

## **Forging Mutual Paths: Defining Dance Literacy in the 21st Century**

By: Tina Curran, Susan Gingrasso, Beth Megill, [Teresa Heiland](#)

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This panel presents different definitions and practices of dance literacy to build a mutual path of articulating the needs and potential of 21st century dance education. Uses and definitions of dance literacy found in existing dance education literature will be presented and broadly considered in the context of functional and cultural literacy in dance. Dance-based languages, verbal and symbolic through which to encode and decode dance, will be considered as an aspect of an optimized dance education. Curricular needs and opportunities in two and four-year institutions will be examined with an eye to progression and scope of learning in dance including a focus on performance and beyond. Four panelists collaboratively weave their perspectives to consider the scope and impact of dance literacy in the evolving practice of dance education.

**Keywords:** dance education | dance literacy | dance-based languages | National Dance Education Organization

### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

## Forging Mutual Paths: Defining Dance Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Tina Curran, MFA, PhD, Susan Gingrasso, MA, CMA, LOD, Beth Megill, MFA, and  
Teresa Heiland, PhD, CLMA

### *ABSTRACT*

This panel presents different definitions and practices of dance literacy to build a mutual path of articulating the needs and potential of 21<sup>st</sup> century dance education. Uses and definitions of dance literacy found in existing dance education literature will be presented and broadly considered in the context of functional and cultural literacy in dance. Dance-based languages, verbal and symbolic through which to encode and decode dance, will be considered as an aspect of an optimized dance education. Curricular needs and opportunities in two and four-year institutions will be examined with an eye to progression and scope of learning in dance including a focus on performance and beyond. Four panelists collaboratively weave their perspectives to consider the scope and impact of dance literacy in the evolving practice of dance education.

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### INTRODUCTION

Each of the four panelists who presented “Forging mutual pathways: Developing dance literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” look at dance literacy from theoretical and practical perspectives. Tina Curran draws from a review of literature to present different identities and mutual paths within the landscape of how “dance literacy” has been articulated in the contexts of pedagogy and dance education in the first paper, “Perspectives on literacy and dance literacy.” She highlights tenets of key educational theorists for further consideration of characteristics to qualify dance literacy in an effort toward defining a collaborative understanding.

Susan Gingrasso introduces the concept of functional literacy and applies it to dance in the second paper, “Functional literacy applied to dance literacy.” She presents a case study, using Motif Notation to teach technique to first year dance majors and a lesson plan on the Movement Alphabet concept of pathways from a July 2010 professional development intensive that Curran, Heiland and she designed and taught to dance educator/artists to make a case for using the symbolic representation of movement to develop functional literacy in dance.

Beth Megill looks closely at the curricular implications of a dance literacy “program” and how two and four year institutions must examine this issue to move the field forward in the third paper, “Dance literacy in search of a curricular home.” She proposes the groundwork for dance literacy (dance theory, notation and

scholarly research using theory and notation) in the first two years of college as is done in most music theory programs. She also presents the barriers she has discovered when coordinating with four-year institutions that do not offer such theoretical coursework. She will share her positive experiences incorporating dance literacy into her classes at Moorpark College and pose her concern for her two-year graduates, who are often stronger in theory and scholarship than technique, many of whom are disenfranchised because of the increasing focus on performance in many four-year institutions.

Teresa Heiland examines the nature of dance literacy as a critical component of a “multiliteracy” (New London Group) framework needed to be a literate dancer and how multiliteracy is critical to evolving the field in the fourth paper, “Dance-based dance literacies.” Heiland highlights what Gingrasso presents regarding approaches to making meaning, but expands upon what is missing in four-year college programs that create enforced illiteracy, thus building a case for Language of Dance (LOD) for college students and a system for spreading diversity through college graduates to the K-12 population. Heiland makes a strong argument for using dance-based languages, such as Laban Movement Analysis and Motif Notation to easily eradicate the roadblocks of enforced illiteracy in dance by weaving them into usual components of any liberal arts dance curriculum of exploring dance through technique, composing, reading, and writing. She envisions multiliteracies in a four-year dance degree revealing a scaffolded system that brings LOD into the entire

curriculum and eventually into K-12 and studio education.

## **PERSPECTIVES ON LITERACY AND DANCE LITERACY**

by Tina Curran

The term “dance literacy” is used with increasing frequency, yet the intention or meaning behind its use is often assumed and left undefined. As a result, questions arise that relate to content, scope, intention and purpose. To begin to contemplate a definition of dance literacy, it is important to acknowledge use of the term “literacy” and the appropriated use by other disciplines, such as: media literacy, math literacy, statistical literacy, critical literacy, computer literacy, ecological literacy, science literacy, and health literacy. Each domain encompasses different forms of representation to capture meaning, communicate knowledge and convey a particular perspective. The arts as aesthetic forms of communication provide a compelling consideration.

In his book *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman (1976) presents the idea of how we ‘read’ the arts and the ways we consider meaning:

We have to read the painting as well as the poem, and that aesthetic experience is dynamic rather than static. It involves making delicate discrimination and discerning subtle relationships, identifying symbol systems and characters within these systems and what these characters denote and exemplify, interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world. (241)

There are two points to highlight here: first, the idea of multiple forms of representation as ways to denote and construct meaning, and second, how consideration of the parts in the context of the whole shapes our knowing of the work itself and in turn how the work represents a window to the world.

Extending consideration of forms of representation, Elliot Eisner provides further thought toward how the arts provide a variety of “languages” to perceive, conceive and represent experiences and, in turn, create different ways to convey meaning. Eisner (n.d.) states:

Our culture is replete with a variety of forms of representation because humans have found it necessary to invent such forms in order to express what they want to convey. The curricula of our schools are the major means through which our children learn the “languages” of these forms and it is by learning these languages that they gain in access to the kinds of experience that these forms

make possible.

