

Flying Fish and
Dancing Dragons:
A Case for Dance
Education in
Singapore

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Abstract

The essence of the arts – meaning-making, creativity and the exploration of the self and society - define and differentiate it from sport. Imagination is the key and the language of teaching and learning in the arts is metaphoric; for instance, it is easy for young children to engage with concepts such as ‘flying fish’ and ‘dancing dragons’ in a dance lesson. However, there are many dichotomies and misnomers about the concept of ‘creativity’ in dance education - there is a need to constantly re-examine what actually occurs in classes to enhance student engagement and participation in creatively based dance programmes. Pedagogy, teaching methodology, curriculum, exam/performance frameworks and parent/teacher/student expectations all impinge on opportunities for creative dance education in Singapore – these components will be explored in the paper. Dance not only has creative, social and health benefits for students, the body encapsulates important information on human behavior in a cultural context and is an expressive tool for learning. Students can learn about their world through experiencing movement and communicate their thoughts and feelings in non-verbal expression.

Data from an in depth research and analysis of a NIE Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice project: ‘Creativity: Representational Practices in Artistic Domains’ incorporating a devised coding system and Studiocode data analysis of classroom data will be cited in the presentation.

Key Words: dance, dance education, creative dance, representation.

Introduction

Dance and sport have much in common – primarily the body is the centre of learning and skill development. Team work, co-operation, the sharing of common goals and aspirations are among many shared elements that contribute to the joy and passion of participation. In an education context, competition and performance often becomes the focus such that school pride and wider recognition are added to the equation – in a broader framework, community and national representation may also come into play. Alongside the immediate rewards, students' involvement in sport and the arts are now widely recognized as important contributors towards the development of citizenship and a civil society. In Singapore, the *Renaissance City Report* (2002) compiled by Ministry of Information and the Arts is strongly focused on this premise.

While these broad goals are embodied in the physical capacity to engage in a diverse range of activities, arts educators would agree that the arts, specifically dance, can leverage much more than this. Dance education should be holistic – engaging the body, mind, spirit and creative intelligence of individuals. These benefits are far reaching and require special pedagogies, philosophies and mentoring. Many extensive studies have been completed that argue the special benefits of arts education in schools such as Fiske (2000) and educators Ken Robinson, (2006) and Elliot Eisner, (1998) have spoken passionately on this subject; Eisner says:

...The problems of life are much more like the problems encountered in the arts. They are problems that seldom have a single correct solution; they are problems that are often subtle, occasionally ambiguous, and sometimes dilemma-like. (Eisner, (1998, p84).

Similarly, sports advocates put forward arguments to promote more time for PE and sports in schools – the arguments are often tied to health benefits along with those mentioned above. In March 2010 the Ministry of Education in Singapore made it mandatory for all students to have extended PE time and to study art and music – typically by adding an hour extra time

per week for each activity across primary and secondary levels of education. Education Minister Dr Ng Eng Hen (*Straits Times*, 2010) states that through sports students not only learn a range of skills, but ‘they develop self-esteem...and pick up important values such as team work and fair play’. This is in line with a policy by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to implement a new framework to;

...enhance the development of 21st century competencies in our students. This will underpin the holistic education that our schools provide to better prepare our students to thrive in a fast-changing and highly-connected world. (MOE, March 2010).

These are heartening developments that recognize the significance of sport and the arts reflecting a desire for a more holistic approach to education where ‘soft’ skills are valued as well as core learning areas such as maths and English. Rather than reiterating and assuming intrinsic polarities, it is useful to examine some shared components and differences between sports and specifically dance in schools as these share the body as the basis of the activity.

Observations

Acquiring physical skills through practice and repetition enables students to participate in a team game, perform a complex dive or to remember a dance, for example. This can be termed ‘muscle memory’

Developing physical skills

Dancers and athletes intuitively understand the meaning of muscle memory. It enables them to recall and execute the essentials of a classical ballet pirouette or perform a back-flip with ease. This is possible through the neurological mechanism whereby the body recalls pathways of movement – this is termed ‘proprioception’ and is the ability to sense, locate and feel body parts. Other examples are riding a bicycle and swimming – skills once learnt, never forgotten. In essence it is a physical skill that has been practiced so

thoroughly it does not require 'thinking about' anymore. Proprioception is also strongly associated with visual memory and this relates well to the pedagogy of dance teaching. In the arts arena, particularly dance as an ephemeral form, pedagogy still relies heavily on the 'master/apprentice' model where the teaching of skills is demonstrated and passed on to students who, in order to succeed, must replicate, copy and imitate. The teaching of skills to athletes often begins this way until they are able to understand the mechanics of the activity, can visualize and internalize it, and through practice achieve the skill. As they develop they move beyond simply copying and reproducing – for instance a top gymnast is coached by someone who does not demonstrate the complete skill at a high level such as a back somersault on the balance beam. The coach is able to articulate the process that assists the athlete's visualization, devise steps to work up to it in logical stages and provide trust and support.

