

Strictly Ballroom? Dancing along the Borders of Movement and Writing

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When we imagine a typical scene of writing, we probably have an image of a seated writer, who occasionally paces, stretches, but is mostly stationary and alone. Certainly a glance in the doorways of most writing classes would reveal seated writers, either composing or talking. In an attempt to expand our sense of the possibilities beyond this static image, to broaden our vision of how writers' bodily experiences and various intelligences may be involved in the act of writing, Karen Klein and Linda Hecker (1994) have recently advocated two teaching strategies, "hands-on manipulatives" and "walking the structure," which

exploit the ideas of 'learning-by-doing,' cross-fertilizing students' linguistic abilities with spatial or kinesthetic intelligences. By working directly with students and observing their writing difficulties, [they] found that many individuals struggling to express their ideas on paper could build models of how ideas relate using colored pipe cleaners, Legos, or Tinkertoys, or they could walk those ideas across a room, changing direction to indicate changes in logical structure. (p. 89)

In the latter approach, the exact shape of an individual's "walk" or exploratory movement is "arbitrary" (Klein & Hecker, 1994, p. 93). Gross-motor experiences of ideas are more important than following the movement patterns set out by Klein and Hecker: "[I]n fact, individual students are encouraged to invent their own sets of moves, if that feels more comfortable to them.... It is the gross motor movement of arms and legs, hands and feet that makes the abstract both concrete and tactile" (p. 95).

Klein and Hecker's work illustrates the utility of movement in teaching writing. What impact, what contribution, can movement make in a given act of composing? Could we claim that, by attending to feeling and thought through movement, our expression is facilitated? Or are the modalities of movement and writing impermeable, untranslatable? Or, for writers, does movement altogether change what Alice Brand (1994) calls the "valuative" experience, the various ways thought and feeling may intertwine in mental activity (p. 156)?

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Translating Intelligences: Moving Words

Of course, it is tempting to be simplistic. Movement is suited to “hot,” vibrant expression; stationary writing lends itself to “cool,” conscious, rational processes (Brand, 1994). On the one hand, it seems common sense that movement is *more closely* connected to emotion than is the act of writing. Feeling and movement are both somatic—feeling happens “in” the body; movement happens “because of” or “with” the body. It is tempting to focus on the gulf between what we experience when dancing, compared to when talking or writing. Howard Gardner (1985), for example, claims that the bodily–kinesthetic mode of intelligence is identifiable in how we use tools, in how we dance, and in how we mimic. He posits this mode because, presumably, other intelligences somehow cannot capture its modality. Gardner provides a sense of these limits by quoting famous dancers on how “untranslatable” meaning is in dance:

And indeed, it is difficult to get dancers (or even dance critics) to characterize their activity in a straightforward and concrete way. Isadora Duncan...summed it up in her well-known remark, “If I could tell you what it is, I would not have danced it”... [and], Martha Graham... has made the intriguing observation, “I have often remarked on the extreme difficulty of having any kind of conversation with most dancers which has any kind of logical cohesiveness—their minds just jump around (maybe like my body)—the logic—such as it is—occurs on the level of motor activity.” (1985, p. 224)

Why use movement in a writing classroom if the boundaries allow little in the way of immigration? Because the boundaries are not impermeable. And Gardner is quick to emphasize that no single “intelligence” ever solely produces a given performance. In thinking about these boundaries or relationships between our intelligences, we have two approaches: First, we can go about our business, relatively unconscious of co-existing intelligences working in a coordinated way, such as when we dance. As my former student, Jen, once described: “You’re listening to music, utilizing an aural mindset and musical intelligence, and unconsciously, you’re translating what you hear into kinesthetic intelligence, and putting it literally into motion.” The second relationship is of a different, trickier sort. We can *consciously* try to create contexts in which various intelligences cross-fertilize, translate, or mingle. This may be the case, for example, when we present a painting to students and ask them to write their responses to it, the visual and linguistic intelligences orbiting one another, so to speak. Or when we ask children to listen to music and draw what they hear. This second kind of cross-fertilization of intelligences is ambiguous because it involves both a conscious mingling of how we act and know in different domains. But it also involves “a letting go,” listening to the music, allowing associations to occur, moving image to page, at times consciously, or semi-consciously, or unconsciously. Perhaps this “trickiness” is the paradox of conscious, creative intentions; success depends on the degree of unconscious “release,” an openness to “peak”

or “flow” experiences, once we have consciously set ourselves in a creative direction. It is also tricky in the sense that, phenomenologically, the moment-to-moment relationship between the intelligences involved in hearing, imagining, and drawing is hard to pin down: Is it one of cause/effect? Translation? Hybridization?

