

Paper

Developing Movement Learning Theory from Improvisational Composition

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This paper is an inquiry into a movement learning theory, *Accessing Embodied Imagination*, developed through my dissertation research. Examination of the research focus—the relationship between movement improvisation and embodied learning—through the intellectual traditions of experiential learning, improvisation, and reflection showed a lack of theory development. *Accessing Embodied Imagination* posits a movement learning sequence that builds on constructivist and experiential learning theories. This educational research, grounded in transdisciplinary study of experiential education and the arts, supports best and promising dance education practice.

The focus of my doctoral research was the relationship between movement improvisation and embodied learning. The grounding for this transdisciplinary focus was my work of 20 years as a dance teaching artist/educator with students and teachers from more than 600 school communities in urban, suburban, and rural settings in the metropolitan New York area and England. During the same time I also worked as a dancer, choreographer, and dance teacher in various socioeconomic and cultural contexts in the US and Latin America, including Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru. I noticed a theme emerging while I was working with learners and teachers in a) PreK-12 public and private school settings and with adult learners and teachers in b) amateur/avocational, c) professional/vocational dance, and d) higher education contexts in the US, England, and Latin America. I observed that movement improvisation and the opportunity to engage with creativity and a creative learning process are transformative for learners and teachers participating as collaborative learners. This observation provided the impulse for my research and interest in developing movement learning theory from improvisational composition.

Within communities of PreK-12 practice I often observe practitioners asking the purpose of theory. The purpose of this observation is not to engage the well documented differences in perspective regarding PreK-12 and higher education approaches to theory, practice, and construction of knowledge. In this paper, I am defining theory as knowledge construction providing a framework for understanding grounded in research. In grounded theory research, construction of knowledge is grounded in, and arises from, practice. According to Creswell, “The centerpiece of grounded theory research is the

development or generation of a theory closely related to the context of the phenomenon being studied.”¹

The transdisciplinary review that I conducted of the intellectual traditions of embodied knowledge, experiential education and learning, improvisation, and reflection and reflective practice and methods revealed that embodied knowledge is an under-theorized domain.² The review also indicated a lack of theory development regarding improvisation across knowledge fields and domains, including the arts and dance. The *Accessing Embodied Imagination* movement learning theory is grounded in my work as a dance and movement artist and educator using improvisation within a transdisciplinary context of experiential education and the arts.

Embodied knowledge is often misunderstood and undervalued in Western and especially U.S. culture. Experiential learning is not just learning by doing, but also incorporates reflection and reflective practice and methods as a critical component of the experiential learning process. Reflective responses to learning through movement are important—whether verbal or nonverbal—because they can help make known the meaning of an experience for the learner. In an increasingly competitive PreK-12 curriculum emphasizing standardized language and math testing, cultivating reflective responses to dance and movement learning experiences is given short shrift, if considered at all.

The *Annual Arts in schools Report 2007-2008* released by the New York City Department of Education indicates that 8% of New York City elementary schools “reported providing annual instruction” in all four arts forms, i.e., visual arts, music, theater, and dance.³ Four percent of high schools reported offering a three or five-year sequence of dance learning.⁴ While New York State Education

Department Requirements “with the force and effect of law” are included as appendix 1 of the report, there is no indication of the percentage of New York City public schools meeting the State Education Requirements for arts and dance education.⁵ There are also no data regarding the frequency, scope, curricular focus and pedagogical approaches for the arts and dance education that are provided.

There are some data on the Department of Education’s compliance with the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Act.⁶ However, there is no other differentiation of demographic data on a) cultural heritage and socioeconomic status of students receiving arts and dance education or b) special needs learners, such as students who are: disabled; English language learners; using English as a second language; gifted and talented; homeless and in foster care; living beneath the poverty line, as indicated by participation in federal free and reduced cost meal programs; recent immigrants; and special education students. Nor does the New York City Department of Education provide data on the use of reflection and reflective practice and methods connected with arts and dance teaching and learning in the New York City public school system, the largest in the US. These kinds of data would support best and promising dance education practices, including learner-centered constructivist, differentiated learning, and culturally responsive approaches.

Despite or perhaps because of these gaps and absences, public funders support arts and dance programs in New York City’s public schools during the school day. Rigorous arts- and dance-in-education programming in New York City public schools during the school day is supported through the New York State Council on the Arts Empire State Partnerships program.⁷ Support is also available through an annual competitive funding process for arts and cultural organizations performing services that benefit the New York City public, including public school communities through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs—“the largest funder of culture” in the US, according to Commissioner Kate D. Levin.⁸

Nonetheless, New York City public schools are not able to achieve legislated New York State education mandates for the number of hours (if not the full scope, sequence, and implicit quality) of public education in the arts and dance that every child who attends publicly funded schools in the state of New York is entitled to.⁹ The National and New York State Learning Standards and the New York City Department of Education *blueprints for Teaching and Learning in the Arts* have created a place within curriculum development discourse among educators

and provide support for a permanent place for the arts in public education.¹⁰⁻¹² However, these critical frameworks do not ensure enforcement of mandates for arts education that exist by legislation as law, but not, yet, in actual practice.

