

The Poetics of Choreography and Dance Pedagogy

By

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Abstract

Dance is generally patterned movements, always changing and with many bright colours: gestures, gaiety, costumes, makeup, etc. It is usually a special set of movements performed to a particular type of music. The poetics of African dance relates to its ability; and as having the qualities, capable of provoking deep feelings and of graceful expression among dancers and audience in terms of its lexis and structure. Therefore, the pedagogy of the African dance poetics reflects the teaching methods employed by the choreographer or the trainee in the process of the study. So dance education or pedagogy is educating the learner through the media of dancing, dance making and dance appreciation. Understanding the knowledge of the manifestation and the history of cultural development relating to that kind of dance will enable quality judgments about the particular dance poetics; that is, how the dance communicates with the performers and the audience, hence the spontaneity amongst spectators alike: without losing the immediacy in the action and storyline in the performance. This study is aimed at exploring the principles of dance poetics as it relates to teaching (choreographer) and general criticism of dance forms and nomenclature. Conversely, modern and contemporary models for teaching dance notation shall be discussed to enhance and development in terms of teaching and learning. The need to incorporate media arts in dance pedagogy was also evaluated and demonstrated as necessary variable in the search for resourceful module in today's dance world. The methodology of research is strictly based on the literary data collection style, with references to books, journals and other internet sources. In the entire process of the research, it was discovered that the teaching of dance can be improved upon and made interesting for both the teachers and students. In conclusion, the paper recommended the teaching of dance pedagogy at all levels with keen understanding; hence, dancing involves a sense of self and connection to the society. Consequently, dance remains as a conduit of expression and communication.

Introduction

Dance is the body rhythmically moving through space and time with energy or effort. A dance form initiates from physical movement, rhythm, content, style, aesthetics, and traditions, mental and spiritual meanings that may be artistic, creative, social, cultural or religious. A dance genre is a class or category of art or dance based on a set of stylistic criteria. Examples of some genre

include ballet, modern dance, jazz, tap dance and hip-hop. A dance form is a subcategory of a genre of dance. Examples of dance forms in the recreational dance genre include line, round, and square dancing. Dance as an art is a conduit of expression and communication; the message and the medium. It provides a structure that can be intricate, precise, casual, or personal through which the dancer expresses movement, style and aesthetics. Whatever role one assumes, the dance is nothing without the dancer and neither can exist without dance poetics and pedagogy.

Without the passing of knowledge of dance from one person to another and from generation to generation, dance could not have survived as a discipline or as an art form. Dance can range from simple, exploratory experiences in an elementary school to professional – level performance in an arts magnet institution. Dance can also be learning folk dances as part of social studies; or it can be a way to integrate the phases of development within community settings, where dancers of all ages participate and perform in artistic or entertainment venues, cultural celebrations, recreational and social occasions, or health and fitness classes as lifelong enrichment.

The discipline of dance concentrates on its processes with performance as the product. The dance processes and the performance experiences educate or teach participants physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually. Ideally, dance pedagogy should begin in early childhood or preschool age. Dance is a discipline of study like other subjects such as science, music, language arts, and physical education. Dance content knowledge centres on different aspects of dance gained through the learning experiences of dancing, dance making, and dance appreciation; dance as a discipline incorporates intrinsic related fields, or other branches of knowledge. This integrated content knowledge supports and enhances dance learning in a cohesive manner to become a holistic educational modality: enhancing the content knowledge of dance. As the world advances, so should dance imbibe the narrative of contemporary orientation especially as it relates to pedagogy of educational capacities to transmit knowledge from generation to generations.

Choreography and the Language of Dance – Pedagogy

Choreography is the art of making dances, the gathering and organization of movement(s) into order and pattern. Most social and recreational dances in Africa are products of long evolution, involving innovations that groups of people or anonymous individuals have brought to traditional forms; steps of dances handed down from one generation to another and subject only to gradual and partial change. Poetically, in the creations of the choreographer, the stimulus may be the desire to express a particular concept or emotion or a fascination with a particular choreographic idea.