However the proprioception/visual dependent relationship does not sufficiently account for skills and feelings that arise from a 'flow' of movement and a dancer's unique ability to link steps into phrases that exemplify meaning-making and emotion evolving into what we might term 'artistic expression'. Few sports require this component – ice dancing, rhythmic and artistic gymnastic routines and dance sports are exceptions. Typically this occurs in sports accompanied by music.

Meaning-making

The premise of the Abstract is that the essence of the arts – meaning-making, creativity and the exploration of the self and society - define and differentiate it from sport. However, there are many dichotomies and misnomers about the concept of 'creativity' in dance education - there is a need to constantly re-examine what actually occurs in classes to enhance student engagement and participation in creatively based dance programmes. At this point it is necessary to distinguish between dance 'education' and dance presentation/performance.

Dance education involves a holistic approach whereby students are engaged in the creative exploration of movement, meaning-making and activities, either individually, in small or larger groups, empowering them to

express their thoughts and feelings through the body. It is a 'process' and fundamentally different from a teacher driven, didactic approach where students follow the teacher's choreography and typically rehearse a set routine for several weeks culminating in a public performance or competition. Where dance is offered in the curriculum these two strands often come together as students may perform their own creations and those created by the teacher or a professional choreographer in a range of contexts. There is no disputing that dancers love to perform. Imagination should be the key and the language of teaching and learning dance metaphoric and 'open-ended'; for instance, it is easy for young children to engage with concepts such as 'flying fish' and 'dancing dragons' in a dance lesson.

Pedagogy for creative teaching and learning

Metaphors, such as 'fly like a bird' are incorporated frequently in dance pedagogy, choreography, performance and criticism. They can significantly enhance a student's ability to translate imagery from language into a bodily kinesthetic experience. As a pedagogy tool, metaphor may potentially assist conceptualization by referring something new to shared, prior knowledge. This translation of body posturing, attributes, sounds and even language, relates to Gender's (Gender, 1983, pp. 155-170) studies of the discourse between the speaker (teacher) and addressee (student) in what he terms 'mappings'. This shared knowledge assists the teacher in communicating to the class and promotes an 'intimacy' of the known/inside knowledge that they share. Thus a metaphor that was once introduced to support a new concept becomes part of the lexicon of knowledge shared by the group and is derived essentially from the transfer of meaning from one context to another.

Multi-modal stimuli significantly enhance opportunities for meaning making. Combining language through such things as metaphor, music, spatial awareness, bodily-kinesthetic and personal intelligences (Gardner, 1983) students can enjoy a rich creative experience. Through dance non-visual interactions, for instance in improvisation, require thought, sensitivity and reflection. This becomes a sensory, intuitive experience for

the dancers. Sir Ken Robinson (2006) comments, 'in dance people have to move to think'.

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Methodology

Research and analysis of a Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) project titled 'Creativity: Representational Practices in Artistic Domains' (Wright, et al 2004-2007), and the associated Studiocode analysis of classroom data gives some insights into key components of learning through the arts in selected schools in Singapore. The study took an ethnographic-style approach using multiple-case studies to probe the meaning of creativity and representational practice in artistic domains from the view points of educators, students, parents and community members. Case studies included dance classes at early childhood, primary and secondary school level.

The research questions were:

1. What is considered to be creativity and representational practice in artistic domains within different levels of schooling, students' homes and their communities?
2. What is inherently valuable about creativity and representational practice in artistic domains in teaching and learning (for example; aesthetic, secular-moral learning dimensions; artistic talent; ethics of care; self-esteem; quality of learning and attitudes toward lifelong learning; school and community 'spirit'; ethnic identity; the making of other subjects more interesting; the connecting of forms of literacy across curriculum areas)?
3. When creativity and representational practice in artistic domains works well, what is happening, how and why does it work, how is learning mediated, on what criteria is learning assessed, and what are the effects (cognitive/academic, creative, emotional, socio-cultural, economic)?

A coding scheme was devised by the team that enabled the documentation of the use of *representational practices* (RP) to ascertain the links between pedagogy, agency and modality. (See Notes below)

Mapping the use of descriptive, iconic, mimetic, metonymic, stylized, metaphoric and somatic representations by both teachers and students in the classroom was particularly useful. The sum of the resulting matrix data indicated that where there is complexity and a range of these attributes, the class is engaged and involved in a mix of productive and reproductive learning. Patterns associated with the use of these began to emerge.