So what are the languages of dance? How can literacy in dance provide a means of coming to know in and through this art form? To consider a definition for dance literacy, let’s begin with the definition and scope of “literacy.”

The Merriam-Webster and Oxford dictionaries define “literacy” in two key ways: 1) the ability to read and write; and 2) knowledge that relates to a specific subject; to a particular field. These fundamental components are not only embedded in the definition of literacy, but are extended, as presented by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). With the world community in mind, UNESCO’s definition for literacy expands to identify skills, progression of learning and purpose. As presented in the position paper *The Plurality of Literacy and its Implications for Policies and Programs*, UNESCO defines:

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. (2004, 13)

These definitions of literacy provide a frame for considering the multiple components of a definition of dance literacy.

At the most fundamental level of literacy - the ability to read and write - dance has symbolically been represented, recorded and read through a variety of forms including figures, letters, diagrams, symbols and signs. The walls of early cave drawings and Egyptian tombs depict events indicating pageantry and movement celebration, however, more abstract symbolic representations of dance appear on record starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century (Guest 1984). While dance notation systems have come and gone to parallel the evolution of dance forms and styles in fashion or favor, three movement languages established in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century are used most prominently: Benesh Movement Notation, Eschkol-Wachmann Movement Notation, and Laban Movement Studies. These systems are used not only to experience, create, record and read dance, but also for movement analysis and research in multiple movement forms and in a variety of contexts.

This author, and the other three authors, are literate in the dance movement languages of Laban Studies, including: Labanotation, Laban Movement Analysis and Language of Dance / Motif Notation. Each of these aspects is distinct, yet complementary whether used singularly or in combination. Laban Studies provides a dance-based theoretical framework, language terminology and symbolic notation to communicate elements and expressions in dance. Integrating this discipline-based language and the visual symbols with the development of skills that

include experiencing, sensing, identifying, observing and interpreting dance enhances the physical, cognitive and affective learning processes and fosters a critically reflective creative practice.

Returning to the second definition of literacy above, “knowledge that relates to a specific subject or to a particular field,” it is compelling to consider the definition presented by Brenda Pugh McCutchen in *Teaching Dance as Art in Education* (2006). In her framework, McCutchen identifies four fundamental cornerstones for learning in dance: Cornerstone 1 - Dancing and performing; Cornerstone 2 - Creating and composing; Cornerstone 3 - Knowing history; culture and context; and Cornerstone 4 - Analyzing and critiquing. Building from this structure McCutchen defines dance literacy as, “the ability to function in each dance cornerstone as dancer, critic, historian-anthropologist and choreographer. Thus, dance literacy combines knowing about dance and the ability to create, perform, and respond to the dance as an art form...” (402). McCutchen articulates that both the knowledge in and about dance and the active application of that knowledge are purposefully important. Further, McCutchen extends another step and defines dance fluency as “the ability to aesthetically integrate and synthesize the parts into the whole” (403). In her terms, this is the ability to more deeply combine and synthesize across the cornerstones to richly develop the practices and processes of creating, performing and responding.

To think more comprehensively about dance literacy, consider the integration and intersections of Laban Studies, a dance-based language, within and across the domains and practices of the dance discipline, such as identified by McCutchen. To do so begins to form not only a definition but also an experience and practice of dance literacy that radiate in depth and breadth to more closely resemble the worldview of literacy as presented by UNESCO. Consider the UNESCO definition of literacy, but modified with dance in mind to explore the potential of knowledge, skills and understanding in and through dance.

[Dance I]teracy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and [analyze], using [spoken language,] written materials, [and symbolic systems] associated with varying contexts. [Dance I]teracy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.

## FUNCTIONAL LITERACY APPLIED TO DANCE LITERACY

by Susan Gingrasso

This examination of functional literacy as it relates to what that might look like in dance, adheres to a traditional definition of literacy, “as the ability to read for knowledge, write coherently and think critically about printed material” (Literacy 2011). While literacy should be situated within a larger context of skills, knowledge and understanding within a community or a discipline, the traditional definition of literacy serves to highlight an important aspect of education generally missing from the dance teaching/ learning paradigm-notation. The case for using notation, the symbolic representation of movement, as a core component in the dance teaching and learning process, has been made by noted dance theorist and Labanotation expert Jill Beck (1988) and more recently by Auckland University of Technology Senior Dance Lecturer Linda Ashley (2010). Both link the study of notation to dance literacy. Ashley contends that, “the experience of the concept of graphic movement notation is essential to becoming fully dance literate. . .” (2010). To demonstrate how notation contributes to Beck’s and Ashley’s notions of literacy in dance, specifically functional literacy, this paper concludes with a case study that used Motif Notated scores to teach dance technique to dance majors and a lesson plan for Movement Alphabet pathways used in a professional development intensive for dance educators/artists.

What is functional literacy and why is the concept of functional literacy important? Functional literacy is the capacity to use language and the symbolic representation of that language to read, write, calculate, and problem solve to function in the world in which one lives. In order to function in the particular community, individuals within that community need a certain level of capacity with the various ways that community communicates its ideas in both the spoken and written forms-they need to be functionally literate (Comings 2011). They need to be able to comprehend the basic concepts, texts and documents associated with the various tasks required to be successful. Communicated through language and the symbolic representation of the language used, these tasks involve one’s ability to decode, comprehend and often to provide a written response. As the needs and demands of the community change, the concept of functional literacy changes. Literacy researchers and authors Gordon and Gordon (2003) confirm that, “literacy is constantly being shaped by the social, economic and technical demands of particular times and places.” Becoming literate resembles a journey one engages in as a life long process more than a state one achieves that “gradually builds reading fluency and thinking abilities” (2003, xv).



