The Photopoetics of Dance in Education: “Dance is like painting a picture with your body.”

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This document presents one artist/researcher/teacher’s way of working with photography in dance as an arts elective course in secondary school education in Burnaby, B.C., Canada, to show meanings that students make of the experience. It expands the concept of literacy in education to include dance as an important bodily expressive, visual spatial literacy. By integrating the technologies of digital cameras, digital editing and presentation software into the dance curriculum students have been able to “see themselves while being seen” [1] This work seeks to expand understanding of the educational significance of what it means to dance in schools.

Keywords: dance education, arts education, photopoetics, arts based qualitative research, secondary education, photography, dance, technology, a/r/tography

Photo 1 “I feel like I am part of something magical, something unique and interesting” (Katrina, 2011).

1. Introduction

Dance is not well understood for its place in secondary education as a fine arts elective course. Receiving an official B.C. Ministry of Education curriculum for dance in this province in 1996 (Gr. 8 – 10) and in 1998 (Gr. 11-12) means that dance has been last to arrive in fine arts departments as an elective arts course and may quite possibly be a fragile first arts elective course to go in any given round of government funding cutbacks to education. Dance is a ‘loaded’ word in North American society where understandings of it have been socially and culturally constructed to represent multiple meanings and purposes that can interfere with the educational value of dance in schools. This paper will elaborate upon the educational context of dance as a fine arts core elective course. As a dance education specialist working in the public school system, I seek to promote understanding of the important ways that dance educates and to show the meanings that students make of their dance experience in secondary school.

Secondly, I will elaborate upon my use of technology within the dance class. During a three week unit in December each year, I combine student photography and text as photopoetics to provide the opportunity for students to creatively express their thoughts and feelings about their dance experience in school. This work integrates the technologies of digital cameras, digital editing computer software and programs such as Moviemaker and Photostory 3 to create slide shows and movies of student dance photography juxtaposed with student generated reflections in poetic and narrative text form. It is an opportunity for meanings to emerge for students that synthesize their learning in dance class since the beginning of term.

Additionally, this work expands the concept of literacy within the public school curriculum beyond the traditional textual literacy that has dominated educational thinking in schools up to the present time. It is an attempt to find new ways to “capture the creative interplay of intelligence, emotion, somatic experience, and verbal and nonverbal symbol
systems at work in dance” [2]. It promotes dance as a welcome newcomer on the fine arts scene in developing this important bodily expressive, visual and spatial realm of literacy.

Finally, as a piece of arts based qualitative research, photopoetics illuminates the qualities of the experience in an artistically evocative way to represent student voice about the dance experience that students have in secondary education in Burnaby, B.C., Canada.

2. Educational Context

When considering the purpose of teaching dance in education, it serves us well to align with basic goals of education. Dance studios are dance businesses that specialize in teaching styles of dance and they do this well. Usually they require payment for instruction and are often involved in competitions and performances that require a high level of technical expertise and skill.

Our mandate in public education is to teach dance to a diverse population in inclusive ways where success is attainable to each individual, regardless of income or lack thereof, learning or behaviour difficulties, English language mastery or English as a second language and to every range of physical ability that exists in a typical public school setting. Occasionally, students are placed in dance class when there is no other elective option available to them. They need to have the opportunity to be as successful as anyone else is in class and as such are captive participants. Regardless of any one of these factors, we teach to the developmental needs of the whole child; namely to their emotional, cognitive, social and physical developmental needs. Dance education teachers help “students create meaning and understanding of their lives in the present and imagine possibilities for their lives in the future” [3].

The relatively recent appearance of dance in the fine arts curriculum has brought with it the need to understand its position there. As well, it is important to better understand the experience of girls who dance and of boys who dance. “The Western European cultural paradigm situates dance as primarily a ‘female’ art form, and has done so since the sixteenth century” [4]. While very few people ever question girls motivation to dance, boys who dance are often questioned for doing so. Dr. Doug Risner is an Associate Professor of Dance, at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, whose writings have significantly helped me to understand the experience of the boys who dance in my classes. He writes, “Illuminating the experiences of boys and young males in dance education provides an important vehicle for researchers interested in exposing dominant notions about masculinity, gender, privilege, sexual orientation and the body”[5]. He reminds us not to cling to outdated stereotypical myths about boys who dance, but to get close to and come to know the experience of those boys who do dance in our classes.

