

Teaching Choreography: Starting with Craft

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Abstract:

This is a report on teaching the first semester of college-level choreography with an emphasis on elements of craft. The philosophical and aesthetic issues that lie behind this choice are described and an attempt is made to explain the sequence of coursework and the way choreographic skills are approached. Student comments are included to show the types of responses received from students at the end of the semester.

Keywords: dance education | choreography education | choreographic skills | college level choreography

Article:

The first time I faced a room full of excited and inexperienced choreography students, I had to come to terms with procedural as well as philosophical questions. What is the best way to teach choreography to beginners? How much can be done? How much should be done? Where do we start? My answers came slowly, evolving over years of teaching. They grew out of aesthetic beliefs and what I think good choreography really is. Although there are probably as many possible answers as there are belief systems, the following describes the methods developed while teaching “Choreography I: Craft,” a course that reflects my viewpoint. The class is the first of a three-semester progression offered by the Department of Dance at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro where I teach; the second and third semesters are entitled “Choreography II: Process” and “Choreography III: Group Forms.”

It seems clear that choreographic craft can be taught just like any other skill: by defining discrete goals and using explanation, questioning, repetition, and practice to achieve understanding and achievement. This area of artistry is knowledge that can be transferred, in a way that more elusive, personal aspects such as meaning, inspiration, and creativity cannot. Once in possession of skills for crafting dances, students are equipped to begin other kinds of exploration. I offer this class as an example for discussion because it offers a different point of view from much of the discourse about choreography in higher education today, and because, by the end of the semester, most students have responded in very positive ways, to judge by what they say and the

final works they produce. The quotations found throughout are from anonymous end-of-semester student evaluations of the course, collected since 1996, for example:

I am so grateful to have the information from this class. It was refreshing to work with tools and structure, right and wrong, and be given a clear base from which to start creating.

I really appreciated this course because it taught me to use very basic things in a way that produced very interesting and aesthetically pleasing visual movements and formations.

In the past...I thought [choreography] was easy because of the level I was working with. Now I see how much I did not know and cannot wait to use what I have learned.

The visible growth in understanding among the students makes this class a pleasure to teach, even in recent years when it has become twice the size it should be. This year's class has had to be split into two groups. With three meeting times each week (and no time to repeat assignments), we are able to get through the syllabus with group A working on the next assignment while group B is showing. My sense is that, in this format, we have to move too fast for some students, and student evaluations seem to indicate that this is so. A smaller class size would make a difference.

The Issue of Craft

The course that has evolved over the past fifteen years concentrates on teaching choreography skills or tools. Techniques are taught that can be explained, demonstrated, and relatively easily graded, and that are focused on the "how to" of dance-making. Aware that, through the way I have chosen to teach this class, I am introducing specific aesthetic views, I explain that we will be working with a traditional way of making dances—not because this is the only way to choreograph, but because it works and it is a good way to start out. I am not handing them a set of objective truths or rules, but rather teaching developmental skills to be explored and expanded upon. I view it as exposing them to a basic approach and being sure that they learn how to do it. I also make a point of letting them know that as they mature artistically and gain firm control of the skills covered, they can decide what to do with this knowledge. For this class, however, grading will be based on the value system I am setting forth.

However, no matter how I try to avoid it, every year, I get at least one comment like this:

I think that choreography can be many different things and this class only allows for one possibility, and that is Jan's idea of choreography.

It is true that I am focusing on structure rather than expression or meaning, and I try to explain this while making a case for starting with this method. Throughout the ages it has been argued that technique and creativity are in opposition to each other and that rules and technique can get in the way of imagination. Some thinkers hold that creativity and inspiration require unlimited

freedom and that technique of any kind imposes restrictions. I believe, however, that acquiring technical competence is inseparably bound to learning to understand an activity.