We know so little about the nature and creative possibilities of this conscious coordination of intelligences. I believe it is worth our time as writing teachers to explore it, warranting the use of movement as a way of shifting student awareness of thoughts and feelings into and out of somatic and linguistic action. A back-and-forth movement. Note how, having to *say* something about dance, Graham, in the earlier quote, does in fact capture a *sense* of how meaning operates in dance—it “jumps,” perhaps in the same way our visual intelligence operates by discrimination and gestalt.

Body sense is present across our experiences and actions, whether we are aware of it or not. Seated writers, consciously or not, have bodies involved in the act of writing, whether that involvement comes in the form of a felt sense, a frustration, the excited jiggling of a foot, the pauses and breaths between jottings, the voicing of words, or the subterranean murmur of inner speech. Individually, movement and writing are both tools that are expressive extensions of our bodies, in the sense described by Polanyi (1958): “We pour ourselves out into [our tools] and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them”(p. 59). My own wish, therefore, is to wonder about the role that a more extensive, deliberate use of “the body’s wisdom” can play in writing events.

We have a number of pedagogical strategies that can help students attend to their physical experience during composing: freewriting, Perl’s (1994) exercises for felt sense, Klein and Hecker’s (1994) “walking structures” and “hands-on manipulatives,” guided imagery related to a particular topic, visual representations, or even doodling. Presumably, by cross-fertilizing our different physical and cognized emotional lives, we ground or inhabit the moment of writing more cogently, successfully, or perhaps even surprisingly. Or, as Brand (1990) observes, “Learning that includes emotion has more stick-to-the-ribs quality than does ‘cold’ cognition and influences performance years later” (p. 306). However, the present culture of most classrooms limits our vision of what is “appropriate” and helpful to better writing. Movement in a writing course seems tantamount to “dirty dancing” in the ballroom. What *can* movement offer writers? In given composing scenarios, how can movement shape their emotional and cognitive experiences? I am trying to make more room *culturally* for the vital role that intrapersonal intelligence can play in this process. Nevertheless, I also embrace the caveat made by Klein and Hecker that movement-based approaches to writing “do not work for everyone,” but should be presented as valued options in a student-centered pedagogy (1994, p. 98).

Two recent experiments suggest directions for those interested in this line of inquiry, teaching, and learning: a collaborative one between the philosopher Robert Schwarz (1993) and the dancer Christina Svane; and the other, a project completed by Jo-Ann, a student dancer in an experimental course I co-taught with Margaret Daisley at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In the latter

instance, I functioned as a participant-observer, seeking to understand how one student conceived of movement-writing connections, and how both I and her peers responded. I will tell both of these anecdotes and then conclude by reflecting on their implications for the teaching of writing.

Dancing into a Different Space

In October of 1992, the contact dancer Christina Svane and philosopher Robert Schwarz conducted a seminar at the School for New Dance Development in Amsterdam, entitled "Spatial Orientation: A Key to Meaning in Thought and Movement." Schwarz (1993) collaborated with contact dancers, exploring concepts of space and "the role that body postures and movements play in the processes of abstract thinking" (p. 45). In effect, Schwarz and Svane wanted the dancers to try to change their sense of space as a separate "thing," around which bodies move, to an understanding that space inheres in the experience of movement itself. They encouraged the dancers to experience spatial concepts as the metaphors they are, linguistic constructs for the human experience of motion and mass.

Drawing on the works of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1987), Schwarz first provided lectures describing the central metaphors that can be found underlying the discourses of philosophy, law, religion, and science (verticality and hierarchy being the most obvious), and the relationships of these metaphors to "motional meaning": "[T]he key words which seem to advance any discourse are words of motion" (Schwarz, 1993, p. 47). He deduces that motion guides all thought processes, and that

[s]pace, time, mass, gravity, inertia, and countless other essential abstractions from which our reality is formed are not so much external *a priori* givens as they are *a posteriori* creations out of the matrix of body experience. (p. 48).