How does functional literacy appear in dance and why might it be important? If functional literacy is one's capacity to use language and the symbolic representation of that language to read, write, and problem solve in order to function in the world in which one lives, then functional literacy in dance is one's capacity to use notation, the symbolic representation of movement, to notate, interpret, create, perform and solve artistic problems to function more completely in the dance world. As members of this community, dance educators need to be able to use notation to comprehend the basic movement ideas, texts and documents associated with creating, performing and responding in dance to provide other inroads to learning in dance. Ashley also proposes that, "notation can increase understanding of dance because it graphically depicts the meaning of a dance in symbolic translation" (2010).

The case study and lesson plan examine how using notation to teach the content contributed to participant development of functional literacy in dance. The Language of Dance® Movement Alphabet, Motif Notation, and Laban Movement Studies were used to teach dance technique in higher education and provide professional development for dance artists/teachers.

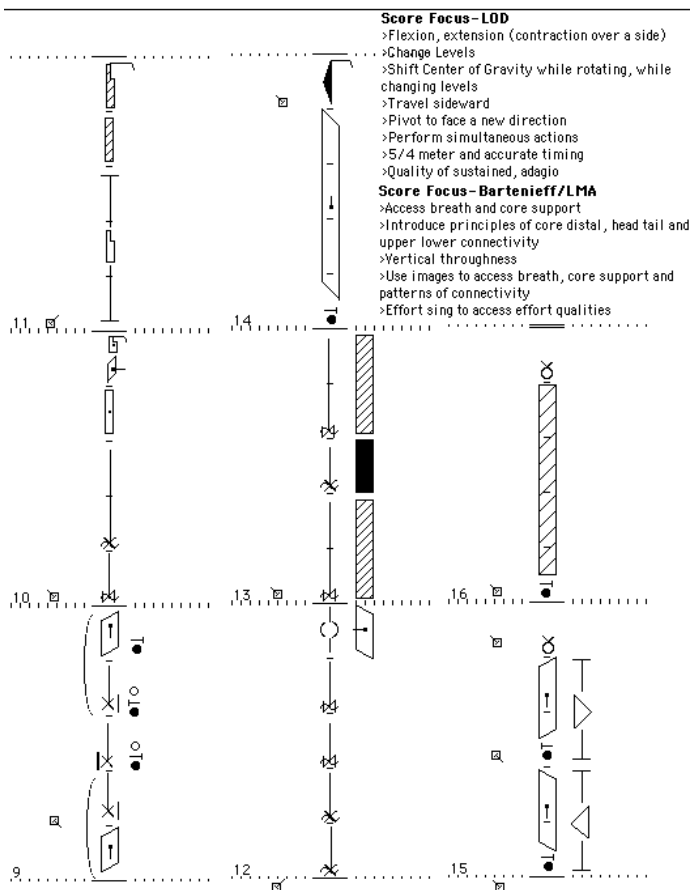
In the fall semesters of 2005 and 2006, I conducted action research in my beginning modern dance course required of dance majors and minors entering the Dance program of the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. This case study, "Using the Language of Dance® framework to change student perceptions about skills, training, and themselves as dancers in a beginning modern dance course," first year dancers developed functional dance literacy by interpreting, performing, creating from and responding to Motif Notated scores of short, complete dances developed from the Language of Dance (LOD) Movement Alphabet and selected Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) concepts. The goals of the study 1) to develop students' physical, cognitive and affective skills, knowledge and understanding in dance; 2) to foster learner agency and self confidence; 3) to cultivate learner behaviors to develop expressivity and artistry; and 4) to communicate meaning through the movement were achieved by teaching the students how to interpret, perform and take ownership of the five Motif Notated scores of complete dances. As students experienced interpreting, learning and performing each dance (16-24 bars long), they became responsible for learning the actions, sequence, timing, dynamics and phrasing as well as invested in meaning making and artistic expressivity.

I created the five Motif Notated dances from selected Movement Alphabet and LMA concepts. The first dance, Breath & Lateral Flexion in 5/4 meter,

focused on the Movement Alphabet concepts of sequential and simultaneous actions; flexion, extension and rotation; stillness; level change; rotating a specific amount to face a different direction in the performance space; shifting the center of gravity, traveling forward and sideward; and dynamics-slight accent. This dance focused on the LMA concepts of breath, core distal and head-tail connectivity, femoral flexion and gaining access to effort through visual and kinesthetic images. The following two-page score shows the level of reading and interpretation required by the first year students.

**Breath/lateral flexion**  
Choreographed & motif notated by Susan Gingrasso  
Music composed by John Strassburg

Copyright 2005 Susan Gingrasso



Breath/lateral flexion, page 2

The analysis of the study results indicates that students used the Motif Notation score to provide a concrete visual representation of the essence of the movement. They also considered that the score is to dance what a written story is to a reader, a theatrical script is to actors, or a music score is to musicians—a road map for the content. The score brought clarity to the *what*—the actions and sequence; the *when*—the timing; the *how*—the dynamics and the patterns of body connectivity; and the *why*—the intentions as revealed through effort images and later the effort symbols. The students used notation to read, write, solve movement problems and develop personal agency, self-confidence and awaken artistic expressivity. They used notation to function more successfully and fully in dance. They became functionally literate dancers.

In July 2010, co-panelists Tina Curran, Teresa Heiland and I created and taught a professional development course for dance educator/artists at the Dance Education Laboratory of the Harkness Dance Center, the premier dance education program of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y in New York City. Curran, Heiland and I took the twenty participants in the Language of Dance Fundamentals Module 1 Part 1 course through a richly textured exploration that applied selected Movement Alphabet concepts to dance education applications:

technique, composition, creative movement, dance history and dance appreciation bridging theory and practice. Participants developed functional literacy through connecting and applying foundational principles of the Language of Dance Movement Alphabet and Laban Movement Analysis to their specific pedagogical and creative practices. This abbreviated explanation of a lesson on pathways demonstrates how participants discovered meaningful connections to these concepts and used them to solve artistic problems.