Over the years, numerous choreographers and teachers have recorded their thoughts about the formal issues of craft, skills, and creativity. In the 1950s, Louis Horst, strongly influenced by his musical background, declared that form and structures are primary in dance. “Your material must be sublimated to form and stylization of symbolization into a work of art,” he wrote. “Until that takes place, it is only self-expressionism.”¹

Doris Humphrey’s book, *The Art of Making Dances*, also from the 1950s, was a clear testimony to craft. She wrote:

I believe we can dismiss as highly naive any contention that we cannot benefit from compositional techniques or that these cannot be taught in the dance. This would be tantamount to saying that intellectual effort and analysis, though valuable in all other kinds of human activity, are without function or necessity in this one area of one art.²

Others have found these pronouncements rigid, blinding both students and teachers to the fact that dances choreographed by rules may be creatively insipid,³ which can certainly be the case. There is, however, more to it than finding something to say and saying it. In a more moderate position, Alma Hawkins advocated introducing choreographic principles as they become relevant to students in their work. Without providing many practical clues, she challenged choreography teachers to figure out ways of assisting young artists to allow the imaginative forming of movement to develop and mature. For her, the successful approach was focused on teaching “the transformation of felt experience into externalized forms.”⁴ Philosopher David Best goes further. While claiming that every medium has its limitations, he describes good teaching as inducting students into the medium, with its implied restrictions, and at the same time, “emphasizing the definite scope for freedom within those limits, and even the possibility of re-drawing those limits.”⁵

For me, technique is not necessarily about imposing limits but acquiring a set of options, tools to explore and use according to need. No rules or skills will hold universally. Each work has its own requirements and will proceed according to its own plan, as Lavender notes: “Because each dance is different, an attribute like repetition, contrast, or any other general artistic value may improve some works while ruining others.”⁶ In my own artistic process, I know the importance of allowing feeling and intuition to guide me as I make a dance. But in gaining competence, I have had to understand and trust that my intuition is both correct and constructive, and that has only happened through study, analysis, and examination. As artist Ben Shahn has been quoted as saying, “Intuition in art is actually the result of prolonged tuition.”⁷ It seems pertinent to ask here: if we decide to teach choreography at all, accepting that it is important to have an idea, what else should we teach but the means to express it?

The Syllabus

During the first class meeting, I talk about looking at dances. I mention that, since members of the class are dancers and know dancing pretty well, probably what they concentrate on when they watch a concert is the performers and what they are doing. Most likely, they do not really observe the choreography. The majority has not thought about this and many do not know what “choreography” means when separated from “dancers.” Questions arise. At this point, I bring up the idea of “structure” as something that all dances possess, and we begin talking about the semester ahead. We will be working to learn various tools and how to use them to obtain the effects we want. We will be developing a “choreographic eye,” learning to see structure and how it is achieved. By the end of the semester, they will make two short dances using the tools they have learned. And at about the two-thirds point in the semester, we will all attend the same concert and discuss the work in terms of structure and tools.

As they gain experience, my hope is that the students are also learning about their own preferences. From the beginning they have to make choices that I do not question; the style of movement, subject matter, and even music selection in the final project are up to them. Since some have already decided they want careers in show business or ballet, to encourage development of individual aesthetic points of view, the syllabus does not restrict them in these areas. I do not mean to imply that I am silent about their choices. I think they always know my preferences but they also know they will not be penalized for developing their work in hip hop, jazz, ballet, or any other style, or for using their own choice of music, and that, in grading, I will try to honor the dictates of whatever tradition they have chosen (such as facing choices in forms that are presentational in nature). However, the work itself must be well-developed and finely crafted in the ways we discuss throughout the semester. Respect for and recognition of these latter two ideas are at the core of the class I am trying to teach.

Temporal Design

For the first half of the semester, assignments center on demonstrating a comprehension of forms and concepts. These include rhythmic notation, methods of applying rhythms to movement (and vice versa), and various ways of manipulating time to develop a phrase, such as using canon, retrograde, and so forth. For instance, after we have discussed rhythmic notation, each student is asked to create an eight-count rhythm using eight notes, and once this is approved, to create a movement phrase that replicates that rhythm. Students then combine into groups of four and string their eight-count phrases together, which gives each quartet a 32 count and 32 note movement phrase. This becomes working material for the next several assignments.

