

## Choreography as a Mode of Inquiry: A Case

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### **Abstract:**

This paper is a personal case study of the choreographic process, a subjective investigation of the creative process and the work produced. In addition, an attempt is made to relate the creative work of choreography to qualitative research, likening the art's struggle for acceptance within the academic system to effort by researchers to legitimize interpretive and to other more qualitative modes of inquiry. In this effort, the author explores such issues as the essence of knowledge, the purpose of art, and how the two relate.

### **Article:**

Before accepting an academic job in 1989, I spent nearly 20 years as a freelance choreographer, for a while working as a solo artist, and then, for a long time, directing a company. Throughout those years, I made many dances, motivated largely by a need to express my ideas, develop new skills, and learn about time and space and the ways in which design communicates meaning. At the end of this long period, I entered graduate school, where I began writing. As I worked toward a doctorate, I found myself drawn to interpretive kinds of research. Qualitative or interpretive research--I will use these terms interchangeably--can be defined, for the purposes of this paper, as those methodologies that study persons and the lived experience and which acknowledge the multiplicity of reality. Perhaps I was attracted because I found many of the values and skills I had acquired as an artist helpful in this sort of work. I was especially drawn to the idea that instead of trying to fit into a preconceived form, in qualitative research the investigator's task is to create a form that fits the research problems. My sense of individuality is affirmed by this work, as is my belief that perception is inextricably linked to interpretations.

Historically, interpretive inquiry has not been readily accepted within the academic world. Today, the situation is beginning to change, though slowly, within certain disciplines. From the vantage of my present position as an associate professor; I can now see that it is shared values and processes which, at least in part, account for the uneasy fit of both creative work and the qualitative modes of research within the academic systems. Both accept the postmodern concept of the subjective nature of truth; both regard the scientific attitude as mistaken when it reduces personal belief and history to the level of prejudice; both embrace the idea that all knowledge is produced in relation to interest; and both regard tradition as part of who we are and where we must begin. For all these reasons, neither form has yet achieved wide acceptance as a legitimate mode of inquiry in the academic world, which historically has conceived of "research" as scientific. The concept, however, actually is somewhat elastic.

In *Webster's*, the word *research* is defined this way:

1: careful or diligent search; 2: studious inquiry or examination, esp. investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories...( *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1980)

The first definition clearly supports the idea of open-ended search, whether it be for personal meaning as a guide to understanding culture or for a vaccine to inhibit the further spread of AIDS. The expansion of knowledge is a goal of all research. It follows that improving perception by seeking new interpretations of the

familiar and finding fresh metaphors to sharpen our vision should also be goals, because knowledge comes through perception and understandings. Viewed this way, qualitative inquiry and the arts both fall easily under the general rubric of research. In this paper, I will explore similarities between these areas, specifically choreography and interpretive inquiry, using my own creative experiences as examples.

The metaphor of qualitative research as choreography can be applied on multiple levels. For instance, the researcher might participate in her interpretive study in the same way a choreographer might in performing her own dance--by adding collaborative voices. This kind of involvement might happen in schools, for instance, as the researcher becomes part of classroom life. Or, the researcher might take another choreographic role, that of designing the study, organizing the material that has been developed and planning its presentation to a future audience, the research community. This would be where the examination and analysis of data comes in: Here researchers search for thematic threads while maintaining the clarity of each voice. In the same way, the choreographer strives to allow each dancer her individuality while developing thematic movement materials.

On another level, the two forms can be compared in terms of impact. It is commonly accepted that those who experience dance first-hand (as dancers or members of a live audience) are those most deeply involved and affected. Similarly, those participating directly in qualitative research, those who are physically, intellectually, and emotionally present in the research context, and who themselves hear the interplay of voices, are those for whom the work is most vivid and meaningful (Oldfather & West, 1994, ps 23).

But it is in the kind of knowledge produced that I think the two realms are most notably comparable: Both deal in truth or meaning that emerges from a specific perspective and is thus subjective. In other words, both acknowledge the validity of more than one perception of truth.

In all of my work, I am guided by the belief that meaning is primarily personal, and that despite commonalities, each of us has a point of view uniquely our own. With its plurality of techniques and philosophies, modern dance lends itself especially well to this belief system. It tends to be an adaptive form, shaped, as is qualitative inquiry, by the participants and the audience.

As an artist, my inspirations tend to come from an image or from music. When starting a new dance, often I do not have a clear idea. Normally, I spend hours alone in the studio considering the concept, working out movement and listening to the music. Quite soon, however, often before I know where the dance is going I have to begin rehearsals. Seeing my movement on dancers helps to flesh out the ideas and shape the phrases into coherent structures. For me, choreography is like a dialogue, a process of bringing ideas to the dancers who can make them visible. Their work then gives me new ideas that I try to integrate into the concept, and so the work progresses.