Schwarz's objective was to help the dancers realize this new body-space relationship. A conceptual transformation of space is created "inside" their experiences of moving. Movement and thought become inseparable.

After the lectures by Schwarz, Svane led the dancers through movement sessions, intended to effect new, non-reified, body-centered orientations to space. Svane's term for this phenomenon is the "now-plane" (Schwarz, 1993, p.44). While dancing, participants attempted to "turn about" a spatial concept in their minds, trying to locate the way in which they conceptualize through the motions of their body. The dancers' journals suggest that they moved with a spatial term in mind, such as "along" or "beside," and then somehow attempted to release that word into the motions of their bodies, "letting go" of the "idea" of the term. Integrating thought and movement, the dancers were re-orienting or "mingling" their physical and conceptual senses of "movement," "space," "dance," and so on. Svane and Schwarz sought to effect these "conceptual transformations" for the dancers through a conscious interpenetration of movement, discussion, and writing. In their journal reflections, often in imagistic, metaphoric,

associative form, many of the dancers report powerful transformations in their approach to contact dance:

Mary Overlie: I had a very strong and amazing experience when I worked by myself with the word ‘through’ in conjunction with moving without the concept of space. I suddenly had a whole new movement vocabulary available to me (p. 44).... It was astonishing to me that when Christie and I did some Contact work with these words [with, until, carry], we were able to be in the Contact dance with such completeness and clarity. (p. 50)

Katinka Bosse: It was new, every single little sensation, sound, emotion, posture.... While this [dance] went on...10% of my conscious mind...was still able to put labels on the “happening”: phrase it, recognize it, compare it, evaluate it. (p. 52)

Christina Svane: So many layers to be aware of. This process has a preparation phase. The Now Plane does hinge upon the body. The body needs time to remember its own complex chords. One doesn’t hear all the instruments in the orchestra at once. Roving is part of Now. Images fleet. A fleet of images. An association seems the next step. Images first. Awareness. Image. Association. (p. 48)

Jo-Ann’s Movers and Witnesses

In the Spring semester of 1993, Margaret Daisley and I co-taught an experimental writing class in which we explored with nine students the ways of integrating the arts of performance and writing. The second half of the course was entirely devoted to student projects and experiments, one of which, Jo-Ann’s, involved us in forging movement–writing connections. Based on her past training and experience in dance, Jo-Ann believed in what she termed “the body’s voice,” “a nonverbal voice,” a way in which the moving body itself has something to “say.” What intrigued her most were the “connections and gaps” between embodied and textual “voice.” Her inquiry into these possible relationships involved us in “deep movement” exercises, which were followed by freewriting. Jo-Ann’s sense of the “connections and gaps” are best summed up in this excerpt from her project narrative:

Rhythm is a central defining feature in dance and in writing. Voice, in writing and dance, becomes apparent in the pauses; shaped by where one stops, and for how long, and at what level. Are you left hanging in the air, or heavy on the ground? How does the writing/dance flow, how intense is it? Does it creep low, slowly, timidly with caution or tenderness, or is it running, leaping, spinning so fast that it seems like the ground/page will explode? And breath... where does the writer/dancer stop to breathe? Are you

breathless or deeply sustained in full breaths that give lustre to every word/gesture? (1993, p.2)

To begin her project, Jo-Ann asked us to stand in a circle and to warm up physically through stretching and relaxation exercises. Then, she dimmed the lights and divided us into two groups, five lounging on the floor, five others standing, encircling them. As her project unfolded, her voice was steady and soothing:

The group on the floor are movers; the group standing around them are witnesses. In your own time, movers, close your eyes, and allow your body to move, any way it wants, and when it does, let whatever thoughts happen, happen—impulses, intuitions, images. This is like freewriting: freedancing. Witnesses, all you need to do is to keep the movers safe, keep them from hitting the walls or one another. Just watch, but also pay attention to your own thoughts and reactions. (Doherty,1993)

Now, almost a year later, I remember well my participation in Jo-Ann's project. During the movement phase, vivid images and thoughts came to my mind. Concurrent with an upward reach, I saw a brilliant night sky. Concurrent with a wing-like movement, I recalled images of dreams in which I could fly. Jo-Ann urged us to envision our bodies and movements as extensions of our writing selves. Because she was interested in the "connections and gaps" between the embodied and written voice, the last phase of her project had two parts: a mixture of dance and utterance—what one student later called "movement poetry"—and then quiet freewriting, intended to connect the page to our previous movements. In the first part, the group spontaneously danced together without music, some gliding, others just gesturing slowly. As we moved, Jo-Ann urged us to express words spontaneously, and after our initial nervousness and laughter, out they flowed, pell-mell. It was hilarious and exhilarating. Needless to say, we were a trusting, tight-knit group.

