

Dance as Innovative Education Throughout Curriculum:

An Essay for EDAN 202

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### Introduction and Process

For this assignment, we were asked to investigate ways in which dance can be used to mobilize curriculum in innovative ways. To research and write my essay I asked myself two questions based off of this prompt: 1) what does *mobilize* mean and 2) what is *innovative*. I quickly came to conclude that mobilizing the curriculum is moving or progressing student's learning and school experience in anyway shape or form. I also came to conclude that *innovative* meant: anyway that is new or differing from traditionally embraced forms and methodologies. Through my research and writing of this paper I have come to see that any use of dance in the curriculum is innovative and that dance can and should be integrated into *all* subject areas of the curriculum.

For my research, I started by interviewing my boss and previous high school teacher Dustin Brass. Brass was a teacher for seven years at Balfour collegiate here in Regina. He mainly taught Native Studies and English Language arts –both at the advanced placement and modified levels. He currently works at the university teaching at FNU and works at the Indigenous Peoples Health Research Center (IPHRC) and is pursuing his masters. The other individual that I interviewed for this assignment was my older sister Amanda Wolfmueller. Wolfmueller has been teaching for just three years at George Lee elementary. She has taught kindergarten and grades 2 and 3. These initial interviews served as the inspiration for my further inquiry. They provided me with ideas and concepts that were further researched in scholarly publications for this assignment. This essay expresses my findings and learning.

I have found that dance can, and does, move curriculum in a multitude of ways and in various places throughout education. First and foremost: dance is a way of knowing, and

embodied knowing supports and encourages deeper cognitive understanding. Since dance is a way of knowing, it can be used to help students build understanding in all subject areas. Dance is included in a holistic way of knowing and is connected to spirituality and offers opportunity for Aboriginal content to be involved throughout the curriculum. Secondly, dance's innate quality of requiring students to create and perform fosters a sense of ownership in the students, allows them to take control of their own learning, and ultimately shifts the locus of power in the classroom. Dance in education also has the ability to foster a sense of community and positive relationships ideal for promoting learning. Finally, dance's nature and history with Indigenous peoples provides excellent ground for teaching Native Studies and history through empathy.

#### Dance as Embodied Knowing that Supports Understanding

At the start of my interview with Brass I asked him "how have you used dance to mobilize curriculum in innovative ways" his initial response was:

"I believe you are exploring the innovative side of things whenever you are using dance; you are taking learning outside of the written aspect and you are turning it into something that is embodied, something felt more than just physical. But it goes from, you know, the mental of just writing something down to being mental-physical as well and it is stemming into those domains."

He goes on to explain how he has used dance in his ELA class and how using dance seems to deepen the students understanding. He told me he had used dance to get students to respond to various texts and also as a way of "storying." He then went on to say:

"I just found that through doing that, the depth of the lesson –the depth of the knowledge that they would work with or play around with– became deeper because they were asked

to move from just sitting there in the mundane to inspiring something that they themselves felt was real... When you embody something, you feel it at a deeper level and you are able to physically feel what that is like, mentally feel what that is like, emotionally when you get in front of people you get to feel what that is like; then in some instances like I said, the spirituality aspect of embodying that life that surrounds us and what that all entails; and also too, it showed to advocacy that we have as students to be able to do that.”

This idea of dance being a way of knowing and deepening student understanding is an interesting concept, and one that was echoed throughout my research and interviews. Citing a number of researchers, Hubbard points out that “[d]iscoveries in cognitive science have confirmed that concepts and reason are rooted on the experiences of the body (Damasio, 1994, 1999; Freedberg, 2002; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991)” (p. 47). Hubbard even goes on to give an example for students to further understanding when viewing visual art through movement:

“When students use their bodies to ‘become’ a building they gain an intimate sense of the makeup of the structure. As they test their balance, challenge gravity, and physically connect with each other, they respond to the building’s configuration beyond a clinical, formal analysis: Their embodied responses allows them to understand the building in relation to human experience of reaching, balancing, bridging and being physically grounded.” (p. 50)

Snowber also addvotcates this notion of embodied knowing supporting other learning when she says:

“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)” (p. 56).

