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# *Simple Forms of Dance and Movement Literacy*

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“Okay, that was a good run. Now go grab your notebooks and come sit over here for corrections.” These directions are nothing new to dancers at the Cambridge School of Ballet—in fact, this scene happens at almost every rehearsal, especially during the few weeks before a performance. What the students are about to do is not what most expect out of a dance class: they are going to write down what they did wrong and what they need to improve.

For centuries, dance forms such as ballet have been studied through imitation and visual learning techniques. Thus, reading and writing are not often readily associated with this type of physical movement. However, as established above, there are small, yet important forms of literate activity within the dance realm that profoundly impact the learning processes of dance instruction. Such evidence of dance literacy has been studied over the past thirty years through debates over what is considered proper dance pedagogy (Cooper, 2011; Davenport and Forbes, 1997; Forbes, 2000) and how movement literacy is applied in specific, real-life situations (Perry, 2012; Phillips, 2009). Over the past two years, this debate has focused on digitizing dance education (Alvarez, 2013; Lehoux, 2013; Skjulstad and Morrison, 2005; Sutil, 2012).

Intriguingly, the complex forms of dance literacy have been studied to a greater extent than its simpler counterparts. Cooper (2011) argues that analyzing and describing dance movement through the use of essays and extended literary works benefits a dancer's literacy of movement. She concludes from her studies as a college-level dance instructor that together, dancing and writing can enhance a dancer but only when that writing is fully “embodied,” or has much depth and analysis (Cooper, 2011, p. 53). Davenport and Forbes (1997) similarly discuss the “use of dance to teach grammar, punctuation, phrasing, and shape in written language” (p. 292). Cheryl Forbes, a language professor who enrolled in Donna Davenport's dance class, was especially intrigued by the connection between body movement and literacy, claiming that “most of us need to be instructed to connect with our bodies as we write” (1997, p. 302). In this case, both scholars put to practice the “embodied” writing Cooper (2011) advocates—they use feelings of body movement from dance as their foundation to connect themselves to the writing experience (Davenport and Forbes, 1997).

Lehoux (2012) claims that the best understanding of dance movement is through notation systems, which describe the movement of the body through symbols on a staff, and act as a form of documentation for choreography. The significance of these systems is their adaptability to the digital times, as well as their ability to “contribute to a richer dance heritage” (Lehoux, 2012, p. 154). Sutil (2002), too, argues that a specific notation system, Labanotation, is particularly beneficial as a form of dance literacy in that it molds thinking and dance analysis together. However, notation systems are learned solely through years of training—exemplifying the complexity of this form of dance literacy.

What most dance and literacy scholars have not discussed is the technique of documenting dance corrections and choreography pertaining to specific dance instruction. In fact, all leading dance literacy scholars previously mentioned have lacked incorporation of the simplest forms of

dance literacy into their studies. One scholar has come close. Newkirk (1989/2014) broke ground in studies of children's artwork, claiming that they were fully functioning forms of literacy, despite the lack of actual text. Though it doesn't pertain to dance specifically, Newkirk's studies of pictorial literacy complement the findings from one of the cases in my following study, which incorporates child-like drawings and symbols as a form of her dance literacy.

The purpose of this study is to explore the literacy techniques found in a specific case study where literate dance activity revolves primarily around writing choreography and corrections, and to compare this case study to the pedagogy of a lower-level college dance class. As a foundation for my research in this area of study, I would like to look further into the literate form of dance movement, and pose the following questions: do literate forms of dance have to be fully comprehensive in order to serve a purpose in the dance realm? Can simpler forms of movement literacy be those that are most beneficial for dance pedagogy?