I have twenty three boys in a program of one hundred and fifty students. They are lively, energetic, creative, confident and happy about their choice to dance in a secondary school dance program and many of them would never otherwise have this opportunity to dance. This photography project has provided me with the opportunity to get to know more about the experience of these boys who dance in my program. It has also provided an opportunity for boys to express thoughts and feelings about themselves in the dance program that are unique to our setting. By sharing the following image and text with me I was able to reframe my understanding of this boy’s love of dance and to better support his learning thereafter.

Photo 2 “I have always loved to dance. When I saw dance offered I signed up immediately” (Stu, 2009).
3. The Photography Project

All dance research must be grounded in movement [6] and as a teacher I think this is happening with my students after one term of dance experience. This includes a full preparation cycle leading up to our first term studio performance. After a full term of learning new concepts and technique and important community building as a class group, then I believe students are ready to engage artistically in aesthetic reflection about the meaning of the dance experience to themselves. Photopoetics values the physical development of dance, and is grounded upon a richly active dance experience. In this work, I seek to draw out some of the cognitive, emotional and social meanings that exist in the learning of dance in an educational setting when it has existed first as an active bodily felt experience. Students are invited to create images in a dance framework [7] while experiencing the world in an artful manner in a project that has both cognitive and affective qualities; where cognition is informed by sentient modalities [8].

In this study, participants have a twofold function when they act as dancers being photographed and as dancers photographing fellow dancers. The relationship between the two is a collaborative one with a shared power relationship. It is agreed that the ownership of the photograph belongs primarily to the dancer whose image it is. Of secondary importance is the ownership of the photograph as an artistic creation by the photographer. This negotiation between student dancers and dance student photographers honors the intimacy and privacy that people feel about their own bodies. The subject of the photograph has the final say about what images will be kept. In this way, photopoetics contrasts the historical role of researcher/photographers. This study of photopoetics places significance upon the artistic collusion of students framing their own worlds as creative inquiry between peers.

Photo 3 “When I see this photo of myself, I feel strong... like a statue” (Chiara, 2010)

My contribution to this work as a teacher lies in the belief that by presenting student voice about the meaning of the dance experience that I affirm students’ experiences as learners. The freedom of artistic autonomy is where “a space of freedom opens before the person moved to choose in the light of possibility; she or he feels what it signifies to be an initiator and an agent, existing among others but with the power to choose for herself or himself” [9].

This sense of autonomy, and the artistic freedom of choice and selection, acts in empowering ways for all students but particularly for those who ordinarily are silenced in schools because they are not strong visually literate learners or because they are not accepted by mainstream prejudices to conform. Students who are in some way ‘other’ find space in this activity to breathe and come alive through art. Photopoetics invites them to “say of what you see in the dark” [10]. As research it offers up data that is one glimpse of understanding about student voice in dance in education. Therefore, photopoetics is teacher inquiry into student meanings of the dance experience they have in schools that seeks to show the educational value of dance as an art form by presenting the freshness of student voice through the lively interplay of visual imagery, poetics and performance. Photopoetics is one form of representation that contributes to Elliot Eisner’s (2002) call for ‘multiple forms of representation’ [11] of the arts in qualitative arts based research.

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4. Photopoetics

Photopoetics helps develop understanding of the ways that dance educates. As well, it provides documentation of an experience that is difficult to capture. The experience of dancing is a fleeting one. Once the dance has been danced, it is over. There is no tangible evidence left behind much to savour. Like a shape shifting taste on the tongue, the inside out, slippery essence of dance dissipates quickly once it is over. Taking photographs of dance creates an artefact of the dance experience that exists beyond the moment of the dance. By lingering artistically on the photographs of that dance like experience, and talking and writing about the photographs; students are able to integrate a variety of skills and technologies to extend learning about their visceral dance experience.

Photo 4 “Dancing is like painting a picture with your body” (Kylie, 2011)

Photo 4 is an example of how a beginning dancer was able to create this artful image of herself. Through the combination first of starting with a relatively ordinary photograph, and then using computer technology to edit it and further adding her own poetic text to the image she was able to create a meaningful artistic statement about her learning in dance class. Her artistic editing choices match her sense of herself and it creates a statement about her understanding of dance as a visual spatial expressive art form.

