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Walsh, Emma

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Research? But You're a Dancer Not a Scientist

Understanding dance as a valid form of research essential to any dancer's education

by Emma Walsh

When I chose to major in dance at a large research university like UC Irvine many people told me I was taking the easy way out in college. This is a common misconception held by those who assume our days are filled with dancing, little to no academic work or rigor, and certainly nothing that would be considered in any way "research." As a senior who has now completed over six different dance research projects through UC Irvine's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP), I can confidently say that dance is a legitimate form of research even if it is not widely known. Though our methodologies may not include test tubes and data sheets, research in the form of observation, investigation, and exploration are necessary for the progression of the field of dance and create a rich, well-rounded education that every dance major should take advantage of.

Scientific research can seem exciting to some but frankly, I easily get lost. Each year when an individual receives funding for a project at UC Irvine through UROP, they are asked to attend a meeting with students from various majors and briefly describe their research. The head of the program, Said Shokair, always asks the same two questions: what is your research project, and how or why is it important to the general public? I have been through this process multiple times and, without fail, I find that I have a much easier time making my research discoveries understandable to everyone in the room than the students who are working in lab coats with test tubes do. This is not to invalidate what they are doing, often it is incredible work! However, Shokair's intention with this exercise is to show that, regardless of the esteem research holds in our field of study, if we cannot explain what we are doing in terms that any stranger can understand, then our research is somewhat missing the mark. Dance research has the capability to be understood by a wider audience, making the findings applicable to both dancers and non-dancers alike.

So how can dance constitute as research? This is a question I often get from those who doubt that the field of dance could ever have any relationship to the field of research. From the outside it is easy to see dancing as a pleasurable pastime or enjoyable form of entertainment, but I would argue that it also has a role in research that hard science cannot always fill. Scholars Jill Green and Susan W. Stinson point out that researchers "have identified a number of limits to traditional scientific research when applied to studying persons, and have drawn from arts and humanities" to fill these voids. This does not assume that dance is inferior or superior to science but simply describes it as an alternative method useful for different areas of research, specifically that which relates to the study of people. Recent Dance graduate Keira Whitaker recognized this distinction during her research on women for her senior dance thesis concert. In an interview, she mentioned that "similar to psychology and sociology, [dance] is a research of people that is just as valid as science, it just affects the community differently." In my own experiences, I have seen the impact dance can have on people, from tiny children to elderly adults, and it is such a rewarding feeling to use my passion to affect others in a positive way.

Now, you may still be asking yourself, how can I conduct research if not with typical scientific tools? Green and Stinson highlight some common dance research methods similar to traditional scientific methods "including but not limited to observation, participant observation, document analysis, and interviewing. Because the interpretations the researcher is seeking are

constantly being constructed and reconstructed, short-answer questionnaires and surveys are not usually very useful.” I had the opportunity to speak with three undergraduate dance majors, Keira Whitaker, Emily Guerard, and Rae Michaud, who have taken advantage of UC Irvine’s UROP grants for research. Each student used a variety of the research methods outlined by Green and Stinson, but all three of them highlighted the fact that they adjusted their approach depending on the topic at hand.

Just as a dancer must constantly adjust their movement from one technique class to the next, so must a dance researcher adjust their methods to match their research question. Current undergraduate dance major Emily Guerard took extensive notes in her personal journal to recall the feelings and experiences in her body when exploring Gaga movement, since the form itself is not supposed to be observed from the outside. Recent dance graduate Keira Whitaker interacted with people through instruction, choreography, and interviews, to understand how her approach was working, and to gain insight into other dancers’ feelings, in order to relate them with her own and weave them into her choreographic choices. And current student Rae Michaud could not speak the same language as those she was dancing with, so she felt that physicalizing the movement rather than purely observing others was the best way to learn and to communicate with the people around her.

Though there are many different options when it comes to choosing a method for dance research, the most common approach is simply dancing to discover. Scholar Anna Pakes argues that dance practice alone constitutes as a form of research and an extremely important one at that. She writes, “practice itself embodies and develops a form of knowledge, rather than simply offering a physical demonstration of a pre-theorised intellectual position.” This type of embodied knowledge comes in many forms as a dancer. It could be discovering the way the body moves or feels when dancing, how the relationship with others in space affects your performance, or even how to create dance in unconventional settings.

Emily Guerard used this method of dance practice as research multiple times both for research of Gaga technique as well as for research on site-specific choreography. To Guerard, this was the only way to truly learn the most from her investigations. In an interview she recalled that “the most effective research method was to embody it. And that’s what makes dance research so unique. Scientists usually conduct research on others so they don’t know what it feels like or get to experience it firsthand. [Dance] may be seen as subjective research but that’s what makes it so cool, you get to find out more for yourself and go deeper.”

