make it known. From our experience, even when there is a curriculum attuned to provoking encounters, such as the fortunate places where dance exists in the curriculum, if the teachers are not adequately prepared to teach it, the curriculum may as well not exist. All teachers should have the opportunity to learn how to integrate dance into their subject areas.

Logically, our second charge for curricular reform is to infuse dance integration into the core curriculum, K-12. This means teachers will need to acquire the capabilities to deliver the curriculum in embodied ways that honour our human nature to use physical expression as a mode of understanding, documenting and communicating ideas. Learning in and about dance is essential to learning through dance, and we call for a curriculum that adequately provides learning in, about and through dance. This means that, in addition to teaching dance as a subject (as it already is in New Zealand and parts of Canada), teachers will use dance as an active, interactive and dynamic pedagogy in all subject areas, when it makes sense to do so.

Our third charge for curricular reform is to provide time for pedagogical experimentation through dance-based inquiry. In our first two charges, the focus is on formal programs with stated learning outcomes, but we also call for curricular reform that honours generative inquiry, particularly through dance. The benefits of translating ideas into physical form include critical/analytical thinking, creative/productive capacities, artistic/symbolic thinking, and more. Further, beyond cognitive benefits, dance is physical activity. Let us repeat that: dance *is* physical activity. At a time when teachers are desperate for ways to get their students up and moving, we have the perfect solution, ready to go: dance.

In this paper, we share how important it is for teachers to experiment with shifting the traditional power dynamic between teacher and student into a learning partnership, as with dance partners, where power is carefully relinquished in a trusting exchange of leading and following. To do this, teachers need time allocated in the program of studies, dedicated to dance-based inquiry with their students. Such activity will bring mutual benefit for teacher and student in fostering comfort with risk and uncertainty, a mindset for emergence and experimentation, and ability to generate imaginative ideas that eventually become represented through dance.

This final charge is essentially a counter-charge to the other two—as we tug the wire back from the opposite end to say that including dance outcomes in all teacher education and for all students K-12 is necessary, *and* it is equally important to allocate time to just try things out through dance. Teachers are rarely encouraged to experiment with their practice, but we know, as artists, that is exactly how we were able to hone our own skills in arts integration. To disrupt notions of curriculum as script (Greene, 2007) teachers need time to be in flux and live their own curriculum as artists (Aoki, 2005). In our third charge, we contribute to the speculative and anarchist approaches

to curriculum in calling for modes of learning that empower the learner beyond programmatic limits—to really live their curriculum through holistic encounters that merge cognitive and physical benefits into intellectual-somatic-affective intensities.

Conclusion

These charges for curriculum reform are based on years of writing, wondering, inquiring, pondering, questioning and learning as dance A/R/Tors. Our greatest conundrum is still figuring out how to teach teachers to use dance for pedagogical purposes in a way such that they also discover the artistic processes within. In a sense, we are trying to simultaneously demystify and sustain mystique. Through this, we remain on the high wire, fine tuning our own balance.

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