One of the things I love about this project is that it works well for the wide ranging and diverse mix of students that we teach in public education settings. Invariably, each class has one or two studio trained dancers in it with a higher level of technique and physical flexibility than other students have in the class. The larger portion of enrolment in our dance classes is typically comprised of beginning dancers who have never tried dance or never been able to afford private training.

Photo 5 is an example of how one beginner received a socio-emotional boost in self-esteem when he saw himself as a dancer for the first time. This happened when he saw how another student had edited this photograph of him.

Photo 5 Dance Student Artist Statement: “When I first saw this photo I was amazed. It looked like I was floating somehow in the air. I like the strong lines and angles of my body in the air. I honestly never thought that I looked this good dancing! I was surprised” (Jeff, 2009)

Dance Student Photo Editor: “I used a soft focus effect and softened the edges of the concrete in this photo so it is almost impossible to tell that he is sitting on a wall!” (Stu, 2009)
Happy accidents occur with student photographers once in awhile. I suspect that there was no intent behind the taking of photo 6. In fact, it very well could be one of those photographs where the shutter was inadvertently pushed. When the subject of this photograph saw it however, she stated how much she liked it. This image represented meaning for her as you can see from the choice of poetic text that accompanies her photograph. This photograph held emotional significance for her, perhaps in describing feelings that she had about herself or about a circumstance in her life. The meaning that is made of a photograph must be significant to the student as can be seen here in order to provide a transformative, meaningful learning experience for them.

Photo 6 “sad, frustrated... angry” (Thea, 2010)

Photo 7 provided Katey with the opportunity to manipulate this photograph creatively by consciously playing with editing software. She explains her thinking behind the cognitive artistic choices she made to edit her photograph.

Photo 7 “I thought my hair looked crazy and so I deliberately distorted the background to match the feeling of craziness that I saw” (Katey, 2009)

Photo 8 is gently evocative, soft, delicate and fleeting. It has social meaning for the two girls whose shadows are in the photograph. Best friends since grade school, they have a few months left until their graduation. The meaning is subtle but significant to these two learners.
Some dancers talk about the shift in thinking regarding their physical technique after seeing a photograph of them. They are able to make judgements about their progress that is not reliant upon looking in the mirror or receiving comments from other people. They know how a movement feels from the inside but when they see photographs of themselves in that position they receive a different kind of feedback than usual in dance class.

The prospect of bringing ‘visibility’ to the dance education experience has been of fundamental importance to my way of thinking about this process. I teach dance to secondary dance students “within the confines of a mirror-lined box all day long” [11]. What happens behind the closed door of the dance studio is not known to others. The position of dance as a fine arts elective course is in a fragile position because it is new and because it is not well understood. The students and I work with Moviemaker and Photostory 3 to create slideshows and movies of our photographic work and dance movie clips together. When the photographs are viewed singly, one wonders about individual meanings but once the images have been strung together into a slideshow or movie, something vibrant begins to happen. A sense of imaginative poetic story appears about the student experience. The combination of one class of thirty students collective work pieced together is rich with multiple meanings for viewers including students and others.

Dance is an artistic medium for students to better understand themselves and the world around them in a bodily way. This work seeks to increase the visibility of dance in a visual way through the documentation of photography. It is hoped that the viewing of artistic representations of the experience creates a dynamic moment that will cause people to shift their beliefs to understand the student experience and its significance to their learning. It seeks increased
understanding of the place of dance in an educational setting so that it will continue to be funded and supported by all levels of community involvement. By juxtaposing student visuals and poetics through performance, it is a way of knowing the world and also of having the world know dance. Photopoetics reminds us as we engage in exploring "unfolding landscapes that twist in sudden gusts of recognition" [12] of the way we began in the world as embodied.

5. Expanding the Concept of Literacy in education.

The Quebec Centre for Literacy defines literacy as a complex set of abilities needed to understand and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture – alphabets, numbers, visual icons - for personal and community development. The nature of these abilities, and the demand for them, vary from one context to another [13]. This is a new literacies perspective that recognizes that one single way of explaining literacy as the ability to read alphabetic text no longer serves the needs of a complex and rapidly changing society. Henri Giroux holds that we should view the world as a text (1992). The New London Group (1996) defines multiliteracies as a set of open-ended and flexible multiple literacies required to function in diverse contexts and communities” [14]. This new concept of literacies considers critical literacy to be a component part of all literacies so that people can indeed negotiate the complexities of acquiring literacies in a changing world.