Conventional wisdom says that principals generally drive the arts that appear in their PreK-12 schools, with or without direct parental support. The development of the *blueprints for Teaching and Learning in the Arts* also indicates substantive support from the New York City arts and arts-in-education fields through both organizations and individuals dedicated to PreK-12 arts and dance in education.¹³ The purpose of providing this socio-political context for my research is not to examine how and why the arts and dance appear or do not appear sufficiently or equitably as learning and teaching modalities in the New York City or other U.S. public schools. Nor is the purpose to analyze the relationship of funding realities to programmatic desires. However, funding for the arts and dance in education is a critical issue to note since, without financing, arts and dance programming in public schools disappears.¹⁴

New York City Department of Education and private foundation leaders have made assurances that the arts have been re-institutionalized in the New York City public schools that had been systemically eviscerated for at least a generation after the economic downturn of the 1970s. However, conversations with executive and education directors of New York City arts education organizations and Department of Education principals indicate significantly lower funding in school budgets for the arts over the past year of economic decline (i.e., 2008-2009) than in recent years. Hopefully this shift is not an indication of a less secure future for rigorous arts and dance teaching and learning in the New York City public school school day than for other mandated and tested curricular areas.

Despite the gap between educational legislation and the practice of arts and dance education in New York State and City, experiential learning approaches through the arts and dance provide benefits for learners and especially for those who learn most effectively through nonverbal, experiential, and kinesthetic practice and methods. These benefits include placing the learner at the core of an embodied learning experience, increasing opportunities for multidimensional achievement and excellence, and enhancing the learner’s ability to take responsible action towards self, others, and society.

Constructivist and experiential learning theories position meaning making created by the learner as a result of action as critical to what defines learning.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

Experiential and constructivist approaches suggest, if not require, a conscious shift from pedagogies rooted in hierarchical, colonial, and neocolonial authoritarian world views. Two examples of educational practice and methods that support the social construction, acceptance, and perpetuation of authoritarianism follow.

One example is the “banking model” of depositing knowledge into the student, critiqued by Brazilian educator and social theorist Paulo Freire.¹⁷ The second is the demagogic dance teaching and rehearsal practices rooted in abusive hierarchic relationships between choreographer/interpreter and teacher/student that dance scholar Robin Lakes critiques as part of the Western and US concert dance legacy.¹⁸ As Lakes makes explicit, authoritarianism in dance teaching is not learner-centered, holistic, or mindful and respectful of the depth of learning possible, as is the lens of “reform educational” thinking.¹⁹ Such approaches are abusive and teacher-, leader-, and “expert”-oriented. Authoritarian pedagogical stances do not cultivate or encourage multiple perspectives, higher-order critical thinking, or self-reflection, reflexivity, and authentic self-knowing on the part of the learner.

Considering the purposes of education in a democratic society and the reasons for making learning experiences available in the arts, dance, and creativity in public and independent schools and studios, colleges, and universities in the US, educational philosopher Maxine Greene demands of us an interest “in human freedom, in the capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise.”²⁰ An education grounded in best and promising practices in and through the arts, dance, and creativity might then seem a necessity and not a luxury, i.e., a disposable commodity whether the nation, state, or city are experiencing good or bad economic times. Such an education would seem critical when imagining an enlivened US citizenry capable of acting in socially responsive, rather than primarily self-serving and logocentric, consumerist ways. Such an education employing best and promising practices in and through the arts, dance, and creativity would also include practice and methods for learners to reflect on their lifelong learning experiences and the ways in which their actions impact themselves, others, and the world.

The Accessing Embodied Imagination theory posits “a non-logo-centric learning sequence that includes moving freely in frontal-bipedal binary space, then thinking about one’s experiences through multimodal reflection. Frontal-bipedal binary space is phenomenological space experienced in 3-dimensionality.”²¹ Interdisciplinary approaches drawing on biology, cognitive science, consciousness studies, creative arts therapies and somatics, philosophy, and psychology provide theoretical

support for unifying the Cartesian mind/body divide by situating cognition throughout the body.²² Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s paleoanthropological thesis of the relationship between hominid thinking and evolution supports the theoretical basis for kinesthetic thinking.²³ “Movement improvisation emerges as the central effect and concept of defining frontal-bipedal binary space by moving freely in it.”²⁴ Accessing Embodied Imagination is a theoretical framework for understanding movement improvisation connected with use of reflection and reflective practice and methods as a way to support all learners, including those with experiential, kinesthetic, nonlinear, and nonverbal learning styles.

The methods of inquiry for my doctoral study included a pilot study with second and third graders and the main study with fourth graders in the same New York City public school a year later. The mixed theoretical framework drew on constructivist, transdisciplinary, and qualitative-artistic approaches. Data collection included verbal and nonverbal sources, including videotaped pre-intervention and post-intervention nonverbal-kinesthetic assessments with 21 movement indicators, questionnaires, interviews, dance journal writing, and field notes. Crystallization, rather than triangulation, of data analysis built on the work of Valerie J. Janesick.²⁵ I adapted the nonverbal assessment with individual autistic children of movement therapists William Freeman and Dianne Dulicai for use with a classroom of general education students.²⁶⁻²⁷

My study generated theory and makes evident that best dance education practices include use of improvisation connected with reflection and reflective practice and methods. All learners then acquire access to increased opportunities for enjoyment of, satisfaction from, and demonstrated academic achievement through their movement learning experiences. These are experiences that contribute to learners’ abilities to develop improvisational skills that an increasingly complex world demands.

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