I have found a great deal more examples that support this idea but I still have much more to cover. I feel that that the point has been driven home: Interacting with ideas through dancing and moving with the body provides a way to deepen student understanding. This could be used throughout the curriculum all the way from responding to art and texts to understanding math, as Wolfmueller explains.

Wolfmueller says, “I use have used dance to teach patterns in math, art, drama, and physed” She explain that she teaches students some dances like the *cha cha slide*, *macarena*, and the *hokey pokey* to help students grasp the idea of patterns. She also explained that she lets the students create their own sound and movement patterns and then teach them to their peers (this points towards students driving their own learning that will be explained later in this essay). When using dance in arts and drama she has the students embody emotions and feelings such as “anger and then they crunch up their faces and makes fists or something, or [she will] say ‘show me happy’ and they jump or twirl around.” She also has them embody actions like “flutter around the room as a butterfly.” In her classrooms, students use dance and movement to deepen their understanding in most all subjects.

### Physicality and Focus

Besides dance encouraging and supporting deeper cognitive understanding, it also releases energy that is held up inside of us. For younger learners especially, sitting in one place

for an extended period of time is unnatural, uncomfortable, and boring. This is where dance can be useful to purge some of the excess energy some students have with the end goal of having them be able to concentrate better. Another large aspect of dance in Wolfmueller's classroom was *wiggle breaks*. She explained that wiggle breaks were used because "the students need to move around and they don't get enough time at recess to do that. After they have a wiggle break they can stay focussed better." This is an interesting idea and I agree that it is true. All too often, especially for younger kids, sitting in a class all day is long and boring, and staying focussed is difficult. Being able to expel excess energy would be beneficial.

She explained that wiggle breaks consist of music and a dancing game, "their favourite is the *freeze dance*" where students dance in a circle until the music stops then they need to freeze in whatever shape they are in. She also noted that this is good for promoting physical exercise and focus. Snowber also supports this idea saying, "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" (p. 53). Besides all this, Wolfmueller noted that the students thoroughly enjoy, and often ask for, *wiggle breaks*. I see this definitely being useful with younger students, but I feel older students could also benefit from *wiggle breaks*. Not only does dance offer an opportunity for students to expel energy, but dancing is a lot of fun, and dancing together fosters an environment of friendliness. When students break free and they see their peers doing the same, everyone becomes less frightening. Our anxieties leave once our bodies are warmed up (Ricketts, 2011). Once we lose our presuppositions and insecurities, a whole world of opportunities arises.

#### Dance that Fosters a Positive Learning Community

As noted above by Wolfmueller, when students would create dance patterns for math, they would share their dances with one another. This act of creating and sharing fosters a sense of community in the classroom. The students are no longer individualized in their learning but now the learning becomes one that is shared. Brass also pointed out in his interview that that was one of the results of his use of dance in his classes. He says,

“there is community that happens as well when you are learning to dance. And also that transferring of knowledge from one person to multiple others. Then too, the intricacies that someone adds to those dances as well; although you are learning the dance someone might add a little extra step. And that is what I kind of wanted to go back to. [Back] to that concept of: that they were teaching others and showing others this dance. Some of the reasons we did that is because I really wanted them to feel that those dances were theirs. Especially after they learned them, I wanted them to see they were theirs.”

This is important for mobilizing curriculum because it builds a strong classroom community and also because it allows for students to drive their own learning. This sense of community and ownership through dance is one that is shared throughout various cultures. Indigenous cultures especially valued dance and Brass explained how he used dance and the sense of community that it builds to teach about Native Studies and colonization. This will be further explored at the end of the essay. Besides community, the creative nature of dance (as with the arts) provides a great opportunity for student driven learning.