Scholars Green and Stinson see this subjectivity that Guerard speaks of as a positive and necessary component of dance research. While relating dance research to postpositivism, they argue that “subjectivity is not only unavoidable but may even be helpful in giving participants a more meaningful understanding of people and research themes.” Whatever method you choose to research you want to ensure that your work is meaningful. If not to the general public at least make sure it means something to you and helps to expand your knowledge in your field of study in some way. There are so many options when it comes to researching dance, whether for yourself or to benefit others, so the important question is not *how* to do it but rather *what* will you choose to do?

Whether you are a beginner or working professional, you must conduct some form of research if you call yourself a dancer or choreographer. If you don’t believe me look at the dance world we have today; none of it would exist if dancers chose not to explore and investigate their art form in a deeper way. When asked her opinion on dance research, Whitaker said “I think it is not only important it is vital. In a broad term I think research is furthering knowledge in the area that you study. If dance research wasn’t a thing, how would we move forward as a field of study?” This is true. If we stop asking, stop exploring, or stop experimenting with dance through research, it will eventually reach a plateau that would cut off all of the progress that has been

made, and will continue being made, around the world. We may not be curing cancer, but our findings have the ability to advance the field of dance, affect a broad audience, and impact the society in a unique way.

As dancers, we have a powerful tool that can transcend many barriers such as language, culture, and social norms. Michaud speaks enthusiastically about her experience researching dance in Panama, where she was interested in learning how to seek and develop friendships with people who did not speak the same language as she did. During her week-long study with an organization called Movement Exchange, Michaud discovered that dance was a major component in establishing strong relationships since it was the one thing everyone had in common. Though there were major language and cultural differences between her and the people she was interacting with, Michaud felt that she was more present and attuned to those around her because she had to learn about them and interact in ways other than traditional verbal communication. She recalls that “dance was what brought everyone together” and established the relationship she was so skeptical about going into the project.

Keira Whitaker also reflects on her experiences researching dance in Panama. She found that her findings were not only applicable during her time abroad, but that she has continued to use them in her dance curriculum to this day. She thinks that her presence and role as a dance teacher actually improved fine motor function in the Panamanian children she worked with, specifically with cross-body movement. But her research did not end in Panama. She explains, “I took my findings back to UC Irvine and used the skills and research to teach at Save Our Youth (SOY) an after-school program for Spanish-speaking students.” Both Whitaker and Michaud found ways to apply their findings beyond the initial research setting to other areas of life and groups of individuals. In doing this, their discoveries ended up reaching and benefitting a much larger population than the initial group of study.

The unfortunate reality is that our dance community is often marginalized, so research gives us a chance to show the greater public that dance offers a valid and positive contribution to society. According to scholars Anca Giurchescu and Lisbet Torp, “movement research is a necessary instrument to uncover the various layers of the dance process, its constituents, and their meaning and function in society, thereby contributing to the understanding of people and their means of expression within the framework of a socio-cultural community.” Without active research, we not only eliminate the potential for our field of study to grow, but also the potential to further the greater society as well as our individual selves as artists.

Any aspiring dancer needs to constantly work toward improvement because no matter how talented you are, there is always going to be someone better. If you aren’t making new discoveries to mold yourself as an artist each and every day, I guarantee someone else is. As Guerard puts it, “You can have dance spoonfed to you or you can research it yourself. You must learn to think on your own in order to go deeper into any movement you are given. You need to research to grow as a dancer.”

Dancers, eliminate the stigma that research is only for scientists. Dance is a valid form of research that you can and should try for yourself. There is no “right” way to conduct research as a dancer. It can be as simple as asking a question or investigating something in a deeper way, but I challenge you to push yourself to do something bigger, whether through an undergraduate research program, or any opportunity that allows you to work with a mentor and discover something new. As a dance major, you have all of the opportunities and resources to do this at your fingertips, so take advantage of it now!

Not sure where to start? Here are some suggestions:

- Think of a question you might have about or relating to dance in some way.

- Talk with professors, peers, and professionals about your question to hear multiple opinions and perspectives.
- Formulate a single question you would like to research further and ask a professor if they would be willing to guide you along the way.
- Brainstorm different methodologies you could use to research your question and decide which would be most effective.
- Figure out what resources (if any) you need to begin your exploration and how you are going to access them.
- Work with your mentor to write and submit a grant proposal to UROP or any grant that can provide you with monetary support for your project.
- Go learn, discover, create, and grow as an artist! I promise you will not regret it!

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Emma Walsh was part of the 2017 graduating class at the University of California, Irvine, with a B.F.A. in Dance Performance and a B.A. in Education Sciences. She is currently completing Diane Diefenderfer's Teacher Training Program for Pilates in Orange County and is dancing professionally as a company member for Re:borN Dance Interactive in L.A. under the direction of Boroka Nagy.