Such stimuli may influence the work even if the choreographer is producing it for a specific purpose. A typical choreographic process may be divided for analytical purposes, three phases; gathering together the movement material, developing movements into dance phrases, and creating the final structure of the work. Let us now consider them on their own merits:

- **Movement Gathering;**

The way a choreographer accumulates movement depends on the tradition in which he or she works. They may not strictly follow the traditional structure and sequence of movements passed down to them, but remain faithful to their characteristic styles, retaining the traditional quality of movement and not introducing steps or movements widely different from the original. Sometimes, in Africa choreographers also create a vocabulary and style (lexis and structure) of movements to suite their own personal visions. Although every choreographer draws materials from diverse sources, most dance works of a single choreographer show a characteristic style of movement. One of the most important features of any choreographer's style is the way in which movement material is connected into dance phrases.

- **Developing Movement into Phrases;**

In dance, a phrase can be seen as a series of movements bound together by a physical impulse or line of energy (effort) and having a discernable beginning and end; a rough analogy can be made within the way a singer phrases a multiplicity of notes within a single breath. It may be that one movement flows easily and naturally into another within the phrase and that there are no awkward transitions or there is clearly visible pattern to the movement. Rhythm is also a factor; and movements are often clearly linked by a recognizable pattern of accents. A movement's accent is measured by its force and duration; so, a hard, sharp movement has a strong accent, while a soft, gradual movement has weak one. Dance phrases vary both in length and shape. A phrase may begin with a very forceful movement, or maximum output of energy, that gradually comes to a phrase, or it may have its climax somewhere in the middle or at the end. These factors determine the way in which the phrase is perceived by, and the effect that it produces on the spectators. Once a phrase has been constructed, it can be built into many different ways. Separate dance phrases may also be repeated according to pattern by passing one or more phrases from one dancer to another in canonic form. The principle of theme and variation

works on the same initial dance phrase being repeated in a number of different ways; for example, with different numbers of people, at different speeds, with different styles of movement (jerky or smooth), or with different dramatic qualities (happy or sad). In motif and development, material from within the phrase is developed in new ways; by embellishing it with other movements, by imitating it on a different scale, or by fragmenting it and repeating only small details.

- **Creating the Final Structure;**

Creating the overall structure of the dance can be influenced by the purpose of the dance, among other considerations. The music determines the structure of a dance work too – by its length, its arrangement of fast and slow movements, and its treatment of theme. If the work is to be a narrative piece, the plot will obviously determine the way in which the dance material is to be structured. It may have to follow a strict succession of events, create characters in a particular order, and bring the drama to climax at the proper moments. Conversely, if the dance forms part of a ritual, the material may have to strictly follow sanctioned form and procedure. But structure may also be organic; in other words, an entire dance piece may arise from a continuous development of movement ideas, each movement working off of the movement that came before.

Movement usually develops organically even when the overall structure of the piece is imposed by a plot or piece of music. In the case of narrative ballets, choreographic ideas may develop into formal motifs while still retaining the ability to represent certain actions or situations in the plot. The structure of a dance reflects the tradition in which it is created and performed. That means to say that dance cannot exist in isolation. It requires the human environment for its reflections and creations. Whereas, human environments give birth to human culture, mostly manifesting in dramatic dance forms and patterns; many of whom have been noted by some traditional choreographers.

Understanding Dance Poetics and Pedagogy

In dance pedagogy, theory and practice; we dance to learn from others. According to Warburton notes:

Dance educators face a myriad of questions about what and how, why and who, where and when to teach dance, all of which underscore the socially constructed nature of instruction itself. The unique human capacity to learn from others is what enables complex cultural

knowledge to be faithfully learned and transmitted from generation to generation (81).

Again, Warburton explains:

To learn dance is to experience a wide range of social information and cultural activities. From baby bouncing rhythmically in celebration, to watching a pair of professional dancers in competition; humans experience dancing across the lifespan. To teach dance, on the other hand, is to enculturate the dancer into a world of meanings and movements. Hence, dance educators tend to be concerned with how we learn from one another... activities shape individuals. Individuals shape activities ... This is the circular logic implicit in teaching and learning of dance and its poetics (82).

The aim of this study is to examine important questions and significant trends in dance and education that shape current issues in dance pedagogy, such as on-going concerns around ‘advancing the field’ and defining ‘high quality’ teaching. On its website, the National Dance Education Organization (NDEO), United States) opines:

The art of dance uses movement to communicate meaning about the human experience. It is far more than exercise or entertainment. It is a powerful medium to express one’s values, thoughts, and aspirations about the lives we live and the world in which we live ... Education in the art of dance develops the knowledge and skills required to create, perform, and understand movement as a means of artistic communications (NDEO).

