

Fostering Agency and Artistry in Dancers

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As each new semester approaches and I consider ways to re-write, refine, and update my syllabus and with each round, I feel anxious and expectant. Questions linger from work in the previous term or year as I touch on my bodily memories of what happened—what approaches felt fresh and rousing, what stimulated unexpected information and connections. Or conversely, what methods felt less productive, or generic. Each semester I devise assignments that I hope will encourage students to be eager and acquisitive. As I tap into my embodied memories, inevitably the students also rely on their memories of what their training has revealed for them, and how they assign importance to certain aspects of the process. More and more, I stress that their learning experience outside the classroom is crucial to creating new paradigms, scaling new heights, and is not in conflict with remaining connected to foundational concepts and results.

Anne Bogart (2005) writes, “If we can see ourselves in relation to our predecessors and the impulses behind their innovations, our own theatre will necessarily become more intense poetic, metaphoric, humane and expressive” (p 40).

I find that my relationship to memory as a tool for forming new approaches is volatile. I am wary of relying too much on what is established, what has come before, but I know that my teaching is bound up in my connections and alliance to my own teachers, my substantial history as a performer and choreographer, and my ongoing commitment to remain a student of the art form. Bounding back and forth between the ancestors and the radical newcomers keeps me full of questions and tension. Qualities I value in my classroom.

I assign interviews, movement essays, collaborative projects, and movement studies that require the student to create a new language for their experience, to question definitions and to stir up an urgency to locate new words for familiar activities. The goal is to open up a process that is based on established forms. Students walk into the studio and they stand in a familiar pattern or grid, facing the teacher, who occupies an empty swath of space at the front of the room, information is delivered and the students are asked to re-create what they see and hear. When this pattern is disrupted, when the student is asked to formulate the purpose and goals of an exercise or event, the equilibrium is knocked askew. Freshmen often struggle with this change-up and resist taking responsibility. The transition from being told exactly what to do, what to wear, how to solve problems in order to meet a specific goal is difficult. Re-arranging perspective can be achieved by simple circumstantial re-positioning. Where do watch students perform a compositional study or exercise? Do we always sit in the same spot at the edge of the room? One day in composition, after leading a group warm-up, I invited the students to stay where they were, scattered across the studio floor, then to assume a low level, lying on the floor to watch the studies from this perspective. It was an invitation to think of cinematic methods that might be fruitful for real time explorations. We began to have fun with the prospects for shifting the established viewing arrangement by standing on chairs, or observing from outside the studio and through the glass door. Site-relational or site-specific work is a robust field in performance studies, but aspects can be applied to the traditional classroom or theater setting with great outcomes. Students later wrote about this class as offering new ways to situate their performance and question the audience–performer relationship.

If a filmmaker learns techniques of filmmaking by creating short projects that focus on framing techniques, how to use, capture and manipulate light, how to operate a camera with single or multiple shots and then how to edit, can dance training follow a concrete project driven structure? A syllabus is created to address a trajectory that focuses on a specific vocabulary, ways to deal with space, time, force, velocity, gravity, density, rhythm, and effort through a set of prescribed exercises usually developed and disseminated by a pioneer in the field, often from the previous century, either adapting or rejecting a particular accepted idiom. Established or fundamental forms come into conflict with new approaches creating a necessary dialectic about effective and innovative methods for training dancers. Pleasure, surprise, and joy, I have found, go hand in hand with innovation. Tethering known experiences and outcomes to impromptu activities, responding in a fluid way to new and unexpected things that come up, can make students more responsible and accountable for their learning. Moving between structure and plans, relying on memory of past successes, with the willingness to see what comes up, has delivered the most vibrancy and success in my roll as a teacher.

Through attending to repeated forms, muscle memory and precision is cultivated and refined. Students learn to execute shapes and actions that are known and recognized as signifiers of accomplishment. They also learn about correct anatomical function and alignment allowing them to push limits while avoiding injuries, and increase physical strength and stamina. Range of motion—joint range and specificity—increase. Intellectual curiosity, imagination, defiance and a rapacious drive to carve out a singular and individual identity are less easily folded into the rigid structure of a technique class and therefore less easy to support or promote. Students are often asked to keep journals of

their process so they can look back over the term and find important landmarks, plateaus, highlight ongoing questions, and measure and evaluate their progress. I have asked students to create fake interviews—to come up with both the questions and answers to address their experience, to write letters to themselves at the beginning and at the close of the term, or to write a summary in a very specific format as a way to promote reflective, memory making evaluations. But I never feel that these methods accurately capture the taste, the atmosphere, the weather, the qualities of the physical, emotional and intellectual act of making meaning out of movement. The choreographer Tere O'Connor has suggested that there is a lot that dance does not do, and should not try to do. But still, in an academic setting, with semesters dividing the evaluation segments, we are required to find structures for measuring the ephemeral act of dance.

Measuring learning in the classroom is full of pitfalls and shortcomings—once meaning is constructed through experience, it becomes a memory and is subject to and is legislated by our view of ourselves inside the experience. Memory is fallible. I find that I tack back and forth between the past and the present to find what's next. In improvisation classes, I give the prompt to “not know” what is coming next. But is this possible? We sense and feel familiar responses, solutions and answers, and must acknowledge them to proceed to something new—or actively seek to counter or dispute the known in our meaning making and composing.