## Methods

In this data analysis, I focused on two case studies: one of a dance instructor named Briana and another of a college-level ballet class. My data from Briana is compiled from her answers to a twelve-question e-mail interview I sent her, which asked general questions about her literate activities for any movement-based part of her life. I've known Briana since she first started teaching dance, and I have been a student in her Jazz class for the past three years. Over the past few months, I've had the privilege of observing her Jazz class and used this time to assess her teaching methods, incorporate what Prior (2004/2014) calls "participant observation" (p. 519). For instance, in the beginning of the dance year (August-September), I was a participant in the Jazz class, learning with the rest of the students; once she began to teach choreography for the studio's Nutcracker performance in November, I took on more of an observer's role. More recently, I spent my time in her Jazz class writing corrections for the dance her students are practicing to perform; this is something Briana asked me to do, as she needed another "set of eyes" to watch for mistakes in the choreography of her piece. To fully integrate "data from multiple sources," I've supplemented the interview and observations with pictures of Briana's literate activity in dance (Prior, 2004/2014, p. 519).

Other data I have collected is from a college-level ballet class I enrolled in during the Fall 2014 semester. This class provided sufficient data from many sources. First, I e-mailed this course's instructor, Kris, the same twelve-question interview that I sent to Briana. This gave me a general understanding of the movement-based literacy activities Kris' practices. Next, I compiled the class syllabus, assignments, and required texts that make up most of the literate activities within the class. By doing this, I was able to implement the process of "tracing a series of texts" (Prior, 2004/2014, 500). Finally, my data analysis includes my personal experience in Kris' class and how her incorporation of literate activity affected my role as a student.

From their interviews, my observations, and my experiences in both Briana's and Kris' dance classes, I will compare the movement-based literate activities of each class.

## Case Study: Briana

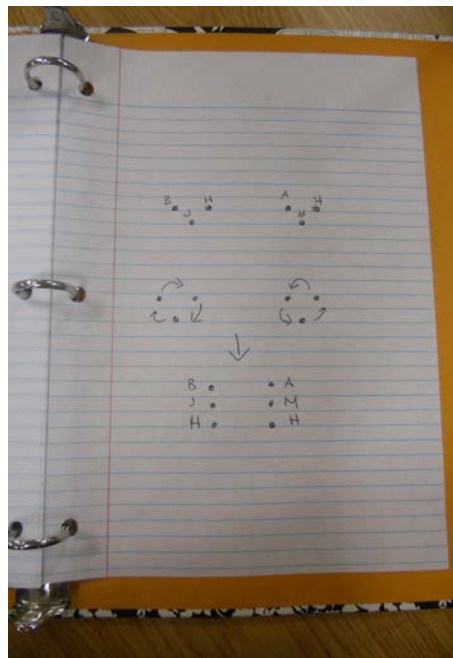
Now in her early twenties, Briana Hofer has been dancing since she was seven. She is a recent graduate of the University of Central Florida, where she studied Sports and Exercise Science. Since becoming a jazz, pointe, and ballet instructor at Cambridge School of Ballet (CSO) in Orlando, Florida four years ago, Briana added a literate form of dance to her movement studies. In part, this is due to CSO's policy of requiring upper-level dance students to write in a notebook the dance corrections that they were given verbally. Although Briana's role as a dance instructor requires her to incorporate forms of dance movement literacy, she also chooses to incorporate literate activity

into other kinesthetic activities in her life (namely, workouts). In this case study, I look specifically at Briana’s literacy as a dance instructor.

### Role of Dance Instructor: Choreography and Corrections

Briana’s main dance literate activity as an instructor is her written choreography and corrections. Briana writes choreography about three times a year and brings her written choreography texts in a binder to every class she teaches. Most of her pages are filled with text from top to bottom. Briana writes cast lists, movement words, positions, and “other things [she] wants to emphasize”—all of which are supplemented by small “drawings” to visually supplement her text (personal communication, September 14, 2014). Figure 1 is an example of these drawings. In this picture, the dots represent dancers and the arrows establish the dancers’ movements across the stage. Briana tends to write in different colored inks to separate sections of choreography. As seen in Figure 2, her “chunks” of choreography are similar to paragraphs of an essay—they mark when movement pauses or changes slightly in style or movement. Briana’s writing style helps her define parts of the piece where the dancers are in new spots or where the actual choreography differs from the previous choreography (on this specific page the “chunks” differentiate between the “fighting” and “dancing” parts of the piece).