New Directions in Dance Pedagogy

The objective here is to hone in on one activity in dance that offers a common window on how different pedagogical choices might affect behaviour: rehearsal. There is however a kind of rehearsal for all dances destined to be performed as well as improvised works. Moreover, rehearsing also implies teaching and learning. Rudolf Laban’s (1948) movement theories and notational systems observes that, “His prescription for ‘modern educational dance’ favoured the kinaesthetic properties of movement: the bodily actions, shapes and dynamic qualities that make dance a symbolic system in creative human experience”. (29 – 32) According to Dils, “The question revolves around the degree to which notation use can be linked to the development of patterns of thinking that contribute to knowledge acquisition, the formation of key concepts and improved ability to do, make and watch dance”. (95 – 113)

Melchoir notes that, “Multicultural approaches to dance education, on the other hand, reflect a commitment to enacting pedagogies that are centred in cultural practices, especially in communities of colours”. (119 – 135) Hence, dance pedagogy must be responsive and culturally relevant, viewing as assets the languages, literacies and cultural ways of being of the diverse students and communities.

Dance literacy is often taught in a guided discovery style. The teacher develops a series of logically designed questions to give to the dancer who then works through the tasks in sequence, and each answer leads to the next task. Eventually, the dancer comes to realize a predetermined concept and the teacher acknowledges when the correct concepts are discovered. On the other hand, indigenous dance practices are transmitted in a traditional command style, where dancers reproduce a specific set of outcomes on cue.

So, “asking young dancers to participate equally in the process of their own learning and identity development; they will recognize the ways pedagogical content knowledge support artistic practices”. (Wilson, 20 – 26) According to Ophir, “The dancers define with teachers what kind of production to produce, so the reasoning goes, the more they will become themselves and the better artists they will be” (186 – 202).

The arts of dance have a long history of activism, defying norms and challenging authority. Stitzlein contends that, “What seems different is the assertion of a positive right to dissent, student entitlement to training in it and a need for educators to devise pedagogies that cultivate the skills of dissent” (41 – 58). In focusing on the idea of disobedience as a pedagogy strategy, Kotin et al postulates:

Rather than constraining our diverse group of students by requiring them to focus on a single, narrowly defined social justice issue, our open-minded approach equipped young people to strategically and thoughtfully enter into the on-going dynamics of authority, control, obedience, and resistance in their own lives. The result was evocative, changeable performance work that invited audience members to propose their own interpretations and see themselves as actors in the struggles Urbano dancers portrayed. Students came to view their

finished work as a bridge to dialogue ... to provoke and intrigue adults who, in other contexts, might not take them seriously. (199 – 200)

Shulman idea about pedagogical content knowledge, he distinguished three types: pedagogies of uncertainty, pedagogies of engagement and pedagogies of formation. Pedagogy of engagement promotes active, problem-based learning; pedagogy of uncertainty creates a sense of dissonance or curiosity, a need to learn; and pedagogy of formation builds identity and character, dispositions and values, teaching habits of heart and mind because of the power associated with the repetition and routinization of behaviour. During rehearsals, both the teacher and dancers should try to get it right. To do so, the teacher should employ iteration as a surgical instrument, achieving precision through meticulous practice, rather than as a bludgeon to enforce adherence to a standard of perfection or style. The rehearsal strategy should rely on the art of waiting, which can be easily lost in translation and challenging to interpret – through painstakingly rehearsals.

Furthermore, all of the dancers have to receive explicit instructions in how to refine the movement they have been given, often demonstrated by the teacher or choreographer. It is plain; do-as-I-do fashion, that the choreographer knows exactly what he wants. Steady repetition and more repetition using rehearsal processes to get the entire dance lexis and structure – through phrased movements and gestures in collaboration with both teachers and students.

Further Approaches to Dance Pedagogy and Poetics

Bannon argues that “the integration of our physical, intellectual and emotional selves that can occur in learning in dance has been advocated by many theorists and practitioners as essential to understanding the holistic benefits of education in and through dance”.(50) There is no gainsaying that the pedagogical practice of dance education has changed considerably over the years. Dance learning and teaching has traditionally followed a transmission model of teaching, where the students learn by imitating specific movement vocabularies (poetics) modelled by an expert trainer or choreographer.