Participants watched the first movement of Paul Taylor's *Esplanade* (1975) after Curran provided background information on Taylor and the work. They relished in the pathways they saw as all four of them appear in the first movement: straight, curved, circular (counterclockwise and clockwise) and free form. After watching a shorter section of the first movement that featured straight, curved and circular pathways, participants then danced these pathways and created metaphors from their visual and kinesthetic experiences. Curran and Heiland introduced the Movement Alphabet symbols, the symbolic representation for each pathway. Using that short section from *Esplanade* as inspiration, each group created, then easily Motif Notated and performed a pathway study. They expressed that they felt the experience of using the Movement Alphabet symbols as tools to observe, analyze and create heightened their technical and performance experience.

Curran and Heiland directed participants to add direction symbols to their specific pathway symbols to indicate traveling in a direction other than forward. They practiced connecting the two ways of dancing their pathway phrases: traveling forward on each pathway followed by traveling in a direction other than forward on each pathway. Each group performed both versions and discovered how changing one element, direction of travel for a pathway, which is in reality a choreographic device, completely changed the technical demands, meaning and expressivity of this simple study.

These dance educator/artists discovered that the symbolic representation of movement concepts connects the cognitive, kinesthetic and affective to change the way they observed and comprehended dance concepts. They used the Movement Alphabet concepts and symbols to communicate clearly in speaking, notating and problem solving. They discovered that the Movement Alphabet concepts and associated symbols enabled them to achieve a deeper level of personal agency and artistic expressivity.

These two groups started on the journey to become functionally literate in dance by being immersed in a notation-rich learning environment that stimulated them kinesthetically, cognitively and affectively. The case study

and the lessons learned in teaching dance educators/artists suggests that for the discipline of dance to continue to develop, we will want to be able to read (decode text/notation) and write (encode text/notation) using symbolic notation; we will want to engage in the journey toward becoming functional literacy in dance.

## DANCE LITERACY IN SEARCH OF A CURRICULAR HOME

by Beth Megill

My questioning begins not with what is dance literacy, but when is dance literacy. When should a dance major be taught theory? When should a dance major become literate? What might a comprehensive dance literacy “program” look like? Dance literacy may never be accepted as a needed tool unless we demonstrate its use by putting the tool to work. The following vision is just that, a vision, a possibility, a dream, based on my experiences and observations in the classroom at a two-year community college in southern California.

I was fortunate to encounter dance notation and theory during my graduate studies. In so doing, I felt the potential for dance notation and theory early in my teaching career. It always made sense for me to use it. My challenge, which has been fun for me, has been implementing dance theory and notation into my curriculum so the addition seems like a natural part of the evolution of learning dance and learning about dance.

### Field Study

At Moorpark College, where I teach full-time, I have integrated dance literacy, based largely on Motif Notation and the Language of Dance® framework, into my online and in-person dance appreciation courses, my jazz and modern technique classes, and my improvisational class.

In writing my own online dance appreciation course, my coauthor, Dave Massey, and I started the course development by first deciding on the framework for teaching. We wanted the material, which can get so easily fragmented into the genres of dance, to have an overarching theme, ideas that crossed the boundaries between the styles and vocabulary to allow for comparisons to be drawn. We were looking for a new way to build a bridge between our students and the material.

Looking at the nature of the computer screen and the overabundance of “icons” as references to information or tools, we decided to integrate the Language of Dance (LOD) Movement Alphabet concepts and symbols plus the Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) notation and concepts throughout our course. Both LOD and LMA concepts were systematically presented and tested cumulatively through objective exams and written assignments. Just as we can all recognize the

Facebook and Twitter symbols, we decided we wanted the dance appreciation students to be able to identify spring, rotation, extension and stillness with the same sort of ease. The symbols became the representation of the course that spanned across genres and specific history. Of course, the computer screen is an excellent tool for two-dimensional symbols, so the migration onto the screen was easily accomplished. In this way, the notation and the corresponding concepts became the framework for the students’ learning and the key to their writing about dance accurately and effectively.

In the course, each genre is introduced using a handful of essential Movement Alphabet and Movement Analysis concepts and symbols that are the thumbprint of the genre. For instance, ballet focuses on uplift, balance, and extensions, while modern includes heaviness, lowered center of gravity and a fluid spine. In this way, the students encounter the genre through dance specific language and symbolic representation of that language appropriate for that genre. Over the duration of the course, the students are able to bridge the genres through their similar use of movement vocabulary and energetic qualities. The following is a screen capture made from the lecture on Jazz dance attributes (Megill and Massey 2011). This portion of the lecture focuses on the articulate torso as used in jazz isolations.

**Genre:** [dance](#)

**Lecture Map**  
 << [previous](#) [next](#) >>

[Convergent Streams](#)

**Articulate Torso**

[Jazz Walks](#)

[Syncopation and Improvisation](#)

[Presentation](#)

[Ballet Influences](#)

The articulate use of the **torso** is a hallmark characteristic of jazz dance that cannot be overlooked. Unlike the use of the torso in the Modern dance tradition, the propulsive, undulating and isolating movements of the torso seen in jazz are directly from the African dance tradition. In this more sensual use of the spine, the **pelvis** acts as an energetic center that catapults the body into motion. The isolation of various part of the spine was also developed over time. Initiating with the hips while stepping, as seen in the Latin social dance forms, evolved into the **jazz walks** commonly seen today. Rhythmic pulsing of the ribcage and vibratory shaking of the shoulders called a shimmy are also unique uses of isolation within the torso that are characteristic of jazz dance.

**Chest**  
 [Symbol: Circle with a dot] + [Symbol: Square with a dot] = **Torso**  
 The image left shows how the symbol for the torso is actually a composite symbol of the **chest** and pelvis symbols.

**Pelvis**

**Center of Levity** + **Area** = **Chest**  
**Center of Gravity** + **Area** = **Pelvis**

The separation of the chest from the pelvis is an essential concept which allows the articulation of the torso as seen in jazz dance. The chest, housing the body's center or levity (the lungs), can be isolated in its actions. The pelvis (with the center of gravity) can swing, circle or pulse in isolation from the rest of the body adding visual emphasis and sensuality to the dancer.