After the exercises, we sat quietly, freewriting in our journals:

Jen: Can't put words to what I saw. No words in emotions, no words in movements, no words in reaction. Just movement.

David: I felt like I could go on forever like that... the movement poetry was also enlivening. I felt like I took it to heart, and kept expressing that lonely line [sic] I had explored in the pure movement exercise.... I found movements shaping words, words forming movements....

From Tim's journal: I began to have images of a night sky, trees outlined in blue and black shadow, and the green shoots of garlic in the garden.... As a witness, I tried to imagine what was happening

for each person. Were they simply moving on impulse—like Glenn seemed to be? Was Nicole rocking and almost motionless most of the time because of some deeply felt connection? The voices of their bodies—a sleeper, one yawning and gathered into motion, one rocking in a center. (1993)

Stacey: How can we express ourselves w/o the constraints of words?...Movement. Movement seems so natural and uninhibited—that's the way I imagine a dancer must feel—uninhibited—so flexible to stretch their limbs gracefully, diagonally, horizontally. Stand up tall and extend your muscles, point and flex your toes, Roll your head. A goal of mine w/my writing is to abandon all of these constraints and be able to dance with my pen [sic., an illustration trailing off of the "E"]. (1993)

Movement along the Continuum

In thinking about both of these experiments, to make sense of the many ways movement and words interact, involving different cognitive and emotional experiences for writers, we can draw on the work of Alice Brand (1994). To understand the various ways emotion and thought co-exist, she uses the metaphor of a continuum, along which we might plot shifting ratios of cognition and emotion, depending upon the kind of experience we are having: From the “cool,” “slanted toward cerebration,” to the “hot,” “weighted toward feeling” (p. 155). Even though the “entire person” is the site for learning, there is heuristic, analytical value in such metaphoric separations, helping us appreciate the nuances of interrelated thought and feeling.

Adapting Brand's (1994) “continuum,” we can try to make sense of the ways movement and writing produce, in conjunction, a variety of “valuative experiences”—Brand's term for the complex interaction of arousal, motivation, cognition, and emotion. On the one end, as we move, we may experience something akin to arousal, what Brand and others call “felt sense” or “protoemotion.” Such an experience is prelinguistic, precognitive because it involves no “names.” On the other end, as we move, we may have something akin to a cognitive, linguistic experience, a fully felt and named emotion or thought. In the middle, movement and reflection are ways of bringing felt sense into conscious awareness. Movement is a way of “attending,” the entire physical body participating in the process of thinking and feeling, moving toward greater consciousness and verbalization.

By virtue of this sort of continuum, we can appreciate a progression among the experiences of both the contact dancers (identified by last names) and Jo-Ann's participants (identified by first names), a progression from relatively unconscious, non-verbalized movement, to experiences of images, to a word-richness triggered by, or continuous with, movement itself:

“No words in movements. No words...” Jen

For Jen, no words could capture the kind of knowing and experiencing of

movement. Words are absent in what Jo-Ann called the “body’s voice.” Svane’s “now-plane” seems comparable.

“10% of my conscious mind...” Bosse

Just as we begin to attend to meaning in the course of moving, things may begin to make sense. Images, words, and feelings may be only vague “blips” at first, as on a radar. My own initial reaction was relatively uncognized. Immediately after, I recorded it as “impulses to move a limb—not very conscious, but sometimes moved because of an intruding thought ‘have to move,’ or a sudden awareness of witnesses or noise upstairs.” The dancer Bosse, as well, seems to describe this phenomenon: “While this [dance] went on...10% of my conscious mind...was still able to put labels on the ‘happening.’” (Schwarz, 1993, p. 52)

“Images fleet. A fleet of images. An association seems the next step.” Svane

Insofar as images and memories are evoked during movement, our post-movement, freewritten record of them may begin to capture the texture and substance of a movement experience. The image-word interaction is also another dimension of “mingled” intelligences. During movement the visual and auditory modes are triggered simultaneously. The majority of my own movement experience was imagistic: “I began to have images of a night sky, trees outlined in blue and black shadow, and the green shoots of garlic in the garden.”