It is now crystal-clear that “the transformation of dance content knowledge for teaching and learning involves just more than dance technique and control; and that teachers need a wide range of teaching strategies to motivate and engage their students” (Chappell, 39-56). Anu Scoot and Ele Viskus formulated these research questions:

- What are the general development trends and challenges of contemporary dance pedagogy?
- What are currently the essential aims and teaching methods in dance pedagogy?

Consequent upon the above research questions, Anu and Ele provided thus:

i. Dance teacher education in the direction of the holistic model

Holistic dance teacher sees a person in its whole. Everything is in intercommunication; it is a conscious activity of compiling learner's world view. Holistic approach of contemporary fragmented world should be involved with drawing the whole together – uniting the body and the mind, the teaching and the identity, the curriculum and the community, so that they could address the human s a whole. At the same time, the teacher should take into consideration that the whole is comprised of independent valuable parts, and should be able to identify and make constructive use of the real and possible connections between them.

ii. Self – regulation and reflection in learning

Smith–Autard framed dance teaching theoretically by dividing it into three models – the direct teaching on the basis of the old school, the child-centred approach on the basis of problem solution method, and proposed a new middle road method on the basis of both of the methods. As the self-consciousness of contemporary learners has constantly increased, it is not possible for any dance teacher on any level of teaching to apply their own ideas automatically to the bodies and minds of the learners. It is essential to take people's characteristics and the development process of their whole personalities into account. Stinson points:

“Concentration, focus, self-discipline, working hard to achieve a goal, being your own teacher, being fully alive and present, problem solving, making connections, seeing relationships, collaboration, are more important than any dance content we teach.”

(142)

Leijen, Valtna, Leijen and Pedaste observe thus:

Reflection stimulates students' awareness of their body and movement experiences, which is necessary for developing high-quality dance skills ... reflection is essential for the students to learn how the audience may perceive their performance or choreographic work. (204)

Video-based facilitation is also valuable for supporting dance students' reflection activities since it helps teachers to guide their students and opens up new possibilities for students to take more responsibility and ownership in their learning. However, Smith-Autard points out two poles in the aims of dance education – developing dance technical skills on the one hand (acquisition/training of the techniques, dance literacy) and developing creativity (individuality, subjectivity and feelings) on the other hand.

Hence, the viewpoints of Sims & Erwin who notes that:

Dance is a creative art form. The type of thinking fostered in a creative environment can be rich and deep, involving a symbiotic relationship between the mind and the body. When dance teachers expect students only to repeat movements, they underestimate the power of creative learning and the thought processes that can take place. (132)

Therefore, according to Anu and Ele, “Dance is directly linked to the establishing of identity in individuals. Dance teaching cannot be autonomous and separate from general human development. It can only be inter-communicating with the person and the community”. (293)

iii. Somatic approach

The idea of somatic approach is to lead students to their bodies and to teach them to become aware of their special features. It has to result from personal perception of where a movement begins or ends or what kind of impact it has. The aim is to develop, repair and improve one's body. While dance is considered mainly a physical and aesthetic discipline, the somatic approach brings out the cognitive side of the physicality of dance. As dance is definitely a physical and aesthetic discipline, it has become increasingly important to use awareness of his body in learning and in teaching. The role of the teacher is to encourage students to originate from their bodies and its special characteristics.

According to Enghauser, a somatic paradigm for dance teaching and learning should emphasize:

- Sensing, from the inside out, rather than relying on imitational practices.
- Experiential modes of learning, such as improvisation, experiential anatomy, authentic movement, or other strategies.

- Practices that acknowledge and apply a basic cognizance of the sociocultural construction of body.
- A balance of instructional approaches and philosophies, which includes a non-authoritarian, healthy learning environment that challenges each students.
- Fostering the development of each student’s creative, artistic voice in dance.
- Creative problem solving approaches in the learning of technical skills and concepts.
- The discipline of dance as intrinsically motivated mindful practice that stems from empowerment and somatic authority.
- A fervent nurturing of creativity and imagination (88 – 89).

The somatic approach has also been described by the concept of embodied knowing. Chapell explains that:

It is applied to a movement context to articulate the dance teachers’ desire for children to be able to interpret and create using their own bodily movement, and that of others (comparable to the notions of reading and writing using verbally-based languages). This movement literacy was grounded in being able to “sense” movement from within; developing to “thinking physically” as part of a “connected thinking body-mind”; to moving with ‘whole self-awareness’. This was coupled with an emphasis on reciprocity” (4).

