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Introduction¹

In this article I present several theoretical frameworks for considering dance as embodied learning. In doing so, my intention is to substantiate the claims on the educational potential of dance – a physical activity that at best engages the human being quite fully. Because dance often involves sensory processes, social interaction, various modes of reflection, creative processes, and performative elements it has the capacity to connect non-symbolic, multimodal sensations with symbolic information. The performance elements and cultural aspects of dance open wide possibilities for learning that is grounded in the body but reaches towards complex cultural meanings. When sensory experiences intertwine with the shared social world the pre-reflective level of consciousness may become connected with the reflective level (Maitland, 2006). Dance, as well as many other creative and embodied activities may also support the ability to access and interpret messages that our embodied system generates and transmits. These messages, along with the immediate sensory experiences that dancing generates, can be seen as “raw material” for creating artistic expressions and interpreting cultural meanings. In my view, these processes form the premise for dance as embodied learning.

Theoretical frameworks for dance as embodied learning

My current understanding on dance as embodied learning connects theoretical views and empirical findings from the fields of embodied cognition and socio-material approaches with dance and performance studies, as well as somatic studies. My starting point is aligned with contemporary

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views on cognition and learning. These views maintain that human meaning-making is always connected to the physical, material conditions in which we are situated, and that it is only partly in our conscious control (see, e.g. Núñez, Edwards & Matos, 1999).

The growing scholarly field of embodied cognition, especially the enactive approach, concurs closely with the above mentioned statements. This approach is highly relevant for developing the notion of dance as embodied learning, as it departs from models that place the internal cognition of individuals as the nexus of social dynamics (Rosch, 2016, xlvii). Enaction sees the lived body as a system that encompasses the interaction between body and mind, body and environment, and environment and mind, and focuses on embodied social interaction as mutual participatory sense-making. As Evan Thompson explicates, “human cognition is not the grasping of an independent, outside world by a separate mind or self, but instead the bringing forth or enacting of a dependent world of relevance in and through embodied action” (2016, xviii). The enactive approach aims to bridge cognitive science and human experience. Such cognitive science focuses on processes that “bring about our experience of the world, including our sense of self ... and extend across complex couplings of the brain, the rest of the body, and the environment” (Thompson, 2016, xx). This view on “the mind” is systemic and sees it as “a collection of constantly changing, emergent processes that arise within a complex system comprising the brain, the rest of the body, and the physical and social environment” (Thompson, 2016, xx). These views resonate with my lived experiences as a dancer, dance educator, and dance scholar, and support me – and I believe many other dance scholars as well – in articulating and understanding my deep interest in embodied learning.

Enactivism seems also closely allied with contemporary approaches to educational research referred to as *sociomaterial theories* (Fenwick, Edwards & Sawchuk, 2011). These approaches consider education and learning as systemic processes that take place within webs of entangled human and non-human action and knowledge. They understand human knowledge and learning to be embedded in material action and inter-action and seek to understand how knowledge, knowers, and known emerge together with/in activity. A key theme is emergence: learning and knowledge emerge within dynamic structures where events and actors are mutually dependent, mutually constitutive. Human beings are fully nested within and interconnected with the elements of the systems in which

they are part of. Humans, thus, are not autonomous, sovereign agents of their learning and knowledge construction. Knowledge, learning and action are understood as continuous invention and exploration, knowledge performs itself into existence, and learning is defined as expanded possibilities for action. Perhaps most importantly, sociomaterial approaches offer resources to understand the unpredictability of educational processes. (Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk, 2011, 14-17) Emergence and unpredictability are qualities of learning in the arts and thus, approaches that embrace these qualities are fruitful in building theoretical frameworks for arts education, including dance education.

Supported by the aforementioned frameworks, I consider embodied learning as a systemic and holistic process that takes place within the entire human being and between human beings, and in connection with the social and physical reality. In order for learning to be experienced at an embodied level, and intentionally framed to be so, it is indispensable that embodied activity becomes a fundamental element in learning. Embodied activity refers to both actual movement and inner bodily sensations, experiences and physiological changes. In embodied learning non-symbolic sensations generated by physical action and multisensory engagement become interconnected with symbolic knowing, and lead towards complex meaning-making processes within the social and cultural world (Anttila, 2013; Katz, 2013; Svendler Nielsen, 2015). Through this process movement and concepts become connected in space and time so that reflection takes place simultaneously with action, and thus, “thought is placed in action and action is placed in the world” (Anderson & Harrison, 2010, 11). When reflection continues after action in the form of sharing experiences and ideas, bodily, prereflective experiences may become translated into language, concepts, and meanings. This is how the living, organic body and the lived, phenomenal body may become interconnected (Maitland, 1995; Thompson, 2007). Reality and imagination may intertwine in these creative processes, and the borders between science and art may become blurred.

The element of performance, or performativity, adds yet another layer to this discussion. In order to understand the significance of this aspect of (human) life, it seems helpful to shed light on some the many meanings this phenomenon. As a noun, *a performative* denotes to (speech) act(ion)s; e.g., to utterances that are events or actions in themselves, instead of descriptions of events or actions (see

Austin, 1975). The British philosopher John L. Austin, who coined the term, focused on performatives in the context of ordinary life. Before Austin, the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) studied “life as performance”, utilizing the analogy between theatrical stage and everyday life, and the many roles human beings take on, and thus, perform. The anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) is widely known for his extensive work on cultural performances, e.g. rituals. During the last decades, a growing body of literature on performance studies, and the so called performative turn, has enriched our understanding on how various act(ion)s, whether on stage or in everyday lives can be examined from the viewpoint of performance (Schechner, 2006; Fisher-Lichte, 2008). Further, *performative* has two adjectival meanings: it either refers to the performance aspect of any object or practice under consideration (see, e.g., Butler, 1990; Schechner, 2006), or it denotes “impactful” (Bolt, 2008), to having an impact, in austinian sense. Again, these terms can be used in the contexts of everyday lives, in the context of diverse cultural practices and in the context of (performing) arts. It is my view that performing is a significant element of human life that should be seen as a continuum where everyday life and art are interwoven. Thus, performing arts and embodied, performative actions should be key elements in learning and education.

Concluding thoughts

Dance is an embodied, performative practice. The educational potential of such practice seems promising, when investigated from the various theoretical viewpoints presented above. Based on my practical research projects (e.g., Anttila, 2008; 2013; 2015), I am inclined to propose that young pupils have an intuitive understanding about embodied learning, an inclination towards learning through embodied actions, and a strong desire for creative collaboration with peers. A collaborative approach towards creating dances incorporates embodied action with negotiation, decision-making, opinion-stating, and demonstrating own ideas not only in words, but also with the entire body. This process can be seen as series of embodied, performative acts that alternate with acts of receiving and responding to others’ performative acts. The experiences related to performing, coupled with witnessing others performing creates space for a shared experience and thus, may enhance the sense of community. A sense of community may, in turn, generate a safe environment for *performing difference*, and for an education that celebrates difference (Bhabha, 1994; Martusewicz et al., 2015).

Performing difference through dance may then be a path towards greater appreciation of diversity, and pave way towards agency, identity, and community. To close, I claim that understanding the significance of bodily activity coupled with reflective and relational processes is a key in developing a comprehensive view on learning, and may have wide pedagogical implications. Thus, dance as embodied learning and performative practice may have educational potential beyond learning dance.

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