They start with a practice period, to work their phrase into various forms such as canon, flattening it (giving each movement one count), performing just the arms while running the rhythm, and assigning (imposing) a new 32 count rhythm to the original sequence of movement. Assignments are done as small group exercises, meaning that students work within a group of 3 or 4 to come up with a choreographed demonstration of each concept we discuss. Then they demonstrate the phrases – in both original and new forms – for the class. After the required

demonstrations, we often have them show how the ideas they have worked with might fit together, like asking one dancer to do the original while another works in canon and a third demonstrates the flattened phrase. Alone, the phrases are not always interesting, but when they are put together, students see possibilities for choreography right away.

As each new group shows, their original 32 count rhythm is written on the board and clapped by the class to ensure understanding of rhythmic notation. These exercises are technical enough in nature to have a right and wrong with which everyone can agree and they are intended to teach a mastery of temporal design. Even if students struggle with the demonstrations, they are secure in knowing that there is something concrete to learn and that they will know when they get it (as opposed to the artistic challenge, when there is no one “right” answer).

Throughout the first half of the semester, nearly all coursework is like that described above: manipulating small, discrete chunks of movement to show one possible method for developing material. Another example would be making a phrase on a specific 32 count rhythm and then mixing up the measures and their movements while keeping the phrase at 32 counts. My goal is to provide ample support, with clearly delineated bite-sized assignments. Doing it this way makes each lesson seem possible, something that can be figured out, rehearsed, and performed for the class on an almost daily basis, even though the work is actually quite sophisticated.

Spatial Design

We also cover spatial design concepts, basic ideas like how rearranging dancers or altering facings without changing the movement can influence audience perception. Coupled with the speed with which we have to work, finding enough rooms to allow all students the opportunity to experiment makes the class a challenge for everyone. With nearly 40 students in the class, the three assigned studio spaces are simply not big enough for so many to work on elements of spatial design when we reach that part of the syllabus. We struggle with this, since use of space is an important skill in choreography.

Assignments center on devising a variety of spatial patterns for the phrases they have already choreographed. These demonstrate how the viewer’s eye can be focused by design choices, how spacing and facings can affect what is seen and how much importance it is given, and the ways in which space can change the way movement is read. We explore ideas such as how moving a dancer from center to slightly off center, or having him face upstage can alter perception of that performer’s importance in a given situation; or how, by changing a group of dancers from a frontal facing to an arrangement facing each other, we can influence the interpretation of what is being performed. In the latter case, the perception might change from seeing dancers “displaying” or dancing for the audience, to “doing” or dancing with each other. Through discussion after each demonstration, students gain awareness of the different choices they can make, even though in our current situation, they do not always have the space to discover these things for themselves.

Putting It All Together

In our discussions, I explain the concepts of “form” and “content” and point out that the methods of developing movement we are learning are a means of creating the formal or structural elements within a dance. To demonstrate how these elements serve to create and augment meaning within a dance, just before I turn them free to work independently on their own dances, I ask them to carry out one more group assignment. In groups of four or five, they must create a complete work with the developmental tools we have been learning using only standing, walking, running, changing levels, and changing facings.

Already, they have been complaining about how hard it is to create without music. Now their voices rise in amazement—how can a dance not use “movement?” I urge them just to go ahead. They think all the dances will look just alike. I assure them that the structure or formal devices selected by each group will make the pieces quite different and that the audience will see different things in each one. And once they begin to work, the variety is always remarkable.

The entire syllabus, and this assignment in particular, is based in an aesthetic philosophy that holds that form serves to create meaning, an idea I explored in a 2001 paper, *Intention: Questions Regarding Its Role in Choreography*.⁸ It is a maxim understood by many working choreographers. Arlene Croce, for instance, portrays Mark Morris’s process as focused on design while allowing the meaning to follow. Often, while creating this way, the artist is unaware of working with or for a particular “meaning,” but of allowing it to emerge as the dance takes shape. As Anna Sokolow says of her own work, “I do it, look at it, and then say: ‘Yes, I see what I am trying to do.’” My own choreographic process follows along these lines. I explore and put together formal ideas until I know that the form has found a way to resolve itself.”⁸ It is usually only then that I know what the piece is really about.