Chapell further emphasises that:

This embodied knowledge is significantly connected to the education of aesthetic experience with dance, and plays a crucial role in teaching for creativity in the discipline. Aesthetic knowledge grounded in embodied knowledge might be said to be the glue that binds the intertwining or the connection between personal/collective voice and craft/compositional knowledge. (51)

Again, Enghauser points out that:

There is a rich dialogue yet to ensue between those in the various fields of ecopsychology, ecology, dance movement therapy, somatic

education modalities, dance education, and performers and choreographers as to how to connect self to world to create beauty, wholeness, healing, and to uncover new dimensions of expressing what it means to be human in the most global and essential way (89).

iv. Dance as an art form in relation to dance pedagogy

Bonbright points out that as artists, it is important to understand the content, process, and methodology of creating, performing, and responding to dance as an art form. As educators, they have to understand the content, process, and methodology of developing and delivering curricula, syllabi, and assessments, in addition, they are capable of using the creative process in integrated and interdisciplinary education. Whereas, Sims & Erwin asserts that:

It is a dangerous practice for experienced and talented dancers to become dance teachers without any pedagogical knowledge. Professional dancers have to learn to transform their content knowledge into pedagogical formats suited to the characteristics of the students and settings in which they teach. (138)

v. Forms of co-operation between art forms, the role of new technology and mass media in dance education

Dance education could apply people interested in dance in all accessible and relevant arts (light design, sound design, graphic design, etc.). it enriches the person as well as the art. Risner & Anderson puts it thus:

Like other artistic disciplines, dance now intertwines technological elements in teaching, performance and choreography. By virtue of these technological advances, it has become increasingly important that undergraduate dance students possess and maintain the technological skills and advances currently utilized for creating, producing and documenting creative and scholarly endeavours (113).

vi. Multicultural approach

Contemporary world is far from being mono-cultural. Crossing borders has placed us in multicultural societies and communities that bring along new aspects for every teacher. Melchior reason that the children who experience dance as participants, creators, viewers and critical inquirers, within contexts that are relevant to their own lives, develop confidence in themselves as learners and as contributing members of a group.

vii. Gender and sexuality

Kahlich, Shapiro, Davenport and Evans captured it like this:

In dance, the body is the central issue for creativity, imagination, and curiosity, all posed in a somatic process. Since the body is intimate to both dance and gender, dance education involves gender (thus, sexuality) in its content (the body) and in its process (presentation/performance). (33)

Therefore, the instruments of gender expression are the same as the means of dance expression.

Conclusion

This study has looked at dance and its intricacies especially as it affects poetics, choreography and teaching (pedagogy). In brief, Anu and Ele espoused that:

The role of the teacher of the 21st century is not merely the teaching of dance steps but rather a conscious guidance in a world of different possibilities with the skills of teaching how to dance. Dance is rather a means of gaining one's aim and not an aim in itself. Important aims include the training of a reflective and active teacher, dancer or choreographer, and the support of individual's general development on the background of acquiring dance technical and compositional knowledge and skills. The teaching methods [should] assume a dialogue between teachers and students and openness for the integration of different forms of art. (299)

Dance as an art is a conduit of expression and communication – the message and the medium. It provides a structure that may be intricate, precise, casual, or personal through which the dancer expresses movement, style, and aesthetics. Dance is what entices you as a dancer in a continuous quest for knowledge about yourself in your changing relationship to the dance. So, dance education or pedagogy can transport you from the studio, the gym, or the dance space to the theatre or other performance spaces and on to the larger arenas of life. In dance poetics, choreography and pedagogy, it will be difficult to sustain it without the passing of knowledge of dance from one person to another and from one generation to the next. In the 21st century, dance is gaining recognition as a healthy, lifelong activity that contributes to developing and sustaining the whole individual. Dance has many roles within the parameters of dance education.

Dance continues to educate within community settings where dancers of all ages participate and perform in artistic or entertainment venues, cultural celebrations, recreational and social occasions, or health and fitness classes as lifelong enrichment. Dance provides a wealth of resources, evolving pedagogy, and scholarship that supports learning in many aspects. Hence, exploring dance and its functions in education provides a better perception of the expanse of dance pedagogy.

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