

## Research as choreography

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### **Abstract**

Since 1977-78, The USA National Dance Association (NDA) has selected one individual each year to receive an award as NDA Scholar and/or Artist and make a presentation at the association's annual meeting. The following essay was originally presented as the 1994 NDA Scholar's Lecture; a manuscript version has been published by that organization. The version published here includes a few additions that were part of the spoken lecture in 1994 but were not in the earlier publication. No attempt has been made, however, to bring it 'up to date' in terms of references and more recent developments; rather it remains in the historical context in which it was created.

### **Article:**

The words 'lecture' and 'research' often call up similar visions—dry and lifeless ones, not the sort of stuff that moves or inspires dancers. In this lecture, I am going to share my experiences and thoughts about research by telling stories and reflecting on them. This is not just because I find stories more lively and inspiring than abstract statements. Story is increasingly being recognized as an appropriate form for lectures—long before the invention of the printing press, people taught by telling stories. And today many researchers are also recognizing the validity of the story as a form for some kinds of research (for example, Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Miller, 1991; Richardson, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988; Wolcott, 1990).

The stories and reflections I will be sharing are about what I do, what we all do and do not do and why, and how things might be different—in fact, how I would like a small part of the world to be. Since stories are not usually as direct and to-the-point as lectures, those in the audience may want to switch to a less linear mode than that used for attending to more abstract scholarly work.

I will start with what I do, since that is what I know best and since my best ideas seem to come from active doing. I teach prospective dance teachers and researchers, and still do some teaching of children and adolescents. Central to these tasks are the processes of sensing and understanding—paying attention to what one is doing, and then reflecting on what one notices. For example, not long ago I was working with a prospective teacher who wanted to teach falls to her high school class. I asked her how the students would get back up after a fall in order to do the next one, and she concluded that she needed to teach recovery as well as falls. Then I asked her *how* she would teach fall and recovery, and she demonstrated a perfect sequence. I asked her to *tell* me how she did this, and what she wanted her students to see in her demonstration. She gave me a blank look. Then I asked her to figure out what she had to do in order to go down and get back up smoothly and safely; she needed to pay attention while doing it, and then ask herself, 'What's going on here?' This vignette is about teaching, but it is also about research; both these endeavors involve attending and reflecting, sensing and making sense.

In one teacher education course I developed, university students participate in dance classes with public school students, and keep journals. The journals are supposed to include not just description, but also reflection. An example of the former is, 'My partner didn't have any ideas about how to solve the problem, so I finally suggested one.' An example of reflection might be, 'I wonder if she would have come up with an idea if I had

given her more time. On the other hand, she seemed to find so much satisfaction in doing what I had thought of. Should “find your own way” be a demand or a choice for students? Most students find it considerably easier to describe than to reflect, but if they are to become really good teachers they need to learn to problematize what they see, to question 'What if...?', to go beyond the taken-for-granted.

Something else I teach prospective dance educators is the importance of the exploring and forming processes in a dance lesson, whether the lesson focuses more on technical skills or on creative work; they need to figure out possibilities, understand them from the inside, and then make something out of one or more of them. I also teach my students how planning lessons involves their own exploring and forming. In all cases, exploring requires sensory awareness, and forming requires aesthetic decision-making. In addition to these courses for teacher education students, I teach a graduate research course, mostly to MFA students. This is not a broad survey course, but one designed to lead them through a process of conducting their own research and producing a scholarly paper. The focus of the research is personal meaning-making in dance. It is no surprise that teaching this course has substantially influenced my own research agenda, which has to do with how participants in dance make sense of their experiences.

I am relating all this, not because I think that what I do is more important than what anyone else does, but because all of these experiences have shaped my thinking about research. One of the principles I share with other feminist researchers (for example, Cook & Fonow, 1990; Grumet, 1988; Harding, 1987; Lather, 1991; Roberts, 1983) is the importance of revealing one's own subjectivity in one's work. To put this into more current lingo, I want to share 'where I'm coming from'; I want it to be clear that the ideas I present are not some sort of revealed truth, but are human creations—my own and others'.