This next screen capture includes the interactive media tool used throughout the course called a flecture (Adobe® flash enhanced lecture), which integrates the symbols and concepts with a video representation of the movement using an interactive interface. In this way, the dance students are learning not only what to look for in the genre, but also the concepts behind the movement. The students are seeing examples of the movement concept, which they later apply in their observational analysis of works performed by professional dancers. The students can refer to this language again and again, working through the manipulatives (flectures) as many times as they wish to gain the needed familiarity with the vocabulary and its

theoretical underpinnings.

Genre: [dance](#)

The dancer begins in a Classical Ballet 5th position of the feet, but her arms, instead of a soft, rounded [shape](#), are dangling limply at her side.

Lecture Map

[next >>](#)

Hinge

[Graham Spiral](#)

[Limon Fall](#)

[Release Inversion](#)

[Roll to Stand](#)

[Roll Down](#)

Shape

Balance

Flexion

Turn to Catch

Dancer rises to a high level balance.

In addition to my lecture course development, I have recently been integrating dance literacy into my modern and jazz technique classes where I teach dance combinations from Motif Notation scores that I have written. I modeled this work after Susan Gingrasso's practice in her modern classes at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. Because I am a Language of Dance Specialist, I have been able to generate my own Motif Notation scores using LabanWriter. In writing these scores, I focus on genre specific movement vocabulary and dynamic qualities. In this way, students become functionally familiar with the notation and are able to use the score as the tool for a more accurate and ultimately better performance.

Teaching from a score has improved the students' performance in timing, shape making, direction and dynamics. Students can trace elements of dance through the scores they perform helping them to create deeper connections to phrasing and the compositional integrity of the performance. Using a score at the beginning and intermediate level, both non-majors and majors have reported that they find Motif Notated scores to be a useful tool for practicing and preparing for their final dance performance.

#### Testimonies from the Dance Floor

Students from the Spring 2011 Jazz I and Fall 2011 Jazz II and III courses reflect on their process and discoveries when learning the movement material from Motif Notated scores. Four students from Jazz I reflected:

I really like the choreography on the paper. I think it is a great resource to be able to look back to, especially for those who have a hard time remembering the steps. I think this should be used for every class. I need to personally work on my timing and remember all the steps.

I think that as a class we had one of the best classes so far. I looked around and saw that we were both

on beat with one another, and I strongly feel that it was because we had the handout. . .

It is also interesting to me because this notation carries over into other classes where I have learned or am learning the same notation. I feel that this whole puzzle approach on the combo is a fun way to hook people who may be intimidated or nervous to learn a combo.

For me, those symbolic figures have magic powers!

The selected comments from five Fall 2011 Jazz II and III students offer more depth of understanding about using the score to learn the material and the effect it has on their learning process. They say:

It takes me awhile to get even just an 8 count in my head and for my body to follow, but with the dance score it was nice being able to see it on paper even just in the simple form. . . [It] was easier to get embedded into my head and body in half the time than when I get regular choreography. (Spelling corrected).

It allows me to be able to do the dance on my own and practice more. Instead of having to do my best to memorize the dance in order, I have the whole dance in front of me. . . It also helps me be on time. . . Overall, I think it is a great thing to have and there's no negative in using it.

[This] was different from everything I have ever tried or experienced. The tempo and the movement that comes out of my body and the way my dance teacher made us feel about it actually brought me to tears as I was expressing the counts and movement. I very much enjoyed the new creative way of how to read and write choreography.

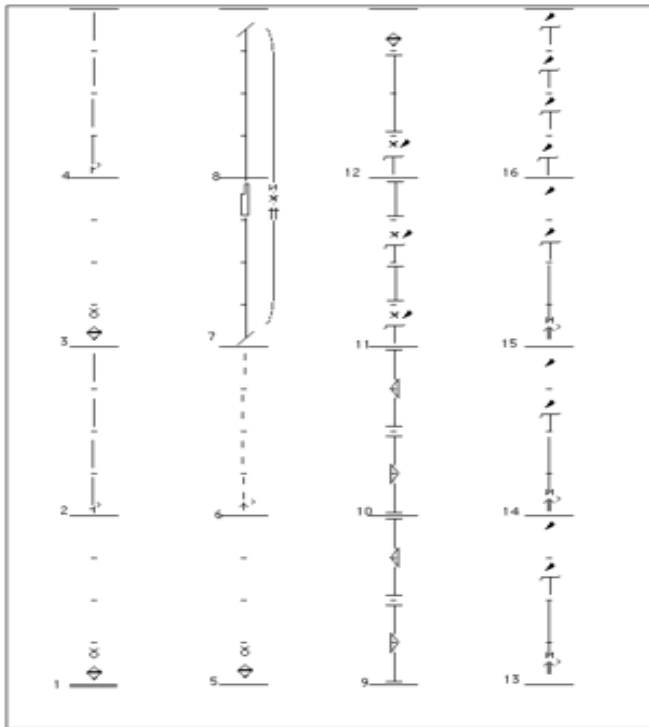
The paper was a quick reinforcement. . . I was able to pick up the dance quicker and remember the steps and counts easier. For me it was easier to flow the dance movement together after reviewing the notations.



### Benefits of Teaching from a Score

- Direct appeal for the visual, logical, mathematical learner (puzzle solvers!)
- Clarity (both my teaching and their performance)
- Timing (improved musicality and timing in dancer's performance)
- More quickly advance to discussion of performance elements
- Student accountability for material (semester long accountability of choreography)
- Students became independent and autonomous in practicing (review sessions were with the paper not the instructor)
- History lesson embedded within the score (thumbprints for a style within jazz)
- Elevates respect for the material presented (substantiate the study of the choreography)
- Increased academic rigor; lecture material expanded beyond history to elements of dance and "dance-based language"
- Students made connections to dance theory and notation from other classes (Modern, Dance Appreciation, Choreography, Improvisation)
- Documentation of the choreography (reusable repertory)

The following is an excerpt from one of my scores for a swing jazz combination in a Jazz I course.