### The Ownership of Dance and a Shift in the Locus of Educative Power

When students create a dance as a response to a text, art piece, or idea they must internalize those things, discover and explore how they feel for themselves and in themselves,

and then manifest those learnings into physical movement. When this is done, no one can tell the student how to feel, how to express, or how to learn. They decide for themselves and they own and then share their learning with one another. This dramatically changes the locus of power over learning in the classroom. Here, there is a shift from the traditional western narrative of learning (where the teacher is the sole holder of knowledge and the students are passive absorbers of that knowledge) to a more student driven locus of learning. The student becomes the master and the driver of their learning and through dance, that learning becomes a physical and visual manifestation for all viewers to take in. Now, every student who has witnessed their peers dances, benefit from one another's learning and expression of that learning. This is a much more inclusive and, I say, efficient way of transferring knowledge and therefore mobilization of curriculum.

When students share this learning with their peers, not every peer will have the same response as the others. When this happens, it opens a door for class discussion and further student driven learning. Brass points out when his students would share their dances that, “it was interesting to to talk about the bumping places that happened in between [dances] when someone would say ‘you know [the text] didn’t really convey that to me’ or ‘it conveyed this to me’ and then this sparked this whole discussion about that [the learning expressed through dance].” It is inevitable that students will interpret and feel differently about things they learn. This is not a bad thing though, rather, it provides more opportunities for students to expand their learning and feed off of their peers’ learning. Dance provides an excellent space for students to express, discuss, and learn from the various perspectives of their peers.



This is one of the most powerful ways dance can mobilize the curriculum: shifting the locus of power. Brass points out that,

“through dance and them showing what they are conveying, they are becoming the teacher. Because there goes that locus of power away from the teacher to what they’re representing or what they doing as well. Which is also an important mobilization of curriculum, is: that there is not one keeper of knowledge within the room that is called the teacher and the rest are just peons to listen to that person. Which is also an educational pedagogy as well that: there is not one locus of power within the room.”

At this point, when students dance, they are the ones who become the writers of their learning. No-body can dance for them except themselves. No one can create, improvise, and explore different dance moves for them. When the students physically dance their learning, no one is responsible for the learning besides the students themselves. The only thing the teacher does at this point is offer a prompt.

When I asked Brass “With all of this knowledge that you have gave me, how would you hope that it would be used, [and] in what way? Or, what would you hope would be the influence or residual effects of this information and this interview?” He responded by saying:

“My hope would be that you, or people who read what you construct out of this... would be that we don’t follow the common narrative of institutionalized education which requires someone to speak and then students to hear the information and synthesize that and construct through written discourse what they want to write. I hope that this would be something that you yourself would embody, or that people who read it see that there is a reason for it – there is actually people who use it. It is not just, as some people would say

‘hokey.’ It is something that can actually teach concepts that are outcomes and indicators as created by Sask curriculum. That would be my hope, that someone would see it as accessible and usable in the future when they become educators.”

That was the one thing he wanted me to remember.

### Using Dance to Teach Native Studies in Innovative Ways

As mentioned earlier, Brass used dance as a way to teach students about Native Studies and history. The way in which he does so with dance is one that I think works so well it is beyond words. Earlier, I pointed out that dance in the classroom fosters a sense of community and ownership, and that dance did the same thing for many Indigenous cultures. After Brass would teach the students dances and build a sense of community he goes on to explain:

“in terms of Native Studies where I related this too was outlawing and banning of ceremonies such as potlatch and Sundance and how as a community within the classroom they felt like that [their dances] was something unique to them, something that they had shared, something that they enjoyed, or something they went along with doing within the class. And then when I had taken it away from them and told them they could not do it anymore, what did that feel like? What did it do to their inner beings? What did it do to the community, [and] to the sociality of things? And that for me was just a relation to Native Studies concepts of colonization happening; that is why I used it for that.”

