This article explores dance as a way of knowing, inquiry, embodied understanding and, ultimately, what it can mean to think on our feet and get our feet in our thinking.

Dance as a Way of Knowing

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Dance as a Birthright

Dance is our birthright. Movement is knitted into the fabric of our beings, and the very first dance begins in the womb. No one who has had a child in the womb can deny that the first signs of life are the movements and kicks of the child within. We become creatures of extended palms and open chests, contractions and extensions, skips and falls, clenched fists and swaying hips. As children we have what I call a body signature, a dance of our own. Delight is taken in the wind sweeping through limbs, and exhilaration is found in hopping, jumping, dancing on the beach, or just skipping down the street. Uninhibited joy is the mark on the flesh. Until we were habituated otherwise, learning in school was associated with “paying attention,” which was equated with sitting still rather than being deeply engaged.

For example, when one of my sons would be twirling and moving in the kitchen, I would say to him “Listen to me,” as if he couldn’t twirl and listen. And he would say to me, so astutely “Perhaps you can’t multitask anymore, Mom, but I can.” In movement he could inhabit a still mind. I resonate with this as a dancer, a walker, and a swimmer. In movement my mind slows down enough to truly listen—listen to the bold proclamations and the gentle whispers; the ones within and the whispers without.

This article invites the reader to consider dance as a way of knowing. It extends dance to include not only the more formal way one thinks of dance but creative movement, improvisation, and ways of moving that are marked by expressivity. This is particularly important in postsecondary educational settings, where there are a wide variety of backgrounds brought by students through diverse experiences. One cannot take only one class or a
semester, and refine the skills to teach or learn dance in all of its rich forms. It is a lifetime of practice and artistry, not to mention muscular and physical requirements to become adept at any particular discipline. Kinesthetic knowing is central to being human, and the beginning of dance is found in the wide expression of gestural language. While one can lie with one’s lips, it is almost impossible to lie with the body. The body is a place of deep knowing, as Martha Graham, the pioneer modern dancer, so beautifully said many years ago: “Movement never lies. It is a barometer telling the state of the soul’s weather to all who can read it” (1991, p. 4).

**Embodied Knowing**

Cases have been made over and over again for the importance of embodied learning and the connection of mind and body and the importance of somatic learning (Bresler, 2004; Cancienne, 2008; Cancienne and Megibow, 2001; Richmond and Snowber, 2009). I come to this work from various disciplines including arts education, spiritual theology, and poetics, but most significantly my work on dance education draws on my theoretical foundation in curriculum theory (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Malewski, 2009; Pinar, 1994) and the practice of Interplay (Winton-Henry and Porter, 1997, 2004) and my background in dance as embodied prayer (Snowber, 2004).

In this short article, I would like to call to attention the significance of how dance can be a place of inquiry and its generative possibilities for deeper understanding. I have been engaging in a practice with both my students and myself for decades, integrating dance as a way of asking the questions. We dance the questions, we write the questions, and we go back and forth from our limbs and torsos to finding breath in our words on the page. Sensuous knowledge is our map for the journey. We know what we know, but I am curious about what it is we don’t know. How can we be surprised and catapulted into fresh insight and ripe knowing? The paradigm of knowledge in Western culture has been primarily education as an accumulation of knowledge. This volume centers on knowledge as embodied, and I would suggest that embodied knowing is a knowing that we need to desperately recover for the health of the planet.

Dance as a way of knowing investigates dance as a form “beyond the steps” yet includes steps. These steps are not so much left and right, back and forth, stage center, but the steps of recovering a visceral language that has the capacity to connect body, mind, heart, soul, and imaginative thinking. I have spent a lifetime integrating dance and movement within undergraduate and graduate education in a variety of educational programs as a means to access our body knowledge. The context of my teaching is preservice teachers and graduate students in arts education, health education, and ecological education. My passion is to find ways to connect writing from the body, where the words dance, and we can dance our words, and
ultimately the body is let out, opening a way for a way of theorizing through flesh. Connecting to bodily knowledge could be likened to having a free GPS system within us, always available to guide, and dance breaks open the boundaries for listening with all our beings (Snowber, 2011). In other words, we need our full bodies for deeper understanding of what it means to be human in this world.

