

Letters / Comments

Lost Dance Research, Found New Hubris

In his keynote address at the Dancing in the Millennium Conference (Washington, D.C., July 2000), venerable modern dancer Murray Louis spoke of “values, about continuity, and the difference between what’s important and what’s intrinsic... With all our effort to expand the scope of dance, we must be careful not to lose the beginnings of that scope because we have already begun to dim those early lights.” His comments apply to dance scholarship. Reputable academic disciplines have a heritage researchers recognize, if only to challenge. Disciplines grow through borrowing, but not misusing, the theories and methods of others.

Permit me to respond to some of the dangers of losing our past and freely borrowing others’ theories and methods. These issues have been percolating in dance presentations, hallway discussions, classrooms, and publications. Why talk about “charting new directions of inquiry hitherto unexplored,” “radical shifts in research,” and “thoroughness in a scholarly field” without knowing the extant corpus of work? Why do many dance professors tell graduate students only to “look at literature of the last decade”? How can one know another person’s dance experience by reporting one’s own kinesthetic embodied practice of it? What are the limits of dance notation?

Astonishing “Innovation.” Who in the last ten years has replaced Martha Graham, Alwin Nikolais, George Balanchine, Plato, the Bible, or Einstein? To read that x has not been done when, in fact, x has been done very well years ago astonishes. To extend knowledge in a particular domain requires first knowing the state of knowledge (see,

e.g., references in Fleshman 1986), often not on the Internet. To cite reviews of the literature of a specific domain of dance as “excellent” and “thorough” without having read, digested, and analyzed the literature, noting omissions and erroneous statements, is problematic. What are the criteria for literature that provides the baseline for new work? To speak of African American dance, should scholars have familiarity with dances in Africa—more than a thousand different language groups and that many dance-pattern constellations? (See Hanna 1987; Dagan 1997). A half-century of theory, method, research findings, and analyses have been lost to many contemporary dance scholars. Moreover, fieldwork data can be reinterpreted.

Some researchers claim innovation with so-called “new” (around for twenty years or so) poststructuralist, postcolonialist, and postmodern methodologies that purport to unmask power relations inscribed on the dancing body or reveal fusions of different dance traditions. Related concepts that often appear as mere buzzwords include reflexivity, hegemony, globalization, multiple perspectives/truths, embodiment, and writing and rewriting the body. But since the 1920s numerous anthropologists contributed a substantial literature on dance dealing with these issues. “Old” scholars such as J. Clyde Mitchell (1956) examined how dance reflects and influences culture and social structure within a political arena of colonized and colonizer as well as tradition and change. He showed how dance embodied ethnicity, social class, and aspirations to new identity. Too often researchers assert race, sex, and politics without providing evidence. Moreover, what one person calls racism,

another may see as a person's bad manners toward everyone. Note that the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States challenge the postmodern and postcolonial rejection of ethical judgment and espousal of relativism.

Much current research gives mere lip service to idioms of trendy theories. Theories should direct a scholar's search and help to explicate research observations. Disparaged by some investigators for being static and stifling, theory usually requires less dismissal than rejuvenation in response to data, such as the voices of informants and objective measures of dance and related activity. Appropriation of theory and methods from other disciplines is enriching. However, African, American, Asian, black, critical theory, cultural, dance, feminist, literary, multicultural, and performance studies, and others, have claimed, for example, the mantle of anthropology but often not its standards. Anthropologists state their sources: how many people they observed and interviewed and how representative these people are of a group. Anthropologists recognize what historical documents they investigated. Anthropology indicates that fieldworkers are not neutral, invisible conduits mechanically recording "facts" and "truths" with objective, ideological neutralism. Ways of questioning can bias answers. Reflexivity to expose personal motives, emotions, and beliefs creates the context for the pursuit of "truths" and an account that allows the reader to understand the researcher's position in it. Viewing dance as communication, anthropologists show the relationships between movement and meaning. Anthropologists' task in translating into words the experience of their own or others' dance encompasses the movement (text) and the surrounding spaces (context, including history); they then seek comment on their translation from the people they study, and revise as appropriate.

Sensual Knowledge. Contemporary dance research recognizes sensual epistemologies, a corporeal mode of knowing, and mind/body integration of cognition, feeling, and emotion that constitute realities for both performers and perceivers. However, researchers who use their own bodily movement experience as if it were that of another person's dance to describe the way sensation is organized and felt by that person is speculative, narcissistic, and ethnocentric. Everyone carries a distinct repertory of biological characteristics, cultural understandings, and beliefs.

