

The Dance of Words

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Introduction

Dance is a field which is attracting increased attention in educational circles in Denmark. Dance has never enjoyed an independent identity in the educational context in Denmark, but rhythmic movement and dance have been part of the official curriculum of Physical Education (PE) for many years. Since the 1960s it has undergone a period of significant development supported by an increased focus on dance in the media and by growing activity within the field of dance education and research (<http://www.dansiuddannelse.dk/>; Engel, 2002; Engel 2007). In Denmark this development has also manifested itself, e.g., in a growing number of textbooks directed at the teaching of practice-theory in dance (e.g. Winther et al 2001; Ravn 2001; Engel 2007). How we use language and words about movement and the experience of movement often face some of the same challenges and problems common to professional art critics and phenomenological research. The challenge is how language articulates and influences our ways of experiencing and understanding a given phenomenon. These issues deal with how we use words in different contexts and how language can communicate and support lived and experiential knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962/2002).²²

In this article we shall discuss the following questions:

What influence does language have on our way of understanding and communicating a dance experience? The article proposes that a bodily anchored *lived* language – by ways of an *ethic-aesthetic* phenomenological approach – may supplement, expand and broaden a given professional terminology in order to articulate, communicate and unfold the experiential dimensions of dance.

Drawing from a choreographic workshop

Body and knowledge in artistic, scientific and pedagogical processes

In connection with the teaching of dance in PE at Danish universities, the students are taught techniques and choreographic approaches inspired by different traditions within contemporary dance. As a basis for the varied practices they also work with movement and dance analysis in order to acquire awareness and sensitivity of movement experience to encourage their embodied enquiry and creativity in both theory and practice. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between theory and practice and hence develop a sensitive language about movement and dance which may build bridges between the lived experience of movement on the one hand and a



22 This theme is especially unfolded in chapter 6 "The body as expres

conceptual understanding on the other (van Manen 1990). This involves concrete artistic processes and methods based on movement expression and experience which enable the students to experience various movement and dance dimensions. Artistic processes are closely related to real art practices. Physical Education is not aimed at art education as such, but there is an intertwining between everyday life, art and sport (Kaprow and Kelley 1993/2003). In the teaching of dance within PE in Denmark, the tradition is to use Rudolf Laban's movement theory as the starting point for understanding movement and movement analysis in relation to certain key elements. Laban's analysis can be seen as a practice-theoretical tool regarding the elements, forms and qualities of movement and as this article will demonstrate it can be combined with a phenomenological-aesthetic analysis of movement dynamics as embodied scenic entities to articulate the lived experience. This fundamental interest in exploring connections between movement and language is also shared by, e.g., Swedish dancer and choreographer Efva Lilja:

"I think in images. Not in words. I both think and dream in images. My dreams construct new contexts using movements. Like you, yours, us. Choreography becomes the projection of intuitive awareness (or knowledge?). Applying a research perspective makes possible a broadening and deepening of the artistic process, which is necessary, both to allow the work to generate new insights and to make them available within the work (2003-2006, 20)".

Lilja is interested in how body, intuition and language mutually open up for new experiences and understandings of dance. Our scientific approach applies modern phenomenology as an embodied dynamic process-based understanding of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962/2002;1964; Rouhiainen 2003; Parviainen 1998).

Our phenomenological point of departure lies within an aesthetic phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962/2002) or what philosopher Gilles Deleuze describes as an ethic-aesthetic paradigm (Massumi 2002; Deleuze 1969/1990/2004). Both the phenomenological philosophy and Deleuze's ethic-aesthetic paradigm point towards a perspective that sees the creative, sensitive dimension intertwined with the concrete, bodily-rooted source in the exploration of dynamic, interactive connections between body, movement, form, relations, intuition, dream, reality and meaning.

Laban's movement theory and analysis

Danish textbooks about music and movement use Laban's movement theory as the basis for understanding all kinds of movement and as a springboard for the establishment of a professional language on movement. Laban's theory has been used and developed in different ways internationally and it is also different inspirations that are used in dance educational and therapeutic contexts in Denmark. Laban's theory is also the background for practice training in the different dance techniques and to the interpretation of dance.

Although the teaching varies, many similarities and challenges naturally exist. Dance and other performance arts are faced with the common challenge that you cannot extract the work of art and revisit it the way you can a sculpture or a painting. No matter which ramification of Laban's theory of movement is used in dance educational practice, it opens up for basic qualitative analysis of movement regardless of genres, styles or contexts. The intention of using Laban's theory is to focus on the basic elements of movement and to learn a conceptual language to describe the qualitative varieties in order to get a better understanding of qualities and nuances of movement. But it is a conceptual language and as such it can be criticised for not really catching the lived experience. The American philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene T. Gendlin perhaps more directly than anyone else has described how working with "the felt sense" as a bodily feeling can be transformed into a word, a metaphor or an association and can thus articulate lived experience which otherwise often remains silent. Focusing on the felt sense can help combine the intuitive, the imaginative and the analytical (Gendlin 1997) as it is a condition that lends itself to a more sensuous, poetic language as an important component of experiential under-

standing. Choices of words and categories determine the dimensions of experiential meanings and relations. Philosopher Ole Fogh Kirkeby's descriptions of lived space are illustrative (Kirkeby 1996, 18): "The cathedral in Gdansk. Floor and vault of stone. . . .The space of sound. The space of sight. The self-incarceration of the body: the joy: everything is being-it . . . The bell creates the space. Touches the leaves in the distant forest with the light beams from its body of the sun bronze"²³. The rhythm and feeling of the language resonates with the experience of lived space – bodily, magically and multi-dimensionally. We use the example to demonstrate that poetic language contains dimensions of meaning that cannot be expressed in a merely analytical, conceptual language. Such qualitative nuances are not merely superfluous coating or stylistic play; they are of crucial importance for both the lived experience



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and knowledge. Describing, experiencing and evaluating dance is a lived bodily, multi-dimensional experience that weaves the event as a vibrating sense of bodies, movements, dance and world. In Denmark, for example, the movement and dance researcher Charlotte Svendler Nielsen – in connection with her PhD study on children's embodied learning processes and experiences of movement – has developed a new method. It is a multi-modal interview approach which may help explore the close connection between the child's experience of movement and embodied language in the movement experience (2008).