Dance and the Lived Body

Dance in its many forms has the capacity to invite us into what it means to be uninhibited in our bodies, to think through movement. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999), who is well known for writing on phenomenology and movement, says, “Thinking in movement is foundational to being a body” (p. 494). Dance invites us to think on our feet and get our feet in our thinking. I have been working with student teachers for many years, and I tell them over and over again, as Parker Palmer (1998) says, “We teach who we are” (p. 2), yet part of who we are is an embodied people. As soon as we walk across the classroom, the students know if the teacher feels confident in relating to the class. We teach with and through our bodies. I call it body pedagogy (Snowber, 2005), and integrate movement as a way for students to make friends with their bodies. We do not have bodies; we are bodies. However, one cannot live in Western culture and not take the impact of cultural constructs that emphasize what we look like instead of how we experience sensations through our bodies. It is clear that body knowledge has become endangered within the human species, and we are often alienated in our own bodies. The emphasis has been on the outer body as opposed to what I would call, in more phenomenological terms, “the lived body.” The lived body is the felt body where we make connections to the multiple sensations around and within us. The feel of the wind on the skin, fingers typing at the computer, the pain in the lower back, the joy of one torso swimming, and the tears in the belly all connect us to the lived body. We are creatures of turns and twists, contractions and expanse, gestures and postures, although it feels as if Western culture has forgotten we have hips. I tell my students that they are in the only class where they must learn pelvic inquiry, to loosen their hips and bellies for that matter, and know, as many other cultures do, that there is knowledge in those forbidden realms of the body. We came from the belly and hips and we must return there. This isn’t knowledge that can just be told or read about; it must be experienced. And in experiencing, there is as much unlearning to do as learning.

The Play of Dance—the Dance of Play

Spinning and dancing, which were once so organic to us as children, have often been lost in adulthood. I often instruct give my undergraduate movement
education students a first assignment to go watch children on the playground and even get on the swings themselves because doing so is to be deeply alive in their bodies. The movements of play on the playground can elicit the body memory of what it was like to feel the gestures of hopping, skipping, throwing, swinging, hanging, and stomping—everyday gestures of the playground. I have my students write and reflect out of their movement experiences because the components of play, risk, creativity, and improvisation elicit both a language of movement and the language of the heart (Snowber, 1997).

Movement has the capacity to touch us physically and emotionally at our roots, provoking the deepest emotions, from love to fear to joy to abandon. One of the central aspects of dance that I integrate in my own work with students is the act of play. Dance has the capacity to be the muscle of the imagination, a magical invitation through the creative process to reimagine new worlds. This is the same imagination that is needed for every new beginning in life, whether it is a different way to lead, a personal decision, a cure for cancer, or a way to build the bones of innovation. The art of play connects each of us to material that is often dormant in our lives, whether that is a new way of moving, accessing places of emotion, or inspiration. The creativity of dance accesses the place within us that has primal imagination. Integrating play within dance making has the capacity to return us to the place where we lose inhibitions of the self-consciousness of our bodies and re-member our bodies back to themselves (Snowber, 2007). Play also gives us the courage to access aspects of dance making, which include lament and sorrow, for the paradox of both beauty and loss always honors the whole person's experience in the world.

**Dance and Literacy**

No matter what we are teaching, when the curriculum is embodied we come to a deeper understanding of concepts, ideas, or new ways of thinking. Research continues to connect the relationship between dance and the embodied brain and interrelate the importance of brain function and movement (Mason, 2009). Dance can be integrated into all aspects of the curriculum, and dance has connected to all aspects of the curriculum from kindergarten through grade twelve (Hanna, 2008). Dance is needed as we recover what it means to be adults in the world, learning with mind, body, and soul. We can dance our stories, understand the nuances of Shakespeare or Neruda, or dissect cultural constructs when they are released in the body. My experience with adult learners is that if they have an opportunity to move the ideas they are grappling with into their bodies, they have the capacity to come to new ways of understanding. The expressivity of movement allows for images to take flesh and, ultimately, new perceptions to develop. Movement and dance are not just ways to illustrate ideas but a way of grappling more deeply with the complexity of ways students can critically
think, sift, perceive, and eventually come to fresh understanding of whatever subject they are studying. **Dance is an invitation to think with our entire beings.** It ushers in a way to connect biology and body, economics and intuitive thinking, human geography and physicality, and psychology and visceral awareness.