In the summer of 1994, I created a dance called "Night Between Two Days." As I worked, I kept a journal, hoping to bring aspects of my process into consciousness. I have made use of the journal entries for this paper, mining them for data on the creative process, reflecting on them much as I would the writing of any choreographer. In a real sense, this paper is an illustration of just how related the process of interpretive research is to the creative process. Here, my own words have become a resource for my research on creativity. As I write this paper, comparing the creative process to interpretive inquiry, I am also using the creative process as a research tool.

The journal entry after the first rehearsal illustrates my uncertainty and lack of direction at the beginning of the process:

July 11--After 5-6 sessions in the studio by myself last week, and endless replays of the music, I was glad to finally see the movement, to be able to watch how it blends and flows, to check the rhythmic interplay, and see how each dancer works with the phrases, who is able to give it style and nuance so I can see where I might be going. I've chosen the music and composed three phrases: one for arms, one for legs, and one for full body. I have a vague sort of costume idea but no clear direction yet--a warm, inclusive mood, active yet open, rhythmic, perhaps ritualistic--but no sense of the form is visible yet.

To my way of thinking, the ambiguity present at the beginning of much creative work seems directly related to the mind-set necessary to effective qualitative inquiries. Principles or deep structures of choreography guide the unfolding of the dance, allowing the artist freedom to apply ideas based on individual circumstance. In the same way, tacitly accepted epistemological precepts inform the qualitative research process. These and socially constructed values combine with findings emerging from the process itself to guide the outcome. Ideas and goals evolve according to the mix of cultural and/or structural givens and newly acquired informations. Examples of such givens might include the race and/or socioeconomic background of the researcher, the number of subjects available in a particular locale, or the amount of time available to complete the study. As each dance is unique, so are the contextually bound findings of each research setting (Oldfather & West, 1994, ps 22).

In my choreographic process, early rehearsals are spent trying out new ideas, experimenting with uses of space. I watch the dancers work with the movement in varying speeds or sizes or configurations, and I begin to understand how the movement and the sound must interact to achieve a particular effect. My journal continues:

July 16--After four rehearsals, I have the first section mapped out in my mind, though I'm running into problems trying to keep from using previously successful ideas. I try daily to imagine new formations, to gain a concept for the piece as a whole. So far, the first section is about a community of women. As of today, they dance with each other but for the audience, separating and coming together. At the end, I think five will lie down,



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leaving one standing. I am seeing Section 2 as a dream or thoughts of the one--but what thoughts? what mood? Maybe the one imagines the five..I will feel much better when I know where we're going...

Another similarity between choreography and qualitative modes of research involves vocabulary. In my view, art is not concerned with absolutes but with trying to cast new light on experience, and the choice of vocabulary is critical. With each new dance, I strive to expand my stock of movement and design, pushing myself in new directions to bring out and clarify the ideas I am working with.

It seems clear that all the major modern dance techniques developed as a response to an individual artistic vision and the need to communicate different kinds of ideas. Each shapes choreography in its own manner, lending itself best to expressing the vision from which it emerged. In the same way, my search for fresh movement and structural ideas reflects a need to express the view of the world I hold today. I work to find original ways of representing my thoughts and experiences, striving to understand how they will be seen when danced this way or that, when combined with a certain section of the music, when performed by three dancers instead of five, when costumed in white as opposed to blue. My goal is to find the metaphor that will allow communication of what may be an unfamiliar interpretation of the world.

Qualitative research considers vocabulary and construction in much the same way. Unconcerned with testing the truth of propositions, the value of interpretive inquiry lies in its capacity to reveal complex issues. Hence, this kind of inquiry seeks to develop language as a means of illuminating the lived experience being studied. Working with the actual words of subjects can illuminate and guide interpretation. In hopes of revealing unique and personal perspectives, researchers often make use of long, in-depth interviews to allow for reflection on the issues. Just as with movement and structural ideas, language itself is neither true nor false, but it has the capacity to influence perception, to affect what is seen and how it is regarded. To allow expansion of vocabulary is to allow expansion of vision, and perhaps to allow communication of unfamiliar ideas. According to a study I participated in with Sue Stinson and Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, this is especially helpful in understanding the construction of meaning:..

To alter our language is to bring into view new perspectives on a situation, thing, or experience. Thus, different investigations will develop different languages, all of which can account for differing experiences in the world and enhance the possibility of understanding the stories and experiences of others. (Stinson et al., 1990, p. 15)

In other words, just as with art, this kind of restructuring can help us expand the cognitive patterns that filter our perceptions of the world. An expanded vocabulary may allow us to see and comprehend a different universe.

