

Dance and the Creative Process

Dance is my passion, and I believe that dance and movement have a place everywhere, including in every school classroom.

We all move.

Our movement may be functional or expressive, but every move we make helps us experience and better understand ourselves, each other, and the world we live in. Any movement can become the basis for dance.

I will never forget the time I asked two middle school students to demonstrate moving in a clumsy way, which they did with focus and delight. I commented that it would be a great beginning for a dance, to which one of my students asked, “You mean you can make a dance out of that?!?”

Enter, creativity.

These students, without any creative dance experience, the opportunity to explore, or the permission to try, simply didn't know what was possible for them. Once given those conditions, who knows what they could accomplish, and how creative they could be?

If you have already looked at the creativity overview, you know that for a young field, there's a lot of creativity research out there. But creativity research in dance is very new. Until the past few decades, much of the insight about creativity in dance has come from the biographies of creative dance artists and choreographers, like Martha Graham, Murray Louis and others.

But the history of creative dance exploration in education is much older, dating back to the 19th century. And of course, dance itself is an ancient practice.

As with many other domains, there is no single creative process that applies to all of dance. The creative process is different for dance performance, dance improvisation, and dance making (Morris, 2005).

Dance performance is the process of doing dance movement, whether for an audience or on a stage. The creativity of dance performance is grounded in the body itself. “Creative performers of movement are those who maintain heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the creativity of the human body at rest and in movement, as well as the creativity of the interface of the body/mind” (Morris, 2005).

In traditional terms of creativity research, the description by Csikszentmihalyi (1996) of a flow state during creative activity as an “almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness” (p. 110) theory of creativity that aligns with this view of creative dance performance.

Dance making involves the more traditional idea of the creative practice at work, as creators go through various phases of idea generation, exploration, discovery, evaluation and refining to make dances that others eventually see.

Choreographer Wayne McGregor refers to dance as a way of physical thinking (McGregor, 2012), and kinesthetic, or bodily, intelligence is one of the seven original intelligences advocated by Dr. Howard Gardner in his MI theory (Gardner, 1999).

Dance improvisation is a hybrid of spontaneous dance making and performing, in a way similar to jazz music or improvisation in other domains. Improvisation plays different roles in dance:

1. A tool of discovery for someone making a dance, as part of his or her creative process.
 2. A performance mode in its own right, performed for an audience. For an example of a structured improvisation for performance, please see the TED talk by Bill T. Jones (2015).
 3. An educational process of discovery used in creative dance
- It is the third role of improvisation that is the focus of this resource kit.

Three more definitions

1. Creative dance – A specific term used to refer to a systematic approach to **self-generated movement exploration** as a way of learning about dance, oneself and the world. It is not affiliated with any particular style of dance, such as ballet, jazz or hip-hop, but utilizes basic elements of

dance movement – time, space, effort, shape – that would apply to any style of dance. Creative dance most closely aligns with modern and contemporary dance, given the focus in those styles on self-generated movement exploration and expression.

2. Movement/creative movement: Something all human beings do! This term is often used interchangeably with creative dance - which can include common pedestrian movements such as walking, running, falling and standing still - as a way of diffusing perceived or potential insecurity about “dance” ability in a given population.
3. Cross-disciplinary: One pillar of the 21st Century Skills Map, and necessary for any standards based process of inquiry, involving the integration of multiple disciplines, such as dance and visual arts or science, music and writing.

One important note: the experience I described at the beginning of this document, of students demonstrating “clumsy”, occurred in a language arts class. Dance, because it has strong visual, musical, and storytelling components, is a flexible mode of expression that partners well with any of the core content areas.

Why use creative dance movement in the classroom?

Creative dance incorporates all three of the dance creative process areas described earlier – performance, creation and improvisation. When you move on to review the dance elements and dance-making tools later in this kit, you will be learning structured ways to guide students in these explorations.

The simple structuring and sequencing of movement exploration provides several classroom benefits:

- reducing movement anxiety and worry about evaluation
- allow familiarity with movement to increase confidence
- increase engagement, intrinsic motivation, and openness to experience as students try to accomplish movement tasks and solve movement problems

If you have already read through the creativity overview earlier in this resource kit, you will remember that these benefits are all directly related to the components of creativity.

Additionally, creative dance movement provides a perfect platform for student **collaboration**, another potential component of

creativity not mentioned in the overview; collaboration is a topic of study in creativity research. For an example of creative collaboration in dance-making, please see the TED talk by Wayne McGregor (McGregor, 2012). The dance-making blueprint provided at the end of this resource kit will provide a vehicle for student small group collaboration in the classroom.

This dance-making blueprint will also provide a vehicle for the exploration of movement integrated with other core content material. As you remember from the creativity overview, another component of creativity is the ability to make **unexpected connections** and **combine disparate areas of inquiry**.

This aspect of creativity may be part of the reason that the 21st Century skill map, the Maine Learning Results (MLRs) and the National Core Arts Standards all call for cross-disciplinary activity in the classroom.

For a brilliant example of how creative dance movement can integrate with the core content area of physics, please see the TED talk about dance and Powerpoint (Bohannon, 2011)!

One important note to keep in mind as you view any of the TED talks referenced here: the dancers and dance makers featured are fully trained; they are performing **high quality, original and relevant** work – all aspects of creativity. They are representative of the “**professional C**” level creativity discussed in the creativity overview.

Make sure as you watch to remember that the creative dance movement represents the very beginnings – the “**mini-c**” creativity level – of a **developmental** path leading to this level of performance.

Both the MLRs and the NCAS call for the underlying components of creativity and the creative process to be addressed from the pre-k level onward, at the very beginning of this path. Creative dance movement in the classroom addresses every level of this path, from pre-k through grade 12, and most of the dance elements and dance-making tools you will encounter later in this kit will work, with modifications, at every age level.

As a final note before you move on to the dance tools, it is important for students to see examples of all levels of dance performance, from the mini-c activities of their peers to the little c dance creativity of local hobbyists, the professional c work exemplified in the TED talks, and the big C of the time-tested masters. When presented in context, such works do not need to be intimidating or discouraging, but can serve as **motivators** and discussion points about **aesthetic qualities, skill building**, and the nature of creativity itself – which in turn enhances **meta-cognition** of creativity.

Students can encounter these performances both live, by attending local venues and by inviting teaching artists into the school for workshops and performances, and through technology, you have by viewing the TED talks and the demonstration videos coming up next!

References

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