When the students’ walking and standing pieces are ready, each group shows its work twice, and then sits down in front of the class for a critique. Generally, this is the first time students have received public feedback on original work, and for some it is uncomfortable, both to receive and give. In order to be as helpful as possible, we establish rules for the viewers such as: discuss what you saw, ask questions about why things were done, characterize the work in terms of what you think it is “about,” and so forth. We start by asking the group to tell us what they did and how they worked. Generally, the class is genuinely pleased with the variety of work being shown, and amazed at how different each piece is. I want them to focus on why things were done within the dances and what was being attempted so that both artists and audience can understand the decision-making process and conclude, in each case, whether the choices made achieved their goals. In this way students begin to see how things work. Deciding what a dance is “about” concerns what the focus of the piece seems to be or the central idea behind the choices made, and often, audience response to this question is a surprise to the artists. We keep returning to the ways in which the created form has communicated, whether it was used as a narrative or for a

design. My hope is that they are convinced of the importance of structure by the end of this assignment.

The message driven home throughout these weeks is that well-crafted choreography does not require a great deal of movement invention. Several key phrases may be all that are necessary; the tools we learn (methods of working with movement which Blom and Chaplin call “motif development”⁹) are a means of developing material through rhythmic and spatial manipulation to make it appear different enough so that a limited amount of movement suffices. This is a new idea to many, contrary to their experience in competition-based studio dancing where dancers are asked to show everything they can do without repeating anything. Students seem receptive, almost happy to have some rules.

The tools...make things seem a little less intimidating—which increases the chances for success in creativity.

I thought the art of choreography was more abstract than it actually is. Much to my surprise there really are some concrete rules and tools to use.

As we make our way through the semester, we talk about numerous aesthetic concepts, the value systems behind them, how they are sometimes in conflict, how they develop according to what the artist is trying to do or the influence of the surrounding culture. Topics cover a broad variety of concerns:

- Does a dance have to be about something?
- Is it okay to make a dance that is concerned only with its own design?
- If viewers don't understand what I am trying to say, does that mean it's a bad dance?
- What good are rules that inhibit my creativity?

These questions are discussed again and again throughout the semester. I try to make clear that with issues of this kind, there is no one right idea, but that, with experience, they will find their own answers.

I introduce the concepts of “unity” and “diversity” as significant values in making traditionally constructed dances, and the coursework we are doing is described as perhaps the most basic means of achieving them; working from a limited repertory of movement, perhaps two or three phrases, guarantees a certain amount of unity within a dance because the source material is restricted. Developing that movement in terms of time, space, and dynamic range (in the ways we have been learning) creates variety enough within the piece to hold viewer interest. Repetition of large or small bits throughout the dance, perhaps manipulated in subtle ways, can be used to show the viewer what is important and to integrate the various segments of a dance into a whole. All of this keeps everything in the dance working toward the same goal, what Blom

and Chaplin call making every moment telling, so it contributes to the development of a unified concept.¹⁰ Nothing is just for decoration. Unless there is a specific choreographic intent to work differently, every choice should appear inevitable— without being predictable.

By the time we finish this segment of work, it is midterm, and a 3 to 4 page paper is assigned, a kind of “what I have learned” paper that is meant as a reflection on their experience thus far. Up to this point, the class has been discussing the role of the choreographer, the job of choreography, and how to use the “tools” they are learning to make a dance. This assignment asks them to reflect on choreography as they now understand it, whether they like doing it, whether it is challenging, exciting, or difficult, whether it changes the way they look at dances. Papers range from personal reactions to the list of assignments to a discussion of perceptions, challenges, and hopes for the rest of the semester. Another, slightly longer, paper is assigned at the end of the semester. For this second writing assignment students are asked to discuss the ways in which aesthetic preferences, assumptions, and values are evolving and how the work in this course has affected thinking and creating. I want students to be conscious of how our work together is affecting them as dance artists and be able to talk about their ideas. Course evaluations seem to indicate a new awareness:

I have a lot more respect for choreographers now. The dancers sometimes have it easy. I now cannot look at a piece of dance without picking it apart and looking at the choreography.