During rehearsal of her choreography, Briana watches her class perform the piece and takes note of the dancers’ movements on a scrap piece of paper. These notes are called “corrections,” or movements the dancers can specifically improve upon. When the performance is finished, Briana verbalizes the corrections she wrote out, often times exemplifying certain steps or styles of the choreography that she wants her dancers to emphasize in the piece. Briana mentioned in her interview that she only rereads her written corrections aloud one time before crossing them off and never looking at them again. She goes through this whole process each time the piece is rehearsed.



**Figure 1:** A page from Briana’s dance binder showing some of her drawings.

### Uses of Digital (or Technology-Based) Dance Literacy

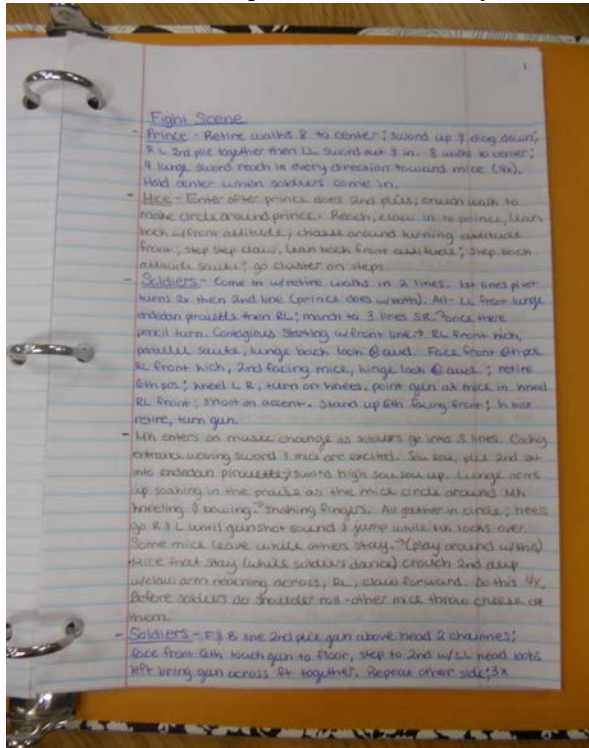
Though she did not mention it in her interview, Briana uses technology as she writes choreography. Most ballet variations are age-old: choreography for specific pieces has been set years ago and remains virtually intact to this day (this is called *Petipa*, after French choreographer Marius Petipa). CSO Ballet uses similar theories for their performances. That is, Briana watches videos of past performances of “*The Nutcracker*,” which is the choreography she is currently teaching and writes down the movements of the dancers. She then adds her own “flair” of movements to the choreography without vastly changing what was already set. Briana writes down past choreography and changes it only in ways that benefit her dancers’ physical abilities. For instance, Briana changed a set of eight count movement in the middle of her “fight scene” *Nutcracker* piece (Figure 2) because her dancers had improved since they last performed this piece and they needed to be challenged with more difficult choreography.

Not only does Briana watch dance videos to learn ballet choreography, but she also shows her class the videos she takes choreography from so that they can understand how the movement works. She points out what she likes in the video, what she is going to change about the video's choreography, and how the dancers can improve their own performance of this particular choreography. In doing this, Briana teaches her students how to learn from other dancers.

Briana reported that she keeps herself up-to-date about the dance world by reading what she refers to as "random articles" online pertaining to dance or working out. When she needs fresh ideas for teaching a ballet class, Briana refers to *100 Lessons in Classical Ballet* by Vera S. Kostrovitskaya. For instance, if Briana is having a difficult time creating a combination for her ballet class to do at barre, she might refer to one of these texts for inspiration.

As an additional literate activity, Briana started a workout journal around the same time she began documenting dance. Briana's workout journals are not related to dance, but they do document literate activity in her other high-priority kinesthetic activity: exercising. Briana writes in her workout journal about five times a week, documenting what workout movements she's done that day and which ones she has deemed "especially good" or "most beneficial" (personal communication, September 14, 2014). Unlike her dance corrections, Briana reads back over her

workout journal multiple times. Even though she writes in her workout journal at home, Briana brings it wherever and whenever she works out. She has filled many workout journals throughout the past four years.