“I found movements shaping words, words forming movements.” David

For David words “happened” while he was moving, but he also seemed to explore a “line” in both the “pure movement” and “movement poetry” phases of Jo-Ann’s project. Here, as in improvisation, censorship loosens. Movement becomes heuristic, opening the door to linguistic performance. To the extent that ideas themselves are evoked as we move, words may begin to mix with, or capture, the knowing and experiencing of movement. As a moment-to-moment phenomenon, such a relationship is indeed “tricky,” hard to put into words alone. Schwarz and Svane also encouraged the dancers to begin with a “motional term” like “through” or “around.” Overlie’s experience attests to the power of this approach: “I suddenly had a whole new movement vocabulary available to me.” (Schwarz, 1993, p. 44)

“to dancE with my pen” Stacey

Finally, there may be a post-movement effort to translate in words that “feel” right. Through the medium of words, we “feel through” or “convey” the movement experience. Most of the dancers in Schwarz and Svane’s experiment use writing as a post-movement processing of the subtle and intricate discoveries and experiences they have had (Schwarz’s essay describing his project includes a total of fifteen written “reports” by the dancers).

The above “progression” mirrors Brand’s (1994) continuum, though I should echo her cautions about overlap and complexity (p. 156). In general, I speculate that the emergence of sense through movement and into words depends on

- our motives for using movement: to experience the “body’s voice” for

its own sake; to discover meanings and felt sense; to explore a pre-determined word or idea;

- the confidence, ease, mood, or attitude of the mover, itself shaped by the immediate context and its climate;
- the trust of the group;
- the intensity of the movement experience;
- the highly particular experience in space–time;
- the nature of the emerging and often simultaneous emotions, images, and sensations; and
- the kind of writing we are doing, before, during and/or after the movements (recording, freewriting, reflecting, integrating into a larger essay).

It seems clear from their writings that Schwarz and Svane’s dancers perceived afresh the central ideas of their art. Jo-Ann’s movers and witnesses, through combined movement and writing, experienced sensations, images, words, and ideas that writing without movement would not have produced. Moreover, these dancers literally and figuratively moved beyond verbs, the traditional words of action, transforming prepositions and adverbs into a new “movement vocabulary.” The material in both experiments may be viewed as reflective, linguistic cross-fertilizings of somatically transformed thinking. They seem shaped by the movement experiences themselves, leading the dancers into memories, associations, metaphors—the stuff of poems. Both of these “movement-language events” reveal a strong bond between what was felt and what was uttered; as a result, learning had a “stick-to-the-ribs” quality.

As teachers, we can integrate movement into writing classes in different ways and to different degrees, depending on several factors. From the systematic connections made by Klein and Hecker between movement and the progression of thought in writing, to Jo-Ann’s more open-ended, intuitive approaches to freewriting and “freedancing,” our choices depend on our objectives and our willingness to take risks. We might ask students who are reading and writing about social issues to examine the metaphors of their own and others’ writings, to detect the emotional-cognitive “movements” of thought, and to weave within their reading and writing processes their own movement explorations.

But there are simpler, easier beginnings: I use movement for writers to warm up and explore persona in text through physical, gestural activities such as facial expressions or “walks” used in conjunction with oral reading (see Johnstone, 1981, on “status”). Peter Elbow (1995) also offers a number of ways of incorporating physical performance into reading and writing activities, such as choral readings and tableaux.

Clearly, movement takes time, and often the movement-writing connection, in its complex manifestations, is not an efficient, instrumental means to finished written products. It is more about expanding our sense of what learning can be and about connecting our multiple intelligences. To do this as teachers, we must try to create a reassuring climate that diminishes self-consciousness and embarrassment. We may feel safe relegating movement to a pre-writing stage of com-

posing, and no doubt any greater role summons a changed vision: writers out of their seats; writers moving their bodies; writers transforming these experiences into meaning. In essence, such images are a challenge to the prevailing culture of what counts as learning, knowledge, and writing. ☺

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