I never knew there were so many elements to choreography. I feel like I can watch a dance now or choreograph one and see it in a different way; I can understand it more.

are asked to create two short but complete dances using the skills they have learned. This is a step beyond the phrases they have worked with as a means of developing material and designing space. At this point, we go over what makes a dance complete, and what, in essential terms, makes a dance good. We do not spend time discussing movement invention (since they already have had at least one semester of improvisation) and, as previously mentioned, students are not required to work in any particular style or technique.

During discussion, there is general accord that a complete dance has a beginning, middle, and end, and we define those terms using words like introduction of the idea (or movement) to be developed, followed by exploration and development of the idea, and resolution. Dynamic change is another element deemed necessary. We have explored this through demonstrations of changing tempo and energy as well as by bringing dancers together or spreading them out into space. A legible “throughline” is usually something I have to suggest as necessary, explaining the importance of being able to see a connection from the beginning through the middle to the end. Other important ideas include spatial and temporal design, use of the tools we have studied to enhance the idea of the dance, and integrity (meaning that everything in the dance seems to belong and advance the development of the piece).

We also explore how to use the tools they have learned to develop movement to create the dance they want to make. How well movement they develop is used is a matter of the effect to which they use it, and whether that effect is a good one. I stress that the movement is never sacred. Once developed, it is theirs to use or not; they can select some portions and throw others out. Whole sections can be thrown away if they do not seem to advance the concept being developed. The trick is to fit segments of movement into interesting spatial and temporal designs that evoke an image or idea that contributes to the dance as a whole.

George Beiswanger called this process of shaping a dance a kind of ordering, creating:

...a design which comes to reside in the substance and make-up of the entire dance work. Hence, to choreograph a dance is to design it in the process of making it, for we can hardly conceive of an art-making process which is not a designing activity as well. Thus designed, when the dance is presented in finished performance order, its quality of design makes itself manifest as the very clarity (and ease) with which the dance's shape take its presence before us.¹¹

I have tried to translate Beiswanger's concept of the quality of design showing up as "clarity and ease with which a dance presents itself" into a rubric for grading the dances. Simply put, the categories I have chosen are:

1. Existence of a satisfying beginning, middle, and end;
2. Through-line connection of the beginning, middle, and end;
3. Use of dynamics;
4. Use of rhythmic tools in developing and manipulating movement phrases;
5. Clarity and effectiveness of spatial design; and
6. Integration of choices for flow and wholeness.

Organizing the Class

Although students are graded individually, almost all coursework is shown in groups, except for the two final dances. Several circumstances pushed me to plan the class this way. First, the large class enrollment made it impossible to do anything else. Over the years, class size has ranged from 16 to 39 per semester—always too big for a traditional solo choreography format. And second, working in groups serves to both support each individual while exposing her to some of the social aspects of choreography.

For classroom assignments during the first half of the semester, students work in groups to collaborate on the completion of each task. Then they present their interpretation to the rest of the class in unison. These demonstrations usually make clear who knows what she is doing and

who does not. A positive side to group work is that comrades are automatically present who will help in figuring out the problems and provide reinforcement while showing. The more experienced students help the less experienced. This is a good thing.

In addition to providing support, the groups make it possible to figure out and demonstrate the rhythmic ideas that are relative to each other, such as half-time and double time. In addition, once all tasks are complete, we can explore how a phrase looks when performed to two different rhythms simultaneously (such as doing a flattened phrase next to the original one as described earlier).

I have found, however, that as soon as students have to rely on each other, a second agenda emerges that creates its own set of challenges. Personality issues and professionalism become important to everyone within a group. One uncooperative or demanding student can make it very difficult for those who have to work with her. Leadership problems surface, as students struggle to cope with difficult personalities, differing technical abilities, and tardiness, all while meeting tight deadlines. Most of the class has previously had experience only as dancers in other peoples' work, so this is all a new experience. As they note in their evaluations, for many, having to cope with the behavior of other dancers while trying to choreograph becomes a consciousness-changing practice in ways they had not predicted.

There were many stressful points in group projects.