**Figure 2:** A page from Briana's dance binder showing some of her written choreography for her piece "Fight Scene."

### Summary

Briana has taught herself to use reading, writing, and drawing as forms of literate dance activity for her occupation as a dance instructor. She has learned to apply each type of activity to her students, her job, and her personal reflection. From this, I can conclude that Briana has fully integrated the two worlds of literate and kinesthetic activities into one interrelated set of processes.

### Case Study: Kris

Kristina "Kris" Stevens is a ballet instructor at both Valencia College in Orlando, Florida and Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida.

She has been a part of many dance companies, worked as a dancer/actor for Disney and

received a degree in Dance from Valencia College. Kris's literate movement activity revolves solely around dance. In this case study, I will analyze all forms of Kris' literate dance activity.

### Role of Dance Instructor: Assignments and Exams

As a college professor of dance, Kris writes lesson plans and choreography for students a couple of times each week. A visual learner, Kris says writing down her choreography or lessons helps her remember and clarify information, particularly which teaching methods and choreography work best or are most enjoyable. She keeps all of her class lessons and past

choreography in both notebooks and computer files, and she will often reread her writings to reuse the information in future classes.

As her Ballet 1 class is a college course, Kris has also written a class syllabus that explains expectations, grading policies, assignments, required materials, and the "Valencia Department of Dance Writing Principles." The syllabus requires two textbooks for student use: *The Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet* by Gail Grant and *Ballet Basics* by Sandra Noll Hammond. Both of these include written descriptions of ballet terms, forms, and movements, as well as pictures and figures that demonstrate the movement. Care of the body and proper dance etiquette also make up a few chapters in the Hammond textbook. During class, focus is on the five basic ballet positions and the eight positions of the body.



Figure 3: One of the notecards cards I made for Kris's "notecard card assignment."

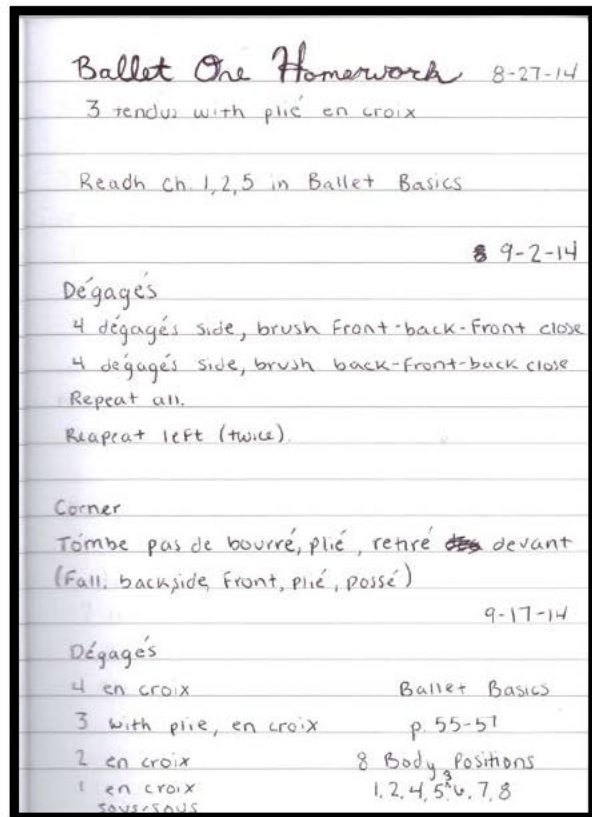


Figure 4: A page from my dance notebook for Kris's class showing certain combinations we learned and homework she assigned.

Kris has her students first look at the picture of a certain form or movement, then read the text describing the movement, and then do the movement themselves.

The syllabus also outlines the dates and explanations for exams and assignments throughout the semester, which includes a written midterm, seventy-six note cards for studying, an essay reviewing a dance performance that her students must attend, and a dance presentation final.