Summary data showed how each component was incorporated in teaching and learning of dance:

Descriptive

- In all classes was the most widely used RP and the first point of explanation,
- It is usually associated with explaining tasks and concepts to students,
- The use of narratives and storytelling was often used to stimulate movement.

Iconic

- Some teachers used this to refer to familiar images – for example, a dance teacher prompted the children to make a pose like ‘Action Man’,
- Iconography is ‘shared knowledge’ that unites the teacher and the class.

Mimetic

- This is the most common way dance is taught – the children stand behind the teacher and follow the dance by ‘miming’ the movement,
- Also associated with clear understanding of imagery – for example, extending the arms to denote a bird or a plane.

Metonymic

- Often seen in small group work whereby the whole group may make meaning collectively and denote a particular object (train, bus, or car) – individuals within the group could also be drivers and conductors for example.

Stylized

- Stylization may occur when the group finds ‘the essence’ of the representation and essentially simplify it. For example, children with their arms held above their heads may signify ‘trees’.

Metaphoric

- Dance teachers commonly use metaphoric language to encourage children to ‘feel’ what the movement expresses. Phrases like be as ‘light as a feather’ or ‘as strong as a tree’ are examples of images to work with.

Somatic

- Least frequently used RP in the analysis
- Children engage in productive meaning making where sensuality is encouraged
 - for example, a teacher incorporated a theme of a ‘magic carpet ride’ whereby she dimmed the lights to let the children imagine their own carpet ride.

Dance Case Studies Summary results

The research project aimed at assessing levels of meaning-making and opportunities for ‘creativity’ in schools at all levels of the system in Singapore across the visual arts, music and dance. (A drama study was already underway by another research team at CRPP). The case studies for dance included observations over a period of a year of classes at three Early

Childhood Centres, three Primary Schools and three Secondary Schools. Our observations indicated that at the Secondary School level in particular, there were few opportunities available for students to make, present or critique their own choreography. (In fact, over the whole study in dance only one class, an Early Childhood session taught by a trained dance teacher from China, allowed students to engage in a variety of dance activities including creating their own movement in response to song lyrics and storytelling activities). Enthusiastic dance students in all other cases worked within the framework of a co-curricular activity dance club that was typically led by an outside teacher - a dance specialist. The main aim of the class was to perform a dance to represent their school at the biannual Singapore Youth Festival – a festival that ‘benchmarks’ standards through awarding gold, silver and bronze certificates to participating schools.

Student engagement in the creative process and their own meaning-making was missing in these dance programmes and the objective was to learn choreography to be performed. Almost all of the classes at all levels were taught in the ‘traditional style’ whereby the teacher stood in front of the class (most of the time with their back turned towards the students and facing the mirror) directing students to ‘follow’ their steps. High school students were typically engaged in standard ‘warm-ups’ such as stretching and strengthening, skill sequences and the like. This was followed by intensive practice of a routine set by the teacher. The data has shown that dance taught in most schools in Singapore incorporates codified steps, is strictly taught and is not about individual freedom of expression whether the form is Western classical ballet and modern dance classes, Malay, Chinese or Indian dance.

Lakes, (2005) articulates a common concern about such authoritarian pedagogical practices in dance. He begins his insightful and important essay with the comment:

...One of the great puzzles within the Western concert dance world is why so many artists who create revolutionary works onstage conduct their classes and rehearsals as demagogues....(he continues) ...A contradiction exists

between the liberating power that an arts education can provide and the continuing history of authoritarian teaching modes in the field...

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Here we see the dilemma when dance should be considered as an 'art' involving imagination and creativity – yet the research data actually places it closer to the fundamentals of sports training. The elements of skill-development, practice, team-work, striving for a common aim (to perform and perfect a routine) are all present and it is not suggested that this is not a highly enjoyable activity with enormous value to the students. In terms of a holistic dance education however, it is unfortunate that this cannot be combined with inspired teaching incorporating multi-modal practices, curriculum that gives diversity and creativity to dance in education and enhances student centered learning. Thus far, there are no O Level (leaving certificate for completing four years of high school) or A level (two years of junior college or pre-university leaving certificate) dance courses offered in Singapore and scant examples of a dance curriculum in the schools. Individual schools may offer dance as a niche area and this is certainly a welcome trend.

Conclusion

Rather than conceding that distinct polarities exist between the arts and sport the instances above point to many similarities and perhaps they can help each other by sharing some common ground. For instance, boys are more comfortable in sport. Why is sport 'cool' at school and involvement in dance is not? There are many gender studies relating to this issue and discussions with some male students revealed that despite the obvious athleticism of male dancers, they still thought dancing was 'sissy'. Others said that boys like to dance outside the mainstream doing break-dance, funk, and hip-hop in street wear; to be associated with the subversive, anti-authoritarian street culture where they can make up their own dances. In this context, MTV is usually their inspiration. The large numbers of young men dancing at outdoor spaces around Singapore testify to this. This also speaks of the fun of simply 'doing' the activity, choosing the style where

moving and creating is the enjoyment and purpose and feeling part of contemporary pop culture that they can relate to.