It seems important at this point to speak more about the kind of research I do and its relationship to other kinds of research. Some researchers are interested in pursuing questions of 'Truth,' or as close as they can get to it. For example, what kinds of dances were done by 15th century Italians? What are the effects of certain traditional dance warm-up exercises? Other researchers, including myself, pursue questions of 'Meaning,' such as, how do different individuals perceive different kinds of dance? How do they perceive its value in their lives? The answers to this second set of questions do not exist as facts to be uncovered by diligent researchers, but are constantly in the process of being created. What we learned about reliability in 8th grade science does not apply, because the answers change over time. As different as these types of research are, all researchers, even those seeking objective truths, are involved in interpretation. We pay attention to things, select from our observations those which appear to be significant, perceive relationships between/among them, think about what these might mean, and make something out of the whole process. And what we as researchers, and thus interpreters, bring to our work is different because of who we are. One difference is that we as artist/researchers often choose to investigate phenomena of little interest to those outside the field. Despite desires for objectivity, we bring our passions, which determine what parts of the world we look at and the lenses we use to look at them. Both are shaped by our experiences as dancers.

Now that I have covered some important ground about what I do, I need to return to the beginning again—in fact, to the title. Some of you may have looked at the title of this address and assumed it was a misprint, thinking it was meant to be 'Choreography as Research.' So often dancers, at least in higher education, have to fight battles to have their choreography accepted as equivalent to research when it comes to promotion and tenure. The National Dance Association has provided leadership in developing a procedure for 'jurying' choreography, but creative artists still have to go to significant lengths to justify the validity of their work.

As a dance scholar I have faced much less difficulty in justifying my existence in the university. It is not university administrators and promotion and tenure committees who question scholarly research in dance. It is more often my artistic colleagues who have been suspicious of why anyone who claimed to be part of the dance community would want to write, apparently joining the 'other side' which values words more than movement.

While such suspicions have diminished in recent years, and the importance of research has been more accepted in the dance community, there is still not much research in dance being done beyond that necessary to obtain the graduate degree. Scholarly dance journals report having difficulty in getting enough high quality submissions. In my own area of dance education, the problem has been particularly acute. At a 1992 invited conference on 'setting a national agenda for research in arts education,' I asked the other dance delegates (all of us selected by NDA) how many researchers in dance education in this country they could name who were still active in research beyond the thesis or dissertation. We could come up with very few names.

There are, of course, some very understandable reasons why so little research is being done in dance. To begin with, there are not very many of us. Most of us, including myself, went into dance with the conviction that words are not enough. And, of those of us fortunate enough to get positions in the field, few are required to publish scholarly research. For most individuals, teaching and making dances (primarily for one's students) are the primary expectations. We see libraries full of words in other fields, generated by pressures to publish or perish, and wonder how many of those books and journals are actually worth the trees cut down to print them.

Yet here I am suggesting that we need more research in dance, and more people involved in it—and it is not just because I think there are so many critical unanswered questions. I think there are important voices that are not yet part of the dance literature, voices that have valuable things to say. I recall reading this inspirational line from the *Talmud*: 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me?' If we do not speak for ourselves—about what we do, what it means, and why it is important—others will speak for us. Or no one will speak at all about those issues we hold most dear, as though we, and the issues, do not even exist.

The next line of the *Talmud* also speaks to me: 'If I am for myself only, what am I?' There are others in dance even more silent than we are, who need for us to give them a place to speak. This realization was the impetus for my current focus on bringing the voices of public school dance students into the literature.

Some in the audience may be saying at this point, 'I speak through my choreography.' Of course choreography is an important form of communication. However, I also suggest that research can be viewed as a form of choreography. And perhaps if this were more widely recognized, research would not be viewed by dancers as such an alien form of communication.

So one mission I have is to convince dancers of the importance of research and their ability to do it. One way I do this is through a graduate course I teach. Most students begin the course knowing a good bit about choreography, and they know it is about 'saying,' metaphorically, what they want to say. Their initial idea of research, however, usually involves going to the library to learn what other people have to say, then putting these various comments all together (the academic equivalent of a dance 'routine,' I think), perhaps with a few comments of their own.

While time in the library is an important dimension of scholarly research, increasingly I have found myself drawing parallels between what my students know—choreography—and what they do not—research. My first task is to help them recognize that scholarly research, like choreography, is their work. Their research comes from them just as much as their choreography, even though both choreography and scholarship have additional sources as well.

How does research come from researchers? Initially, they have to select a topic, something in which they are interested passionately enough to be willing to invest the labor required. Then there is a process of gathering and/or generating the raw materials of the work. In choreography, this may happen in private studio time or, if one draws movement material from dancers, during rehearsals. In the research I am currently doing, it involves gathering observations of a particular dance setting—the journal notes I take following participation in dance classes with a particular group of students; this is a methodology originally developed by anthropologists, but now being used extensively by educational researchers (see Denzin, [1989](#); Maguire, [1987](#); Spindler, [1982](#)). My methodology also involves gathering the words of students through open-ended interviews. I speak of gathering

as though these words existed, just waiting to be plucked by a researcher, whereas actually they are joint constructions between myself and my participants. Nevertheless, these are my raw materials, just like movement themes are the raw material for the choreographer.