More often than not, I begin new work without a clear idea of the dance I am starting to make. Although I trust my own process and know that I will come to understand what needs to be done as I work, there is always the moment of doubt that says I should already know. I try not to countenance these feelings. Although working blindly can be torturous, it is also what draws me to create. Overall, I prefer the not knowing, and I relish the interaction with the material, trusting that the trial and error will lead me to a place I have not known. The best times are when I have a new structural idea and the accompanying questions about what it communicates. With or without the idea, however, for me the choreographic process is always a search for clarity of meaning as much as anything else--a search for the form that satisfies both emotion and intellect and offers up a key to its own significances. The analogy with qualitative research is apparent in the following passage from the study by Stinson et al.:

It should be understood that form and content are related in interpretive research similarly to the way they are related in choreography. In both situations, form and content evolve together. There are no pre-existing rules which determine this relationship. (Stinson et al. 1990, p. 14).

I find this aspect of the creative process particularly agonizing. My journal goes on:

July 22--End of second week, I finished. first section, though part of it still looks too like my last dance. I've tried to just get something out there so I can have material to work with or work from. Today, alone in the studio, I mapped out the first half of the second section with the music. If it works it should be different from my other work in substance, though thematically it's like "Spike" and "Lullabye" [two of my older dances]. The bad dream that takes over, a theme for me: one against the group. I wonder many artists keep recording themes in themselves. I wonder if audiences can see it, and how easily? It is possible to get away from favorite

movement themes, but often I don't see what a dance is going to be about till I'm done. So it's sometimes with chagrin that I see I've been elaborating on an old theme. Here, I think I've grow. I know the theme of this section is an old one and I hope to have done with it and go to a new resolution in the final section. What that will be, I'm still not sure...

This process of discovery, of finding personal truth, seems the essence of honesty in art-making, and a parallel to the goal of research. In a recent interview, Twyla Tharp discussed her process with critic Arlene Croce. During the course of the conversation, Tharp described the sense of inquiry involved with choreography and cited the "not knowing" as a crucial difference between her artistic and commercial work. With a new dance, she said,

I have the desire to do it, and that gets me through. A whole lot of things get decided in the making. At some point in the piece, I begin to feel which movements belong and which do not. But the luxury of using up rehearsal time deciding how to proceed is not given to me with every commission. In commercial work, I'm hired to get results, and I rehearse differently: I enact an effect that has been prescribed by the conditions of the contract. It isn't art. Art is about finding things out. ("Twyla Tharp," 1995)

Like art, qualitative research embodies both deep structures and creative freedom, and so it requires a research design with a balance between process and product, system and option. Both artists and researchers may go through periods of uncertainty and discomfort, adjusting to the ambiguities and freedoms inherent in their respective fields. Newcomers may search for instructions and, finding none, may be quite uncomfortable until they develop an intuitive sense of the guiding deep structures. Ability in both fields comes through understanding these structures and giving oneself the freedom to let go and apply them in improvisatory ways (Oldfather & West, 1994, p. 24).

Even for the seasoned choreographer, this can be an uncomfortable process:

July 28--End of the third week now and I'm sunk in the certainty that I don't really like this dance. So I've videotaped it and will take the weekend to re-envision it. All week I've been down on myself. Somehow, though, since I've finally admitted that I don't like it. I've felt some hope that I can fix it. It's as if I'd given myself permission to think it through, make changes, get rid of the symmetry from "Field of Force" [a recent dance]. Too bad there's still so much of the "Lullabye" influence thematically. That will be harder to get rid of or hide.

To me, this process feels a bit like groping, the trial and error, postulation and refutation, trying to find my way, seeking the thread of meaning. As I said earlier, I view the process as a dialogue between myself and the dance, where I try to grasp what is being said, to see clearly what is there and understand where it wants to go, what the natural, inevitable outcome will be if I can allow the thus-far intuitive process to complete itself. This process seems analogous to the process in interpretive research, recently described by Stinson as "facing a large number of puzzle pieces, trying to figure out how the puzzle fits together even before we know what picture we are making" (1995). To make dances in this way, I have to trust that once begun, the dance knows what needs to happen. At this point, my job is merely to be sensitive to the work's direction and enable it to unfold without forcing any particular conclusion. More from my journal:

August 2--I spent an hour with the video on Saturday, watching and rethinking the first section. I took out the symmetry, which seemed too formal for the sensuality of the movement, and constructed some group pathways and partnering that seem to work. Yesterday and today in rehearsal I found myself really pleased with the first section. It's as though my process involves a necessary growth. The first ideas I come up with sometimes are those most recently successful in previous choreography, and I have to try them out, realize they do not work, and go beyond them into something new.