Working in groups...felt counterproductive.... I felt we just were trying to agree and get assignments finished.

People fought and it was hard getting four dancers together outside of class....

Over time I have begun to see these concerns as an important part of the course and as a result have incorporated issues related to "professionalism" into the syllabus. Now, at the end of every major group assignment, each student is given the opportunity to grade other group members on work habits and cooperation. With the class meeting three times each week to allow students a class-time work period on most assignments, I can control attendance and behavior to a certain extent as they rehearse. However, for the dances at the end of the semester, students usually need to find rehearsal time outside of class time. Just as in the professional world of dance, at this point the deadline becomes the major concern and each student begins to see cooperation and reliability as essential to her success. By the time we are ready to start on these dances, most students are geared up to begin working independently. Often, through the group work, they have generated ideas they want to try out, and they are eager to be free of the constraints of building consensus for each choreographic decision.

While they have a lot of freedom in choreographing their final project, their first dance is under my tight control. For this work, the class is divided into groups of four or five and everyone is asked to create a trio with no music, making use of the tools we have learned, using three other

members of their group as dancers. This way, each dancer makes one dance and performs in three other trios. Every semester, with this assignment, there are two complaints that many students raise, giving voice to the frustration of still not having full control: having to make a dance without music and their lack of freedom to choose their dancers.

I try to preempt both of these concerns. I explain how music has a form of its own and that I want them to simply concentrate on creating a structure without having to deal with anything that music might impose from the outside. Though they argue that music is an inspiration, I insist that they figure out how to work without it. Music can create a mood or tell a story and I want them to make a dance that stands on its own. I am asking them to do whatever they do without the help that music might provide. They understand this and see the difficulty.

In response to the second complaint, I note that choreographers often accept jobs to create choreography for dancers they do not choose, whether they work in education or as freelance artists. As an example, I point out their own teachers teaching dances to students in the repertory classes they are all required to take. This is a sobering revelation and they readily accept the difficulty as a professional challenge.

Critiques

The class is given 3 to 4 weeks to work on the trio assignment and then the dances are shown to the entire class. Students work in all three available studios during class time and are encouraged to sign up for extra rehearsals outside of class. During this period, I move from one group to the next, inquiring about missing dancers and other problems, trying to help when needed. Often I attempt to head off problems I can see developing in rehearsal, such as balletic turns thrown in at the end to build dynamics after a low key, informal beginning and middle, or, after some interesting connections, dancers being moved into a straight line facing front to show a canon. I do my best to encourage students to think about the context they are creating within their dances.

At the showings, choreographers turn in a selfevaluation, discussing the challenges they encountered and how they would change their work if they had more time. This helps me to understand how they see their work and aids me in talking with them about it when we meet for critiques.

After showings, they immediately begin working on their final dances while I get together with each group of four or five separately for a critique of the trio assignment. As each group settles in for the critique, we talk for just a moment about the process and how this kind of review is often the way student artists are evaluated. I caution them to try not to take it personally, explaining that it is supposed to be constructive, that my discussion will focus on the dance they made and not on them. They may not agree with everything that is said. In fact, I remind them, this construction method is one they may come to question as they develop artistically, since, after all, the history of artistic evolution is actually a history of deliberate breaks with previous custom and tradition.¹² But for the moment the rubric, which is the same for the final project,

covers: use of dynamics; an effective beginning, middle, and end; the clarity and effectiveness of spatial and temporal design; integration of all choreographic elements; and the presence of a through line that gives the work an internal coherence. These are the aesthetic principles that must be observed to do well in this course.

While we watch each work on video, I provide them with my comments. A common construction in these first dances might go something like this: a beginning that, through physical contact or focus, introduces the idea of relationship among the dancers; followed by dancers moving into a line or an equilateral triangle (or one followed by the other) facing the audience to execute a canon or another of the tools, often for some length of time; then perhaps the dancers will move out of formation, speeding up as they travel around the stage until they collapse or exit and the dance is over.