I have also incorporated dance theory heavily into my improvisation classes and performance groups. By teaching improvisation through the lens of dance literacy, I have discovered that the students find greater ease in creating structured improvisations with coherence (Spontaneous Choreography). The students are able to communicate with each other and create their own structures for improvisational performance that are clear and exciting. The presence of a dance-based language inherently shifts the dancer's focus from vague or general movements to dynamic, articulate movement vocabularies. I noticed that the students are better equipped to physically differentiate movement concepts in terms of the directions and levels, timing and dynamic qualities. Introducing them to dance-based dance language exposed the students to exactly what they were doing, rather than impressions of what they were doing. I often discuss the elements of dance theory as tools in a tool belt; just as certain jobs require the right tool certain dances need the right movement concept.

All of this work that I have done to seamlessly integrate dance theory into my classrooms has led me to wonder: when is the right time to present dance theory to college students? Assuming most college dance students have come from a dance academy or studio setting, it is safe to assume that most have not been challenged with learning dance theory before coming to college. In this way, I fear we are doing a disservice to the students to try to force them to learn dance theory after they have already learned to dance. In some ways we are putting the cart before the horse. In looking at some of the local four-year institutions offering dance degrees, I discovered their dance theory classes were almost all offered as upper division courses. Others offered no theory courses. In many ways, dance theory has become an afterthought, taught in different ways, to different degrees at different colleges across the nation. Because dancers receive uneven and dissimilar amounts of dance theory education, that education becomes potentially obsolete after they leave academia because the other dancers may or may not be able to speak the same language.

#### Southern California Dance Theory Programs

The course work for the following universities was taken from their respective websites or course catalogues in October 2011.

- University of California, Irvine: 3 quarters of Laban Studies (upper division)
- University of California, Santa Barbara: Dance Notation and Movement Analysis (upper division)
- University of California, Los Angeles: Movement Theories, and Movement Observation and Analysis (upper division)
- California State University, Fullerton: Rhythmic Analysis (lower division); Dance Theory and Criticism

(upper division)

Other performing arts disciplines do not face this same challenge with music being the best example. Trained musicians all speak the same language and read the same notation. When musicians get together they all use the same language. The few non-literate self- or ear-trained musicians have a huge challenge when they enter the academic study of music at a university because it may be the first time someone asks them to read and write music notation. This of course does not mean that an ear-trained musician who cannot read music is in any way a lesser performer, but it does mean that person would probably not progress at the university level without first learning to speak the same language as the rest of the music world. Being a non-literate musician in academia means being cut off from the canon of music and music research that is available for study. Within the music scores themselves lay new ideas, new repertory and more demanding technical and performative challenges. Music majors need their literacy in order to excel in their academic and performance pursuits. This more universal literacy is something that the dance world has yet to solidify in practice.

#### **Comparative Model**

Looking at the music major theory model, we see quite a few differences compared to most dance programs. Music majors are all required to take two full years of theory regardless of musical instrument or stylistic emphasis. More specifically, these two years of theory are taken in their first two years at any program, the lower division. Music theory goes beyond any one genre and the students learn to apply it as appropriate to their specialization. In this way, music theory classes are held separately from students' practical training as performers or composers. Music programs start with the fundamentals of the language before the students are asked to speak sentences. Thus, their music literacy frames their entire collegiate experience. This is not always an easy or fun process for some music majors. However, it serves as a turning point for many students in their choice to become music majors. This intense study of music can transition the students away from the hobby of music and towards the intellectual study of music.

A similar example can be found in the acquisition of a language. Submersion is an effective way to learn a new language for practical purposes, but the academic study of language must involve learning the grammar structures behind the application. Currently, the dance world does an excellent job of submerging dancers in the practice of dance, but sometimes lacks sure footing in the analytical practices that yield deeper academic study and the resulting canon of literature to promote our field as a whole.

In this way, dancers are much like vocalists. Vocalists often learn by ear, hearing melodies and mimicking sounds they hear in performance. Vocalists have incredible instincts that serve them in their performance just as dancers do, but they struggle and often resist the theory of music upon first impression, because they feel it is ancillary to their skill as performers. Many vocal students struggle to get through their first two years of a music major program because of the required shift in thinking from performing to critical analysis of music theory. It is this academic foundation that separates them from someone with only a natural skill for imitation. Being a good singer is not enough; studying voice in higher education must go beyond mere performance. The literate vocalist understands music as a whole and her role within it, opening up new doors in the study of music including composition, research and musical analysis.

#### **Music Major Theory Model**

- Music Majors take two years of theory of which four semesters are in their first two years of academic study.
- Theory classes are required for all music students of all styles, genres, musical instruments and academic interests including vocalists who frequently rely on imitation and their natural instincts as do most dancers.
- Theory classes are held separately from student's training as performers or composers.
- Teaches music students the language of their art first. It frames their entire collegiate experience and often marks the turning point in becoming a music major.

Of course, the music system has its flaws, too. A more integrated approach to theory might be an easier pill for many music majors to swallow, but the lesson I take away from this model is that the academic pursuit of dance requires a shift in thinking that happens alongside the physical development of the dancer. Arts programs in colleges and universities are being closed and I fear this may be largely due to a lack of intellectual rigor that would produce a canon of dance literature defending our field as both an art as well as an area of intellectual inquiry.