In a comprehensive dance education programme there should be no doubt about the fundamental difference between student participation in sport and dance. Student engagement in creative meaning-making that involves the imagination, the senses and emotions ought to be the core components. Developing dance education curricula that equally acknowledges the 'process' as well as the 'product' aspects of dance education is urgently needed in our schools. Judith Lynne Hannah (1999, 194) sums it up;

Dance education is valuable in itself. Often magical in its impact...the art of dance benefits emotionally, cognitively and physically. Dance is a kinesthetic intelligence...dance is integrally laced with other aspects of human life...

Notes:

i) A summary of terminology and elements of the Coding framework devised by the research team.

1. **Pedagogy:** Theories and processes of learning about/in/through the arts, influenced by:

a. **Contextual practices:**

- **local practices:** ethnicity, religion, class, gender
- **distant practices:** brought in from outside (peer groups, community, home)
- **universal practices:** applicable/generalisable across contexts (collective)

b. **Representational affordances:**

- **events:** types of experiences in which representation takes place (e.g. music lesson, drawing at home)

- processes: types of learning involved (skills/techniques, concepts, emotional connections, making, presenting, critiquing)
- features: characteristics of the artistic representation (visual, aural or movement qualities that are fore-grounded)
- functions: how the representation 'works' (decoration, aural ensemble, social statement)
- purposes: the intention, objective or end in view (craft, aesthetics, social engagement, performance, improvisation, composition)
- criteria: standards and means of judging

c. Pedagogical outcomes:

- productive outcomes: allowance for alternative outcomes and ways to produce them
- reproductive outcomes: transmission of knowledge/skills to be reproduced by students

2. **Agency** (person and practice: claims to autonomy, power and truth) and resources (instantiations of communication offered through the materials and 'figured' through artifacts)

a. Knowledge, tools and mediations:

- source of knowledge: student, teacher, textbook, artwork, worksheet, internet, mass media, exam
- teacher tool: whiteboard, OHT/visualiser, powerpoint, textbook, worksheet, internet, art materials, artworks, musical instruments, voice
- student tool: whiteboard, OHT/visualiser, powerpoint, textbook, worksheet, internet, art materials, artworks, musical instruments, voice
- teacher's mediations for thinking, feeling, acting: task/procedure, strategies, behaviour, content, concepts, processes, informal chat

b. Interactive structures in relation to representational events:

- time: amount of time afforded to events, place within the timetable
- space: location, size and quality of the area, number of participants
- layout: design of space/physical arrangement, proximity to other occurrences

- action: type and level of activity
- flow: sequence, continuity and 'ease/blockage'
- weight: importance or emphasis given to objects or events
- range: variety and scope (extent of interaction)
- narrative: story or account of event

c. Developmental trajectories:

- paths: types of development that occur in individuals over time in relation to (a) and (b)

3. **Modality**: The way in which communication takes place marked by:

a. Affordance of semiotic modalities and representational practices

- visual-spatial: forming mental models, creating and transforming mental imagery, producing graphic likeness of spatial information, imagining movement and thinking about spatial relations in terms of body orientation
- aural-musical: sensitivity to sound, general auditory and musical memory, responsiveness to sound structures, emotional connections to sound
- bodily-kinesthetic: the use of the body for expressive purposes (e.g. working skillfully with objects and materials using fine motor movement of the fingers and hands, gross motor movement of the body) and to make connections with visual-spatial and aural-musical domains
- somatic: the integration of the psyche (mind) and the soma (body), often while forming representational frameworks, through visual-spatial, aural and bodily-kinesthetic modes of thinking and feeling
- linguistic: using language

b. Types of representations

- descriptive: the process, act or technique of presenting an object or event (e.g. program music)
- iconic: having the nature of an icon (image, figure, likeness)
- stylized: conforming to the rules of a given style (characteristic manner of expression, execution, construction or design)

- mimetic: imitating or acting out using gestures and actions
- metonymic: having the nature of standing for something by association or suggestion ('the White House has decided')
- symbolic: using writing, marks, sounds, images, gestures or movements to stand for another thing, especially an object (event or emotion)
- metaphoric: likening one thing to another, as if it were that other ('screaming headlines', 'all the world's a stage')

c. Relative positionality of semiotic modalities.

- commonalities of (movement through art, music and dance)
- boundaries between (visual but not aural)
- shifting/switching across (visual and aural)



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