As noted, grading for both dances is based on how well the piece integrates the tools, concepts, and ideas we have been working with all semester. No matter how clear I strive to make the rubric, however, I am aware that no rules hold for every dance. This truth is easily seen in grading over 30 trios, so as I address each item on the rubric, I discuss it in terms of the dance that was presented. After observing areas of strength, critique of the dance described above might proceed with a number of remarks:

1. After an intriguing beginning, the through line into the middle is broken by obviously moving the dancers into position to display tools for the audience, never returning to the relationships suggested earlier. Display of the tools in this way does not further the ideas introduced at the beginning.
2. For as long as the equal and (usually) wide apart spacing of the line or triangle is held, the energy of the middle of the dance drops.
3. The collapse (or exit) at the end does not seem to reference either the beginning or the middle of the dance and so does little to bring the piece to resolution. Dynamics may have been addressed through the speed at the ending, but just as often, if the dancers are spread out across the space even as they travel, the energy has probably remained flat throughout the piece.

Throughout the process I encourage them to ask questions. I ask if what I have said makes sense to them, and sometimes we get into why certain choreographic decisions were made. From here we go on to discuss particularities of the piece and to determine how similar problems might be avoided in future work.

My insistence on having all parts of the dance contribute to the same idea while employing spatial and temporal design tools stems from the ideas of unity and integrity discussed earlier, while working to maintain visual interest. These are not just my own ideas, though they are what I consider “natural” aesthetic principles that guide my own work. I believe, along with

philosopher David Carr, that “a good choreographer should... appreciate the profound aesthetic importance of certain natural laws of perceptual and emotional psychology relating to human movement in the context of dance....”¹³

Carr is referring here to some of Doris Humphrey’s basic rules of composition (such as stage positions) as examples which “would seem to be important for the successful design of *any* dance [emphasis his] at any place or time.”¹⁴ These are distinguished from “conventional” aesthetic principles, systems of rules particular to historical or social conditions that determine a style or technique (such as classical ballet or postmodern dance), and which can be modified or rejected for choreographic purposes. Perhaps, continuing with this line of thought, we can say that creativity is the ability to form and reform form.³

The final dance belongs to the students. They have about five weeks to make it and it must be shown with costumes, title, and whatever sound accompaniment they select. I give them the following advice as they set out:

- No dancing in your own work [so that you can see what you are doing].
- Use all of whatever music you have selected. No edited music unless you are working with the composer [because you do not want to compromise the work of another artist].
- If the music has words, consider the relationship of the words and the dance. Can the words be understood? Are you depending on them for communication? Are you ignoring them? They are part of your structure [and integrity of structure—unity—is important to what we are learning].
- Work toward integrity within the dance’s structure, including the title, costumes, and movement choices [again, so that your work has unity, with all aspects working together to achieve the same goal].
- No cliches in movement—avoid movement you have learned in class [so that your work is as much your own as possible, with movement developed for your particular idea].

Again, they are given all three studios during the class period for rehearsals and, though it is crowded, many take advantage of this time in addition to rehearsing on their own. And as I do while they work on the trios, I make myself available for consultations, guidance, and advance critiques of the works in progress.

Final showings are held during exam period in the dance theater and they are open to the public. Friends and family come and energy runs high. It is an informal situation with no lights, and students are asked to introduce their dances with whatever they would like to say. The informality is my attempt at keeping the pressure down, but tension and excitement are palpable throughout each concert. The students are very proud and excited about their work:

Choreography is now more interesting since I know more ways to do it.

I am much more enthusiastic about choreography now that I know so much more about what goes into it.

I have learned so much! I enjoy choreography now!

With thirty-some students, showings are done in four sittings over two days. Even so, sitting through nearly twenty student dances in one day is a challenge. My mind is not able to critically process more than about eight on first viewing, so I rely on a video of the event and take the time necessary to analyze each work. Since it is the end of the semester, there is no time for critiques. Over the next few days I will write an evaluation of each dance according to the same rubric we used on the previous assignment and put it into the choreographer's box to be picked up in January when the new semester begins. When classes start, upon request, I will meet with anyone who wants to discuss the final project. A few come in every year but most do not bother. The new semester is upon them and they are already off into "Choreography II: Process."

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