This gathering is actually the easiest part of my research, even though it may take quite a long time. Like the choreographer, I discover and create a lot more material than I will eventually use in a particular work. The more difficult tasks are selecting out what is worthwhile, meaning what has the possibility to generate insights; figuring out what it means; and then coming up with a way to construct a cohesive paper that can communicate my process and my insights to others.

These are the steps that produce terror in the budding researcher. What is important and how do we know? How do we determine what we want to put together, what we want to say? Most of us do not fully know what we want to say until we have said it; we rarely have a dance or a paper completely figured out before we start. Rather, we figure out what we want to say as we figure out how to say it. Form and content arise together, and we truly do not know one until we know the other.

As choreographers, my students know this well. They initially go into the 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.) They pay attention to the movement they have generated, and make decisions about what does and does not fit. This is a time of trying out, false starts, unfinished phrases. Eventually both form and content become clear, but there is a good bit of messiness along the way, a good bit of trial and error. One hopes for patient dancers and for a muse that will speak as quickly and as clearly as possible. But it is indeed an act of faith to go into the studio, trusting that a dance will result from one's labors.

For me, starting to write a scholarly paper is just as much an act of faith, and the process is just as messy as choreography. Initial drafts are like improvisation with words—a time of trying out, false starts, unfinished sentences. I experience the frustrations of trying to get ideas down before they disappear, of trying to figure out how the puzzle goes together even before I know what picture the puzzle makes. For me, this part, this most creative part, of writing must be done in pencil, a symbol of its impermanence. It is important not to fall too much in love with my own words or those of my respondents, because large amounts of this material may get thrown away, or at least thrown away from this project when it turns out to be heading in a different direction than originally expected.

My graduate students, who would quickly reject the idea of following a choreographic formula, assume that there is one for writing a scholarly paper, and eagerly ask, 'What do you want?' Indeed, there are some kinds of choreography and some kinds of writing that do use formulas. I remember being taught a formula for expository writing in high school, and it successfully got me through a multitude of essay exams in college. But while an expository formula is effective in conveying information and arguments, it is not so useful in conveying the interpretive process of scholarship. Similarly, choreographic formulas, which might create great cheerleading or drill team routines, do not usually produce very interesting art.

But the lack of a formula for choreography does not mean that there is no structure. One muddles through, not for the sake of making a mess, but in order to find the right structure for this particular work.

Similarly, in research one must look for the right structure. In the kind of research I do, there are two kinds of structure with which I am concerned. One is the structure of the final paper, the choreographic form of the paper, so to speak: how I am going to tell the story of where I started, where I ended up, and how I got there. Traditional scientific research has a formula for this; if one does a dissertation in science, there is little question about what Chapter Two will be.

But, as I tell my students, in other kinds of research this is not all that clear. The 'Review of the Literature' does not necessarily go in Chapter Two; it may even be woven throughout the paper, so that voices already in the

literature speak in response to newer voices. 'How do you know where to put anything? How do you decide?', my students ask. I tell them everything goes where it fits best; the choices are usually aesthetic ones, not unlike those they make in choreography. For myself, I even find that seeing ideas in space helps during this process; my living room floor becomes the stage, as I spread out the parts of a paper and rearrange them, seeing what looks right, sensing what feels right.

Another kind of structure in research is the theoretical framework; this is one of the most challenging aspects of research for my students. In some kinds of research, one starts with theory. In the kind of research that I do, theory evolves from the process of interpreting, as I try to find the structure underlying the treasures I have found. Indeed, it does feel like I am searching for treasures that already exist, and I only reveal them—rather like Michelangelo's observation that being a sculptor involved finding the horse that was hidden in the stone. But theories are our creations rather than truths we discover; the only place that theories exist is in the human imagination. And, as I shall suggest in a moment, imagination is fueled by what we know in our bones.

A theoretical framework is about relationships—what is the relationship between ideas and concepts, between the parts of a whole? If this sounds like choreography, concerned with the relationship between movements and dancers, that is the way I think about it. In fact, theory is not about words. Einstein (cited in North, 1973) said that, for him, visual and kinesthetic images came first; the words of a theory came later. I often tell my students, in relation to theory, 'If you can't draw it or make a 3-dimensional model of it or dance it, you probably don't understand it.'