Kris's pedagogy puts heavy emphasis on writing correct ballet terms. One assignment we did before the midterm, for example, encompassed memorization of seventy-six fundamental ballet terms by writing their definition and pronunciation on the front and back of a note card (Figure 3). In this way, my fellow classmates and I were able to really learn the ballet terms, which I found helpful for both the midterm and barre exercises in class.

As another literate dance activity, Kris writes difficult or certain barre exercises on the whiteboard in the dance room at the end of class. Her students are required to write these combinations down, work on them at home using the written form for reference, and then perform the same exercise with improvement during the next class. To provide some guided study, Kris has her students read certain chapters of the textbooks that demonstrate specific movements. Figure 4 includes a few of my combination entries and notes from the months of August and September.

Finally, all dance classes at Valencia require students to write a four- to five-page essay about the Choreographers' Showcase Dance Performance, which all dance students are required to attend. The essay analyzes and critiques a minimum of four dance pieces that were part of the Choreographers' Showcase. The essay has specific requirements (e.g. MLA formatting) that are listed on the assignment page in BlackBoard. Different from all of her other assignments, this activity is Kris's most complex.

### **Uses of Digital (or Technology-Based) Dance Literacy**

This ballet course also includes an online component called BlackBoard. Blackboard is a website used by Valencia College where Kris can post files, assignments, and messages for her students. Currently, she posts the syllabus, a list of ballet terms and definitions, music from a dance piece the class is performing, the essay assignment guidelines, and a few miscellaneous documents about dance and the body.

Kris allows her students to use cell phones, laptops, and/or other devices to record her teaching of new barre combinations or choreography during class time. She then has the students post their recordings on BlackBoard so that all the students in the class may see them.

Kris reads many pieces of literature regarding dance (biographies, programs for concerts, "how-to" articles, pedagogy essays and books, and reviews) mainly for her own enjoyment in learning about the topic (personal communication, September 17, 2014). Recently, she had her class read a blog from another dance instructor that was written to motivate students to work harder.

### **Summary**

Kris learned to be literate in dance from both her degree in dance as well as her many years teaching the subject at the college-level (which requires texts, grades, and policies to qualify as a credit course). Kris applies many different forms of dance literacy to her course, involving both simple and complex literate activity. In my own experience, I found the simpler forms to be most helpful in my navigation through the course. That being said, I have yet to reach the most complex literate activity of the course—the essay.

Like Briana, Kris has integrated the two worlds of dance and literacy.

### **Comparison: Briana and Kris**

Upon enrolling in Kris's Ballet 1 class at Valencia College, I found that the way Kris teaches is similar to Briana in some aspects but includes more structure and maintains a different focus. Similarities occur in the way both instructors write choreography in a binder that they bring with them and look over during class. Both seem to find inspiration for their dance classes by reading recent dance literature, such as news articles about dance and books entailing proper dance technique. Kris recently had her students read a blog post from a dance instructor talking about motivation in ballet; this is much like the articles about dance Briana reads on the Internet. Both use textbooks about ballet fundamentals to help with their barre combinations for ballet class: Kris reads from *Ballet Basics* by Sandra Noll Hammond while Briana chooses *100 Lessons in Classical Ballet* by Vera S. Kostrovitskaya.

Despite these parallels, Kris's dance pedagogy is much more structured than Briana's. Whereas Briana has her students write their dance corrections in their own personal styles, Kris has her students write the movement combination they are doing in correct French. This may have to do more with the mental and physical level of dance students each instructor has contact with: Kris works with students primarily new to the dance realm, while Briana has been working with most of the same girls since her first year teaching. Thus, Kris' form of dance literacy requiring text

is most beneficial for her beginner students, while Briana's lack thereof still effectively incorporates a form of dance literacy that is best for her more advanced dancers.