#### **Losing Our Academic Base**

In short, I worry that we might be losing our academic base because of a recent emphasis on performance over theory and study, the effect of which is acutely felt for the transfer dance major from Moorpark College. As I have integrated dance theory into my classroom, I have had a boom of interest from my students. They are revved and ready to attack the study of dance at a four-year institution. They graduate from the Moorpark College dance program with a strong foundation of dance theory and notation, but as many of them came to dance late in their lives, they have a weak technical foundation as performers. These students who are ready to revolutionize the dance world are not strong

applicants when applying to local four-year programs, of which there are many options in southern California, because the programs do not test for dance literacy nor intellectual understanding of dance concepts. Rather, these literate, intellectually prepared students are asked to perform in their auditions and many do not make the cut. So I am forced to ask: are we disenfranchising potential “movers and shakers” in the dance world because of the increasing focus on performance at many four-year institutions?

The Moorpark students are theoretically grounded and passionate about dance studies and inquisitive and articulate dance writers. They want to promote and shape the world of dance. But, there are few places for them to continue their intellectual studies without requiring excellence in technique and performance. Of course, programs like this do exist, but in Southern California there are limited options for a dancer who is strong intellectually but weak practically. Where are our next dance historians, our next dance critics, and our next dance theorists? It seems that dance literacy is happening too late in the training to have a lasting effect on the research and practices at the undergraduate level.

In making the case for dance literacy we need to ask: why become literate if you already know how to dance? Dance as a field needs more than a handful of theorists; it needs to revolutionize its way of teaching dance literacy so that we can all talk the same language and move the field forward both in theory and in practice. Dance literacy needs to happen sooner for our programs to continue being successful in this time of budget cuts and additional scrutiny.

### **Proposal**

I propose a different focus in the first two years in the academic study of dance. Following the music model, dance programs could require a theoretical foundation in the first two years to lay the groundwork of dance literacy for the rest of the student’s college experience. This foundation would include courses focusing specifically on dance theory and Laban-based notation so the dancers can assimilate the concepts fully in order to apply them in their practical and academic courses. The courses would focus on observational skills, movement analysis and compositional implications, which would then need to be reinforced by utilizing scores in their classes and performance groups. In this way dance literacy could become a tool to aid students in their academic careers as well as their performance careers.

This shift would naturally result in a surge of scholarly research in theory and notation, which will promote dance in higher education and create greater awareness of dance as an academic pursuit. It would also demonstrate dance-based academic rigor commensurate

with the undergraduate studies in the other performing arts. The inclusion of a dance theory program would further delineate the difference between conservatory style training and academic scholarship in dance. Lastly, by placing dance theory and notation at the beginning of a student’s career, it would remove the burden to teach theory and notation from those teaching technique and composition. Dancers could move forward in their academic studies with the same degree of exposure to this important information.

By putting the dance theory first, literacy becomes the lens. The experience of the dancer in higher education becomes richer because literacy supports and informs all of their studies. The students will be able to see more, differentiate more clearly, articulate in word and action and choreograph with theoretical grounding and integrity.

But this vision is just that; it is a mere promise of potential. So, let this vision become a call for help. Curricular change starts at the four-year institutions. In order for a dance theory program to exist, university programs must examine this issue to move the field forward. Two-year colleges are required to follow the lead of the four-year institutions because of the issues involved in transfer from the two-year college to the four-year universities. I request that we reforge the path for the “intellectual” dancer, the next dance writer, dance historian, dance theorist. These are the people who are going to fight for dance on the ground level and keep dance alive and funded. We are in a position where the dance field needs to retrain academia to treat dance as equal to the other performing arts and I think dance literacy is our key.

### **DANCE-BASED DANCE LITERACIES**

by Teresa Heiland

The field of dance education educates students quite well, especially in regards to psychomotor and affective learning; however, cognitive learning is often relegated most of the time to the three levels of Bloom’s taxonomy of learning (1956) that deal with knowledge building: remembering, understanding, and applying. The reflective levels of Bloom’s taxonomy: analyzing, evaluating, and creating, are often delayed exploration until, and if, dancers reach the college level (Pohl 2000). These habits in our teaching-learning strategies deny many children and adolescents who study dance a chance to practice habits of mind for engaged learning in dance where a level of responsibility exceeds mere rote practice and memorization. Students in dance at any age need opportunities to vigorously research, discuss, create projects, and make discoveries based on their choices and curiosities. Looking from an entirely different perspective, the field of dance most commonly serves (primarily in dance studio practices) a culture that provides opportunity for literacy to be more dominant in the



following domains of dance education: (1) BODY AND PERFORMANCE: physical skill building, anatomy, kinesiology, somatics; (2) LANGUAGE: concepts related to theatrical performance, elements of dance terms, vocabulary related to specific genres of dance; (3) CULTURAL AWARENESS: origins of dance styles and forms, history, aesthetic valuing; and (4) INTER- AND INTRA-PERSONAL RELATING: community building, leadership, social skills, participation, and competition.

Dance literacy in studio environments is already a complex web of knowing, but aspects of literacy could be heightened so that a language that anyone studying dance could use accompanies learning how to dance. Outside of dance education, ten educators forming the New London Group coined the term multiliteracies to address evolving literacy requirements due to globalization, technology, and increasing cultural and social diversity with the desire to create access to the evolving language of work, power, and community, and foster critical engagement. We believe dance education needs to address our own discipline's evolving literacy requirements in order to stay abreast with the advancing requirements for dance to be respected as a core arts subject in schools. Multiliteracies is about visual meaning, auditory meaning, spatial meaning, gestural meaning, linguistic meaning, and multimodal patterns of meaning that are combinations of the semiotic modes (Cope and Kalantzis 1996), all of which dance education has already been mostly quite masterful. However, dance's own semiotic system of signs, symbols, and codes that make meaning explicit are not shared equally among all dancers, which means that we, as dance educators of the field of dance, are allowing enforced illiteracy to continue in our field. Dancers describe movement from the viewpoints of their adopted genres easily among peers. Ballet dancers speak about *développé*, breakers *top rocking*, tango dancers *el gancho*, contemporary dancers the *huck*, tappers the *parididdle*, jazz dancers the *6-step turn*, Hawkins dancers *tassling*, and the glossary of nick names for movements goes on and on. If dance education included a systematic language that traversed all genres so dancers could write and speak fluently about any dance form in a codified dance-specific language, we could share and access our knowledge base, our history, our dances, and our heritage without being handicapped by not having spent numerous years studying each genre. Dancers could read about and understand dances from forms they have not yet even studied in motion, which could expand the range of understanding of dance across cultures and time.