For me as well as Einstein, there is a definite connection between theory and the sensory/kinesthetic; thinking is an active verb. One particular example that stands out for me occurred when I was working on my dissertation (Stinson, 1984). I was struggling with a very abstract topic: the relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of human existence as they related to dance education. All of my attempts to figure out my theoretical framework felt disconnected from the concerns that had initially propelled me into the study. At the suggestion of my advisor, I began to write a series of pieces describing moments that seemed important in my life, regardless of whether I knew why they were important. These stories were full of sensory language, because it was in my senses that my memories were stored. Some were stories of dancing, while others came from other parts of my life as a child, a mother, a student, a teacher, a friend. As I tuned in to these experiences, my awareness of everyday life was heightened. One day, still searching for my elusive framework—the form that would reveal the content—I went for one of those long walks that were a necessary part of my thinking process. When I returned, I lay down to rest and instantly became conscious of how differently I perceived myself and the world when I was standing compared to when I was lying down. Within moments I knew my framework, which was based upon a metaphor of verticality (the impulse toward achievement and mastery—being on top) and horizontality (the impulse toward relationship and community—being *with*). I noticed how lying horizontal felt passive and vulnerable, while the return to vertical made me feel strong and powerful; these feelings offered important insights as to why we value achievement so much more than community. Once I had identified this dual reality in my own body, I found it in the work of others: in Fromm (1941), who spoke of freedom and security; Bakan (1966), agency and communion; and Koestler (1978), self-assertion and integration. While I had read each of these authors previously, I had to find my framework in my own body before I could recognize its connection to the issues with which I was grappling.

Another time I remember, I chose swimming for a break in between writing sessions. But one day as I swam, I became aware of the excess tension in my neck. Rather than releasing my neck to allow the water to hold up my head, I was holding on as though afraid it would fall down otherwise. This awareness pointed me toward awareness of other situations in which we use unnecessary control—in internal relations within our bodies as well as relations with others, and I again attended within my body to try to understand why. I realized how much we hold on in making the transition from horizontality (the dependence of infancy) to verticality (which allowed us real mobility and independence). Embedded in our musculature, generally beyond the reach of rational thought, is this impulse toward control and the fear of letting go. Again, this is an insight that could not have arisen without attention to embodied knowledge. These incidents, and many others, have convinced me

that we can think only with what we know 'in our bones,' and that attending to the sensory, followed by reflection, is as essential in research as it is in teaching.

The final stage of research is, for me, the least enjoyable, because by this point all the important discoveries have been made. This is the time for editing. In choreography, editing requires standing away from one's work, in order to look with the most objective eye possible, as though it were not one's own offspring. In my writing, I have to get similar distance—I do it by typing the penciled words I have birthed into the computer; the hard square lines of the typed letters make them look as though they could have been written by anyone, and allow me to be more critical. I remember the advice of my dissertation advisor, 'Kill the little darlings,' by which he meant that sometimes we have to cut those parts with which we are most in love. Editing is difficult whether we are cutting words or movement. I must sever my relationship to what I have written, freeing it to go into the world without me, like an almost-grown-up child who needs to be ready to leave home.

Even though these days I spend a great deal of time writing, and do very little dancing and choreographing in the traditional sense, I still feel like a dancer and choreographer. For me, dancing is not what we do but how we do it: dancing is about being in a state of heightened consciousness. Choreography for me is about using all of my senses, including my kinesthetic sense, and about making aesthetic decisions. Both are essential in my work as an educator as well as a researcher. In fact, they are essential in everything, as an 11 year-old participant in my current research reminded me when asked if she thought what she was learning in dance was important in her life. This child told me, 'I'm trying to choreograph what I'm going to live ... you choreograph your whole life, you know.'

One of the nice aspects of being an artist and researcher is that one gets to imagine possibilities, to play 'what if?' So, in closing, I wonder ... what might happen if technique were widely taught as a way to facilitate sensory awareness and understanding, as much as training to accomplish particular feats in movement? What might happen if technique, improvisation, and choreography teachers taught sensing, understanding, and forming as life skills and not just dance skills? I wonder what it would be like if dance students kept journals making connections between these processes in the studio and outside of it.

I wonder what would happen if research were also taught as a way of sensing, generating, exploring, and forming, and if it were widely known that research involves both passion and the kinesthetic sense. And if we taught, in all classes, the kind of courage it takes to begin a journey without knowing one's destination, and to speak in one's own voice.

Perhaps at that point we would not need to have lectures about why choreography is a form of research, and research is a form of choreography. Maybe all of us would just *know*.

### **Acknowledgement**

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