Today we began with changes to Section 2 and still it felt kind of hokey--not an idea that Paul Taylor would ever have gone ahead with. So I went back and sat in the theater with my music after rehearsal and tried to image the whole section. I realized the group should not rise by themselves but need the one to get them up again. Then I found ways to repeat the thematic material, and I came up with an idea for the end.

What a great feeling now, to know the ending is right, that it makes the dance okay after all, that the third section now has a reason for being. The piece turns out to be about transformation instead of a nightmare....

That feeling of *Aha!* is one of the major rewards of any discovery, and when it comes, I know the dance has determined its course and found a completion that satisfies the structural problem set up at the beginning of the process. Here, the "Aha!" is an intuitive knowing, a sense of completion and satisfaction, and a revelation of meaning within the dance. As Tharp said, "Art is about finding things out" (1995). The process leads to a "knowledge," that is both subjective and true: a view of reality expressed through choreography, a metaphor that offers an interpretation of the familiar. As subjective truth, the goal of art is to influence perception, illuminate and reveal complex issues, and expand vision.

Just like science, interpretive inquiry and art both hold innovation and originality as key values. All of these forms develop through an expansion of knowledge, increasing understanding among those involved. However, unlike hard science, both qualitative research and art emphasize the role of subjectivity and tradition in understanding and interpretation. That is, they move forward based on the history of interpretations through which meaning has been acquired in the past. Whereas hard science builds on previously discovered factual knowledge, striving to be objective and eliminate all traces of bias, the latter two accept predisposition and engagement as valid places to begin. Bias is an element of the process, to be understood and interpreted along with the incoming data. For instance, my interest and involvement in choreography are valid reasons for me to study its value as research and, no doubt, my involvement affects my thinking. My engagement with choreography is thus where I begin, acknowledging my history and predisposition as part of the information that must be interpreted. Both art and qualitative research oppose the scientific attitude when, in the words of phenomenologist Hans-Georg Gadamer, it "relegates its own historicity to the position of prejudices from which we must free ourselves" (Gardner, 1994, p. 40). With creative work, tradition is part of who we are and where we must begin.

The journal entries confirm my involvement with my own choreographic tradition when, as quoted above, they describe my efforts to transcend it. As I wrote.

It's as though my process involves a necessary growth. The first ideas I come up with sometimes are those most recently successful in my previous choreography, and I have to try them out, realize they don't work in the present context, and go beyond them into something new.

Making use of my own tradition (to say nothing of the general modern dance tradition), accepting the prejudice I bring to the work, and coming to a new interpretation at the end--the journal describes a process of searching and reflection very like that of interpretive research, and just as likely to bring about new knowledge.

No doubt, entering the unknown is a propellant behind most discovery, scientific or not; for me, it is a big reason to begin a new dance. Most probably, this process is used by artists around the world, with or without the formal organization of material that I have done here. My purpose has been to show that this intuitive, open-ended method of working out a position has meaning for researchers and artists alike who value subjectivity as a means of finding new ways of interpreting the world we live in.

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## *Resources*

The **Dance Heritage Coalition** (DHC) has completed a three-year cooperative project, funded in large part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, to improve access to dance resources in seven institutions. The project's major accomplishments include the creation of an on-line union catalog of historical dance materials, a substantial increase in access to dance holdings previously unprocessed and uncataloged, and the development of standardized cataloging guidelines for dance. For a detailed summary or a copy of the final report contact Michelle Forner, Director, Dance Heritage Coalition, P. Os Box 15130, Washington, DC 20003, (202) 707-2149.

The NEA and the Benton Foundation launched **Open Studio** <[www.openstudio.org](http://www.openstudio.org)> to provide free public Internet access at arts and community institutions and help nonprofit arts organizations and artist go online by offering training and technical assistance. Open studio supports ten regional mentor sites that train local artists and arts organizations in providing information--such as performance schedules and artwork--online. Open Studio also has more than 80 Internet access centers, with sites in every state where staff assist the public in finding arts and cultural information on the Internets

**Multicultural Media: Widening Your World of Music and Dance.** Spring 1998 update of audio, video, CD-ROM, and books. Phone: 800-550-WORLD (9675). Web: <http://www.worldmusicstore.com>  
Judith Brin Ingber contributed articles on dance to two 1997 research volumes--The **Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion** and **Jewish Women in America, An Historic Encyclopedias** The two volume encyclopedia is published by Routledge.