One of the joys of being a dance student is learning from an informed teacher who shares oral histories and provides authentic movement activities in the classroom in the command style of teaching. Students

feel honored to be learning from a master. This method can provide exciting experiences, yet may also be limiting, depending on how many experienced teachers one has access to in one's community. It is important to note that even if a master teacher is present in the community, using only one style of teaching limits students' learning. Mussta Mosston discusses eleven teaching styles that can be used in the classroom, with each style creating a particular learning climate and set of conditions, which either support or are incongruent with the particular learning objective or goal at hand. These spectrums of teaching styles, as he calls it, involve two basic thinking capacities, the capacity for reproduction and the capacity for production. The first five styles form a cluster that represents teaching options that foster reproduction of existing (known, past) information and knowledge. The remaining six styles form a cluster that represents options that invite production (discovery) of new knowledge – this knowledge is new to the learner, it may be new to the teacher, or at times, new to society. These clearly parallel the upper and lower levels of learning in Bloom's cognitive taxonomy mentioned earlier. The line of demarcation between these two clusters is called the discovery threshold. The discovery threshold identifies the cognitive boundaries of each cluster. If the field of dance has indeed been working in studios with mostly the knowledge-building aspects of the cognitive learning taxonomy, and hence the reproduction style of teaching, then we have set boundaries for the analytical, evaluative, and creative skills of our students by limiting guided discovery, divergent discovery, learner designed and initiated projects, and self-teaching. The literacy we are teaching is about building knowledge and reproducing what the teacher shows. This seems like an enforced illiteracy that has been wholly accidental due to habit of teaching from the viewpoint of oral histories—a strength in dance education that we surely do not want to squander. What happens if only one person in the room can proclaim to own the literacy of dance? What happens to the agency of the younger dancers who are not sure if it is okay to claim that literacy for themselves? Does it take ten years before one can claim it? Can I claim what I learn today as mine? Am I literate if I can spell French ballet terms and say them properly? What is literacy, if I cannot analyze, evaluate, and create with it? What does it offer me if I cannot experience my own divergent discoveries with what I know so far? How do I explore my own dance literacy if my teacher is not standing in the room teaching me? How can I become independent in my own learning?



Bloom's Cognitive Learning Taxonomy	Mosston's Spectrum of Teaching Styles
KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING 1. Remembering 2. Understanding 3. Applying  REFLECTION 4. Analyzing 5. Evaluating 6. Creating	REPRODUCTION STYLES 1. Command 2. Practice 3. Reciprocal 4. Self-Check 5. Inclusion DISCOVERY THRESHOLD PRODUCTION STYLES 6. Guided Discovery 7. Divergent Discovery 8. Learner-designed Individual Program 9. Learner-initiated 10. Self-teaching

What if dancers weren't so dependent on being taught everything by their teachers? What if they didn't have to wait to be told everything? What if they could be responsible and explore dance materials on their own using an inquiry approach to learning? What are the benefits of music literacy? If a music student needs to be challenged, the teacher can send home more difficult sheet music for the student to practice. If a young jazz dancer wanted to learn about the dance styles of Jack Cole, she could read a score and dance it in her living room, just as a young pianist could play George Gershwin. The young musician can be more in charge of initiating learning and is not as dependent on her teacher for inspirations. The shift to the "discovery threshold" is one that invites students into a problem-based learning process, where learning is driven by challenging, open-ended, less defined, and less structured problems or projects. Students generally must work collaboratively, which speeds literacy and creativity, while the teachers take on the role of facilitators of learning. One of the functions of problem-based learning is that students develop self-directed learning skills, which become life-long learning patterns, such as increased motivation to maintain study, social and academic integration, heightened development of cognitive skills, and increased rate and depth of learning (Severiens and Schmidt 2009).

If learning how to read dance scores is left for college years, then few people will likely learn to be literate in dance. Most dancers in their early twenties are at the peak of their performing careers, and it would be naïve of dance educators to think that college is the right time to focus on beginning to learn a brand new dance-based language—no matter how fun and interesting they might make it. This is not to say that learning a dance notation language in college cannot be done, but learning it at an earlier age, when students have less responsibility

in their lives and more time to play with language, to play with dance and build dances, would likely be an easier access point toward dance-based dance literacy. Also, by starting learning earlier, there would be much more possibility to scaffold teaching and learning so that literacy comes naturally, and joyfully, through play and human interaction rather than rote memorization. Children learn notation easily, and they have fun if teachers know how to offer learning experiences that engage students with creativity and technical mastery of movement through notation. The possibilities for dance-based dance literacy exist, but we have to be willing to give up the sole role of command style of teaching in dance. It would be to our students' benefit if dance teachers were taught how to balance the role of problem-based learning by becoming less of a "sage on the stage" and more of a "guide on the side." Are we willing to allow our field to become multi-literate and literate? Why is it so scary to think of it?

More research would support how literacy via problem-based learning fulfills this balance. Possible topics for research include: Does learning a dance-specific language (dance notation) enhance the dance education learning process, the interest in and awareness of choreography and dance heritage, and the level of engagement among dancers (Heiland 2009; Warburton 2000, 2003)? If so, how is literacy in dance experienced for each participant and how was it learned, embodied, and expressed? Does increasing the level of dance literacy empower students to take on their own learning?

What would the possibilities be if dancers were literate in the traditional sense, in a dance-based language, and if dancers were literate as most musicians are literate? What would dancers' ways of world-making be like? What would our field's potential be? How would our field change, or be perceived? What would we gain, what would we lose? By denying our students literacy, we are losing something. What is the cost?

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