I say this is absolutely fantastic (and not just because he is my boss, but) because that is such a great way to teach history through empathy. By teaching in that way, giving the students dance, having them make it their own, and then taking it away, they are able to experience first hand the effects of colonization. This would be extremely effective even for students who were raised in

racist homes. This is because (speaking from my experience) if a person has racial tendencies, then they tend to shut down whenever someone tries to teach them otherwise (*citation needed*). But by teaching in this way, they experience and learn the inhumanity of colonization first hand. They experience the loss that resulted from colonization. On top of all of this, students gain a deeper understanding of the value of dance that they would have not had before that experience.

### Dance and Spirituality

I may be stepping over some boundaries in this next section but the writing to follows comes from my heart; it has been taught to me through Indigenous knowledge systems; and is inherent in my life and pedagogy. If I did not include it, I would be hiding a very influential part of my life. When I say *spirituality*, I am referring to an awareness of the interconnectedness of all of creation and an awareness of the human dependence on the rest of creation for survival. At the same time, spirituality is the expression of these awarenesses.

When speaking of teaching dances and steps to his students and what is behind those steps (the cultural knowledge) Brass says:

“along with that too, something that sometimes people try shy away from when they teach is the spirituality aspect to that. And it is through dance that I was able to be more poignant when I was teaching about spirituality. Spirituality isn’t a religious following, it’s an embodiment of life that surrounds us, so that’s why I used dance for that because that is what they were able to achieve by doing that within the class as well.”

That phrase: “spirituality... is an embodiment of life that surrounds us,” is very telling and helps us make this connection to dance. Snowber wrote, “Our lives are a dance in progress, as we are informed, formed, and transformed in the rich palette of lived experience” (p. 58). Brass speaks

of the embodiment of life as spirituality and Snowber speaks of our lives being a dance in progress influenced by our experiences. When we put those two ideas together, –embodiment of life as spiritual, and life being a dance informed by experience– we realize that dance is inherently spiritual. Our dances are reflections of our experiences, they are reflections of our lives, connections, and understandings. We embody and transmediate our life experiences into movement and dance, that is why dance is spiritual.

Gradle offers another perspective into this idea when she mentions the place of creativity in the Indigenous/traditional world view: “Creativity is seen as an inter-relational transformation, a dance of great magnitude between people, processes, and things themselves” (p. 83). Dance is without a doubt creative, when we we dance we cannot escape being influenced by our understandings and experiences throughout life. When we dance, or create anything, we move into direct relation with all of the people, processes, and things we have experienced.

The connection to curriculum may be skewed by this point, but don’t worry I am bringing it back. Curriculum, as defined by the dictionary, is any course of study. And we have been told over and over again throughout our time as pre-service teachers that we need to include Canadian Indigenous content in our classrooms. What greater opportunity to do so than to express Indigenous views towards dance and spirituality. When treaties were first signed, the Indigenous signed them with the intent of sharing the land and sharing cultures. That was not the case, but now we have a chance to reconcile that original intention.

Writing this essay has expanded my perspective on the value of dance. My interviews were the most fertile place of learning. It was during these interviews where most of the seeds for inquiry were planted. From the interviews every subject in this paper was revealed to me. These

revelations prompted the investigation of their validity and to no surprise they were in fact validated. The immense amount of scholarly writing on *embodied knowing* for example was staggering. Through writing this essay my view of dance in the classroom has drastically changed. Through my inquiry I have come to a much deeper understanding of dance, ideas that were once faint and foggy have become more solidified and I am sure will continue to be expanded in myself.

I always knew that dance was another way of knowing, but I never realized how massive it's integrative capacities were until I researched and wrote this essay. For example, I have always been fond of all of the arts and have thought of them as extensions of our being—we experience and express our experiences of the world through the arts. I had always thought though, that for some reason they belonged in their own classrooms. This is true to a certain extent, as there should be time *devoted* to exploring and growing in each form of understanding but they should not be exclusive and separated from one another. Instead, all of these modes of learning could(/should) be integrated into one another. I have criticised the western education system in my past because of the lack of value placed on the arts. I was looking through the view that there should be more art classes, but now my view has changed. Now instead of my focus being on more art classes, it has changed to more art *in* more classes.

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