In pedagogical work with adults, it is possible to switch between bodily practices and exercises in language creation or other forms of expression about movement. It has to do with developing sensitive and concrete methods to bring movement and language about movement analysis in play in such a way that the pedagogical, embodied and artistic practice join in mutually dynamic development.

Developing a language about the lived movement experience – an example

Differences are found in the way the different PE departments design their education within the dance area, but the basic question about how categorical and poetic language can provide different perspectives on how we experience and understand movement is relevant everywhere. The example put forward in the following stems from a practical-theoretical performance examination in a bachelor program in PE at one of the universities in Denmark. The objective of the exam was to let the students demonstrate that they could choreograph a dance, perform it in public as well as to demonstrate that they mastered the classical elements of a movement analysis and dance evaluation (Laban 1971; Ravn 2001; Winther et al. 2001).

23 The authors' translation.

The performance of the students and their ensuing critique generally followed this structure:

- A description of their overall impressions sometimes combined with a spontaneous evaluation without any further details or explanations.
- An account of the composition of the dance, broken down into passages where appropriate.
- An interpretation consisting of a detailed description of the story shown in the dance. This was as a rule structured to fit the various passages of the dance.
- An analysis of the technical devices with special focus on the dynamic qualities of the dance by means of Laban's so-called effort qualities (Ravn 2001, 51-53; Winther et al. 2001, 127-128).
- General perspectives on the overall expression of the performance of the dance, e.g., how the performance could be intensified or improved as regards its motif(s), qualities and style.

The above is a guide to the students on how to structure their dance critique and thus sharpen their focus on experience, interpretation and language. The fact that the students are obliged to work on the creation of a dance, and subsequently to participate in mutual qualitative analysis, interpretation and evaluation of the various dances, provides them with concrete experience – through artistic practice and methodology – of both the craftsmanship in putting movements together as well as the aesthetic-artistic reflections of what, how and why, with a view to creating a dance performance for their fellow students and teachers.

Challenges in finding words for the experience of dance

Our main impression is that the students have achieved considerable proficiency in seeing a dance as an entity, in forming a general impression. They grasp the structure of a composition easily. In their analyses they are confident in using conceptual terms from the chosen theory. Their interpretations are rooted in recognisable forms of functions and stories as well as common experiences and feelings, i.e. in psychology and drama. In their choice of choreographic genre, the dances primarily become psychological, dramatic and narrative. The dances

are primarily performed, described and interpreted as the representation of recognisable actions, and the qualitative movement description is reduced to stories and to recognisable, abstract Laban categories. The students attach much importance to the story of the dance in order to understand the meaning. Their choreographies are related to the mimetic aspect where they tend to imitate everyday gestures, actions and stories and they do not really developed the narrative poetic and abstract dimensions.

Like other theoretical models, Laban's movement analysis must be understood as a framework to help achieve an aesthetic understanding. It is necessary to try to extend the more analytical language and expand the basic Laban movement categories to embrace images and metaphors as a means of expressing the lived qualities of the dance.

Drawing from a choreographic workshop



One way of developing an extended practice-theory, where form and feeling are interwoven, could be by means of the mimetic, understood as identification through bodily imagination and the felt sense (Engel 2003; Gendlin 1997). By focusing our awareness on the felt sense of the movement, we can develop a synkinesthetic empathy which allows words, images and associations to emerge from the experience (Kirkeby 2007)²⁴. Finally, the possibility exists that identification may lead to an intensified presence and thus to an extension of the felt sense in a creative meeting between the known and the unknown, the abstract and the figurative. Intensified presence can open the expression and experience of movement as a creative principle interweaving movement and meaning. It is this basic meaning of movement in the sense of being and knowing that touches both art, learning and life (Merleau-Ponty 1964; Engel 2003).

Creating space for the words of dance and the dance of words

The article has described some key challenges in the effort to combine language and feeling with the experience of dance, and we have proposed that a bodily anchored *lived* language – by ways of an *ethic-aesthetic* phenomenological approach – may supplement, expand and broaden a given professional terminology in order to articulate, communicate and unfold the experiential dimensions of dance.

The article raises educational questions like: How can we work with a sensitive embodied practice as a door towards a multimodal language and as an interweaving of practice and theory that can guide students towards creating an experiential and multi-dimensional dance experience? This is where the traditional dependence on Laban's movement terminology proves unsatisfactory and could be challenged by a greater focus on a poetic, metaphoric and multi-modal language. In a dance pedagogical context, it is important to work consciously with the challenges inherent in artistic methods, to encourage and enhance creative processes by means of embodied sensitivity of lived movement, language and meaning. The artistic subjects – both in theory and in practice – bring together body, experience, articulation and meaning as shown in modern phenomenological research on practice and experience (Deleuze 1981/2003/2005; Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962/2002).

Because movement is so closely connected with how we express, experience and understand dance, the balance between a technical language and an embodied-poetic-metaphorical language is crucial to the development and sensitivity of movement.

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24 Developed in chapter 17.2. p. 590ff

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