**Dance as a Way of Inquiry**

How do we know what we know? Why do we think that it is only the mind that can unravel and discover knowledge when it is often our senses—the smell of lilacs, which remind us of childhood, or the feeling of swaying back and forth, which exudes comfort? We are an embodied people, designed as our birthright to dance and move. **Dance accesses many kinds of knowledge beyond kinesthetic intelligence, including visual, tactile, mental, cognitive, and emotional intelligence.** And the contribution of dance, choreography, and improvisation to a broad way of understanding and perception is clear from the works of dance education scholars over the years (Fraleigh, 2004; Hanna, 1987, 2008; Shapiro, 1999; Stinson, 1995).

How are questions changed when we ask them through our bodies? When I access a question through dance, I evoke words, thought, and uncoverings that go beyond the tricks my mind can pull. How does the body connect to what is happening in the ecological sphere? How can dance reveal global warming or what is happening to the planet? The curriculum of our lives has the capacity to become the canvas from which is drawn upon as a place where theory has the opportunity to be enfleshed into practice. Accessing this canvas is much more possible when the language of dance can touch to the roots of experience and knowing. The body has constant data that speaks to us, whether it is the flurry in the stomach, the stretch of an elbow, or the abrupt contraction. **Body data is the information that occurs in the present moment, the immediate present time, the ways we experience information through our bodies (Winton-Henry and Porter, 1997).** The choreographer and performer have long known that the creative process is one of questioning and sifting, forming and unforming, making and remaking, and always a place of discovery (Cancienne, 2008; Cancienne and Snowber, 2003). **By dancing our questions, we can uncover the questions underneath the questions and open up a deep listening to the body's knowledge.** Dance awakens us to emotional and spiritual intelligence, as Anna Halprin (2000), a pioneer in integrating dance as a place of discovery, has modeled for many years. The dancer follows the movement impulse and is awakened to the nuances of the language of the heart, one that calls us back to an ancient way of knowing. The place of not knowing is fertile ground for excavating the choreographic process and opening the whole body and mind to a place of growth. Knowledge opens to the dancer in ways that are particular to the body's insight through
its capacity to explore both balance and nonbalance, gravity and levity, or contraction and release. Principles of composition in dance and improvisation have correlations to how one can perceive and understand themselves and the world around them.

Central to this creative process to which I am speaking is the art of improvisation, the necessary ingredient for all creativity. A movement and writing exercise that I integrate with adult learners is to open up the places to not only dance the questions but to write out of the experience of dancing. Dance opens up to our breath, the tongue of language that is rooted in our bodies. When we write from our sweat, our words uncover knowing that we did not know. I ask students to do a free write after dancing from these few words: “My body knows...” The jewels that break forth are always amazing, and how much body wisdom is within each one.

Our lives are a dance in progress, as we are informed, formed, and transformed in the rich palette of lived experience. Dance is the invitation to reclaim an embodied inspiration—the entrance to our knowing that is filled with a lifetime of mystery and magic. More than ever, it is the questions that we must pay attention to, dance from, and live into a new way of being in the world. As we dance into the unknown and the known, we can birth the breath of new words.

**The Body Knows**

Dance is a way to break
spill, turn, twist and extend
the knowing of the cells
juicy and jagged
an ancient space
where the feet think
and the belly listens
the sternum proclaims and
the kidneys lament

The body longs to be present
and be with presence
let out of the classrooms, offices and homes
and dance its way back to wonder
take each form as multiple celebrations
and bring the body home
to its rightful place
where we honor
the footnotes of our bodies

Dance your questions—
what you know and don’t know
and know this:
what is within you
is fluttering, seeking a form
so loosen your joints
awaken your muscles
and breathe into your limbs
and dance your way
into new steps.

This article has sought to expand the ways that movement and dance can be thought about and practiced in connection to adult learning. Ultimately, dance is a way for adults to be opened up to embodied learning and not only connect to themselves with their bodies, minds, heart, and imagination but to more deeply understand and question the world around them. The most significant value dance brings is to invite learners into a different relationship with their bodies. This can relate to a variety of content areas in a curriculum as it shifts the curriculum of their own bodies. When we inhabit our bodies fully, no matter what vocation is in our lives, we are able to integrate the fullness of our intelligence, incorporating the emotional, kinesthetic, conceptual, and our complete humanity. We are fully alive, vibrating under our skin, and live with presence. This is a presence of knowing and experiencing our full vitality. And in this place we encounter the deep wisdom of our bodies, what we came into the world with, and what we need more than ever in this day and age. Dance opens us up so we can show up for our own lives and once again fall into wonder.

References


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