Yet reliance on an informant's verbal exegesis alone for description and analysis may preclude understanding a people's dance. The language of dance is nonverbal and not always easily translatable into words—many features of dance generally lie beyond the conscious awareness of dancers and viewers—but movement analysts are familiar with the elements comprising dance. Krebs (1975), in a valuable approach followed by other researchers, used film playback of Thai dance for Thai informants to elicit meaning. However, even when an informant comments on dance, it may be difficult to know what actually is being said: words often have multiple meanings; things taken for granted may not be articulated; lies, rationalizations, jokes, and metaphors are possibilities. Like poetry, dance is often layered with many meanings, and like a Rorschach inkblot test, each person interprets dance on the basis of individual experience, situation, and culturally influenced perception. To discover a culture's perspectives on dance, how many people does one ask? (See Hanna 1983 on different perceptions of emotion.)

When a group does not have articulated aesthetic views about its dance culture, the researcher's intervention in trying to elicit articulation rather than observe activity may

trigger a new concept that is the researcher's artifact. If a group does not analyze the dance it performs, a researcher must then rely on the disciplinary heritage in a scholarly field, even though it may be ethnocentric. The analytic categories, however, should be viewed as open-ended and alterable in light of new theory and research.

Dance Recording. Using notation in the field also has problems. Seeing is creating meaning, and even highly trained movement analysts may variously perceive, interpret, and notate a dance. Accurate and speedy notation of a dance in its field context is nearly impossible because some dances may be performed only once during a research visit, and some dancers may be unable or unwilling to replicate a performance. Film and video make actions more objectively accessible and permit valid and reliable analysis and reanalysis of detailed units of movement in slow motion (see Hanna 1989), especially when viewed through a grid-marked lens. Of course, film is not palpably three-dimensional, and there is selectivity in what is filmed and how. Consequently, an ideal situation would involve several cameras to obtain different perspectives and samples of time and place.

Dance research requires competence in movement analysis, but one can learn the concepts of a notation system without using the notation itself. Articulating movement analysis allows the broader dissemination of dance research. But, "How will a simple notation which is sophisticated in the interpretation of form account for the empirical content of ... a dance?" asks Layiwola (1999, 104). He faults Western notation for being unable to deal with empathy and story line, as I found when I began my fieldwork in 1962 among the Ubakala Igbo of Nigeria.

Although tools existed to analyze the physical movements of dance, for example, the Laban, Benesh, and Eskhol notation sys-

tems, no tool existed for probing for meaning in the movements. In response to this need, I developed a semantic grid to serve as a tool for creating and discovering meaning in movement. The grid, which evolved through the efforts of numerous dancers and researchers attempting to make sense of dances in different parts of the world, represents a broad canvas of possible ways in which dancers embody the imagination. The grid's concepts helped to shape my analyses of dance movement in studies of gender, children, and American theater (e.g., Hanna 1986, 1988, 1989).

Dance in Many Disciplines. Dance research is conducted by scholars in many academic disciplines whose members may not attend dance research conferences or publish in dance journals. Fragmentation and change within these disciplines further extends the palette of theories, methods, and data of dance. To be a viable discipline, then, dance must respond to major developments in other disciplines. Dance departments cannot fully encompass the theory and method of all disciplines related to dance research topics. But when a dance researcher uses another discipline's theory or method, is the work accountable to its standards? Are divergences explained? Collaborative research is an approach to achieve excellence recognized by the discipline of dance and other related disciplines.

Of course, the big question is what do we want to know? For example, how do dances come about to communicate effectively? How do the processes differ in various cultures? What are career motivations and restraints to becoming a dancer? How does the role of the critic impact choreographers, dancers, companies, and audiences? In dance, how does the mind work in body and context? How can a company appeal to diverse audiences? What happens to the dancers and spectators in a performance?

How does dance mark various personal and group identities? An interrelated question to what do we want to know is what difference would the answer make to the advancement of knowledge? Then one links the question to the theory, methodology, and method of the discipline(s) most relevant to seeking the answer.

There are quests for a fundamental understanding and for solving problems. The question is how can what you want to investigate be carried out so that the contributions to fundamental understanding are as large as possible? Another key question is how can you situate dance research so that it contributes to practice, such as better choreography, dance training, health, education, and the public appreciation of dance?

Ultimately, we want to know more about the researched than the researcher. Notwithstanding some of my observations and concerns, I am delighted with the vibrant explosion of dance research articles and books; *CORD* and *Dance Research Journal* came into being because there were so few. But reputable academic disciplines recognize their roots and offshoots upon which knowledge grows and develops. The effort to be at the forefront and recognized as first to do something in “dance” at the expense of being wrong and superficial does not advance knowledge. Rigorous work is needed to combat the rhetoric of innovation and cutting edge against the backbone reality of continuity.

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