Body signage is read in dance, sometimes based upon codified dialects of movement and other times perceptually, instinctively and perhaps subconsciously absorbed. Various viewers decode their own meanings that lead to a range of interpretations. When the meanings are shared new understandings are socially constructed [15]. “Literacy, given this view of the world, means that we engage not only with what is contained in the library (conventional notions of reading), but also with what is in the art gallery (the making and interpretation of art), in the street (popular culture and student experience)”[16], and in the dance studio creating and interpreting photopoetic dance inquiry. This expands the concept of literacy in schools beyond an ability to read written text to include visual spatial bodily expressive literacy as another way to read the world. Dance is an expressive literacy with significant potential in education to make vivid the fact that words do not, in their literal form or number, exhaust what we can know. The limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition [17].

6. Research Methodology

“We name things and then we can talk about them” and that is the way that Ludwig Wittgenstein described the first essential step of identification and definition of thinking philosophically about an idea [18]. And so, I have named my curiosity photopoetics, as a way of seeking answers to that which I wonder about dance in education. Photopoetics embraces photography and narrative poetics in a mutally exclusive performative way to present student voice about the meaning of the dance experience to secondary students in schools. This vision of photopoetics belongs to the family of a/r/tography [19] (artist/researcher/teacher, UBC, B.C, Canada) in its intent to represent human educational artistic experience and to be open to artistic interpretation. It is not the intent of photopoetics to provide evidence of the real world, but rather to provide opportunities for artistic interpretations of it.

At the same time, it is informed by social science methodologies because photopoetics shares commonalities with photo journalism, ethnography and visual anthropology. As a teacher, I am collaborating with students in the production of visual representations. The difference between social sciences and a/r/tography is that a/r/tography seeks to open up spaces of inquiry through art, allows for contiguous connections and relishes the providing of opportunities for multiple interpretations of meaning whereas traditional social science methodologies are more often concerned with rigour and analysis. Photographicnography depends upon rules of sampling and data collection whereas photopoetics seeks to show through artful creative inquiry how an artistic collection of student work, whose primary significance exists as student learning, has important meanings about dance for students in education.

Photopoetics, in this study, is situated within the field of dance education research because student photography and student poetics have been combined to present student voice about the dance experience that students have in a fine arts elective subject in secondary school. Dr. Liora Bressler notes that in the past 40 years the individual arts have situated themselves within Arts Faculties that work to support each other. An outcome of this is that we are "increasingly witnessing the generation of innovative artwork with mixed forms of representation, where the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic combine to create new types of art. The individual arts have maintained their distinctive identities while serving to 'cross-fertilize' each other [20] when photography and poetics fuse to become photopoetics.

My range of educational perspectives include: visual literacy as part of the expanded concept of multiple literacies [21], creativity and imagination, dance as arts education, teacher inquiry and the presentation of student voice. Theoretical underpinnings include phenomenology, embodiment, a/r/tography, performative inquiry, narrative poetic inquiry, and visual ethnography. Photopoetics is a mode of teacher inquiry in the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition that is interpretivistic in nature because it seeks to interpret and "study the direct (dance) experience” that students have in schools “as it is experienced in its felt immediacy [22].

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7. Conclusion

Perhaps you can see from the photographs presented in this paper that meanings emerge from the photopoetic representations between the “seen and the seer” [23] that are somewhat visually fresh when compared with typical popular media presented adult dance photography. These student representations are not saturated with the iconic blatancy of popular media. Student learning about dance in an educational setting is validated. This creates a body of work about student bodies in a dynamic of peer relationship. Students learn to appreciate the creativity, imagination and artistic sensibilities of their own work. Student culture is made visible through the creation of photopoetic images.

Students now walk into the dance studio and pass by the dance magazine rack in the corner to pick up collections of student photographs to browse through. They are learning more about themselves and each other by choosing to dwell for awhile upon the artistic photopoetic images of their own bodies documented. The integration of technology through the use of digital cameras and photo editing and presentation software has enhanced the meaning making potential of the dance experience for students. We can talk about the dance experience and we can watch the dance but this photopoetic documentation provides other possibilities to understand the experience of dancing bodies. The meanings made help to create greater understanding of what it means to dance in schools.

References