## Discussion

In her studies of dance, Cooper (2011) found that "the creative and compositional processes involved in dance-making and writing are complementary" (p. 53). This concept coincides with what many literacy scholars have to say about literacy across two or more discourse communities. For example, Newkirk's (1989/2014) study focuses on the literacy of children's drawings. He analyzed students' artwork and found that "drawing can help develop perceptual ability—the ability to make refined observations, which is useful for more than artwork" (p. 104). While Briana's dance literacy (specifically her written choreography and corrections) may not be anything like the literate activity that Newkirk (1989/2014) examined, it exemplifies his idea that these simple forms of literacy are useful in multiple genres and situations. This can be seen in Briana's beginning to write her workout journals around the same time her new occupation as a dance instructor required her to be literate in dance. Briana is not only improving her ability to be literate, but she is building her ability to observe and analyze her own processes and performance in dance and exercise.

Dance literacy studies like Cooper's (2011), however, fail to discuss the simple forms of dance literacy that we see in Briana's work. Cooper (2011) tells us that dancing and writing can together enhance a dancer, but only when that writing is fully "embodied" (p. 54). That is, based on her successful student analyses of dance movement, Cooper (2011) believes deep explanation of movement that gives "a real sense of dance as a sensual and corporeal experience" is the best way to experience dance literacy (p. 59). I disagree, noting that Briana's simple system of dance literacy invokes personal growth and reflects her maturity in the dance realm. She has not only learned to be effective with her literacy techniques in regards to her work as a dance instructor, but she also applies these reflection techniques to her personal workout experience. Likewise, Briana provides an example for her dance students to be equally literate in the art of dance.

Similar to Cooper (2011), Davenport and Forbes' (1997) campaign for extended analysis of dance literacy fails to explain Briana's literate dance activities. According to Davenport and Forbes (1997), both writers and dancers can benefit from experiencing the mind-body connection. Specifically, dancers would do well to think of their movement as grammar: colons, semicolons, and punctuation that put "flow" in their "kinesthetic experience" (p. 300). Davenport incorporated literacy in her dance classes by having the students do an activity that Forbes fashioned for her writing students: to rewrite (or, in this case, re-choreograph) different endings to a movement piece in order to find the best one possible (Davenport and Forbes, 1997, p. 300). While this form of dance literacy is arguably beneficial to dance pedagogy, it doesn't encompass all beneficial techniques in the dance instruction practice. Briana teaches her students to write down the choreography they learn as well as the corrections they are given. My own college-level ballet class also includes writing specific choreography or combinations. Both instances provide a foundation to grow as a dancer. These simple forms of dance literacy improve students' "synthesis of knowledge, and retention of new information" as they learn to understand the basics of their movement (Davenport and Forbes, 1997, p. 300).

In a wholly disparate form of dance literacy, Lehoux (2013) affirms that "notation systems are essential to the description of movement" (p. 154). Sutil (2012) agrees, specifying that Labanotation "has found a new readership in digital dance contexts" of this century (p. 161). In simpler terms, both scholars make the claim that these complex forms of movement documentation (similar to music scores) are advantageous to dance literacy. While intrigued by the idea of using staff and symbols as representations of body movement and pieces of choreography, I can't help but disagree as I find these systems unnecessarily complex. Briana cohesively documents her

choreography using language she understands best and is effectively able to teach her movements this way. More than that, Briana develops most of her choreography from past performances that she and her dancers watch on video. I argue that learning from choreography documented this way (video and written) is much more effective in helping dancers develop specific style or flair to their dance. As she shows her dancers a video of choreography, Briana points out certain parts that can be improved, changed, or incorporated into her dancers' movement of the piece. While notation systems may contribute to "richer dance heritage" in the long run, they only apply to students who are trained in the system (Lehoux, 2013, p. 154). Primitive forms of dance literacy, however, can be universally understood and applied.

Over the years, dance has become more of a literate activity than ever before, even though I argue that the most beneficial dance movement literate activities are those in the simple form. From this perspective, the understanding we might want to more readily incorporate into dance pedagogy is simply the ways students learn and are taught to do movement pieces—as well as the way choreographers or dance instructors develop, teach, and improve those pieces—by simple forms of writing and watching other dancers. From my observations during this study, there are many ways dancers learn choreography and take corrections; perhaps applications of many different pedagogical practices of dance instruction (a mix of simple and complex forms) could result in a more approachable and comprehensive design of dance instruction.

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