And it is in the handling of our selves that the logical cul de sacs and double binds, the inconsistencies and the side-effects are the most vicious and insidious, where the errors and gaps in our theoretical principals cause the most damage and suffering. (Juhan, 1987, p. 11)

I have come around to the realization, that for me, it is in these moments of slippage, small failures and veering off course that can move creative discovery and analysis forward. Faulty recall and distortion can be a vital part for constructing methods of original problem solving. Keeping a line or thread that connects back to real, and tangible events is necessary, but not so much as to limit exploration. Technique should mobilize imagery, sensations and information.

I try to articulate these contradictions in my course syllabus by including text that acknowledges the erratic nature of the process, such as:

Notice details, be relentless in your desire to discover, but—be willing to walk away from your work, set it aside, forget about it, change your mind and even dismantle or deconstruct it and start over anew. Learn the rules, the history and legacy of your discipline, but be willing to challenge the rules and avoid outcomes that are certain to bring praise or a good grade. Don't expect airtight guidelines and certainties. The process can be messy and convoluted. Why is this? The clash of human impulse to achieve and find answers comes up against the reality of chaos and the improbable.

I examine these and other movement metaphors, anecdotes and classroom discoveries not to resolve the paradox or conflicting notions of learning, of making and doing, but to find reasonable and generative methods to embrace them and bring them alive in the classroom. Unlike Juhan (1987), I hope to notice and mark the errors and gaps in theoretical principals for productive rather than damaging results.

Relentless pursuit of a skill is a mark of both stubbornness and passion. Dancers often approach technique class with ferocious drive to attain skill and thereby, success.

Success is often defined, for the college age dance student, by what they see already occurring in the profession. The force of will to figure something out, to gain insight can be driven by fear of failure—not a bad impulse, but if this alone is your main impetus, you to freeze up in fear at the first stumble. Likewise, if you are solely driven by a desire to please your professor, your parents or some perceived audience, you are limiting your possibilities. You are already predicting the outcome—a grade, a compliment, a reward. The task at hand becomes hemmed in and prescribed by artificial measures. If you can tap into a pure desire to experience something new, to uncover some part of yourself you didn't know was there, you'll tap into a willingness to fail as part of the journey. Being willing to stumble, be foolish, to let go of immediate expectations is liberating and powerful.

While it's commonly assumed that the best way to solve a difficult problem is to focus, minimize distractions, and pay attention only to the relevant details, this clenched state of mind may inhibit the sort of creative connections that lead to sudden breakthroughs. We suppress the very type of brain activity that we should be encouraging. (Lehrer, 2008, p. 43)

According to the neuroscientist, Mark Jung-Beeman, daydreaming and game playing—letting your mind wander—is essential (Lehrer, 2008). For some dance students, being asked to loosen their grip on always reproducing particular shapes or positions that denote the codified language of classical ballet or modern, is heterodoxy.

In constructing exercises for my students, I employ a shifting frame or lens of focus that sometimes feels like an unruly alchemy of coincidence, pleasure, desperation and enchantment. Finding prompts to provoke or reinforce a student's desire to engage in

self-directed learning often takes a story-telling shape—moving through and talking through metaphors and analogies. Dance is ephemeral, our output is registered in action, reaction and then repose. How we reflect on our work, and how I ask my students to think about what they have created or how they interpret the work of their peers relies critically on using fresh, inventive and sharply defined language. This is where collaboration and active exchange can be a vital, but disquieting part of the learning process.

One day last year, as I stood before my class ready to begin the launch into the opening exercises for technique class, I could not override the leaden and stale vibe from my students. They often deal with fatigue, physical strain and lack of sleep, which inevitably shows up in the opening segments of class. Then the cortisol and other chemicals of the neuroendocrine system become activated and students are able to bypass the tiredness, and successfully engage with the work. This day was different. I needed to make a shift in the way we thought of practicing our craft, physically, emotionally and mentally. I announced—“Let’s go to the wall”—which sounds like an axiom, or call to arms, but I meant it literally. Our studio has one large, open wall where each student could find a space to work. I led the group with specific tasks for pressing and resisting body weight, moving from the arms into the legs encouraging each student to experiment with using different surfaces and varying pressures. Then I became less specific and urged them to work, always with one point of contact to the wall, through balances and more challenging weight bearing. The musician joined in and provided an imaginative score for us to work inside—using rhythmic awareness, phrasing and pauses. The students became more committed and began trying out inversions and balances that

required considerable strength and flexibility. We kept an ensemble mind throughout our investigations, incorporating connections and weight sharing with each other and the wall. Complex suspensions and layers emerged. We found our way into canon formations and began to cycle off the wall, leaving the wall at one corner, observing the composition as we made our way to the opposite end and launching back into the work. We moved non-stop, sweating and breathing hard. Sometimes someone would call out a structure to play with—propel off the wall in complex timing structures, rapidly return to the wall and repeat till exhausted. We moved throughout the hour and a half class without stopping, feeding off one another's ideas and energies. At the end, there was a happy consensus that we had busted through the veil of fatigue and expectation sometimes surrounding gearing up to get through class. With full employment of all our senses, we created a new structure for learning.

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (1994) writes, in her book *Sensing, Feeling and Action*,
The separation of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual faculties in our culture is a direct reflection of our bypassing the need to survive on an automatic physical level. This means that on one hand that automatic physical defense mechanisms on the low brain level are minimally stimulated to develop, while on the other hand, high brain mental consciousness is greatly emphasized. (p. 56).

This situation might be no more common than in academia and higher education. As a professor of dance, I must consistently make a case for (and sometimes defend) the value of my creative research and practice to my colleagues in other disciplines. This is a place where I can surprise the students with the ways movement carries and transmits

significance and meaning. How grappling with solving problems and tasks in non-verbal language.

I co-teach a movement section in course called Creative Process with faculty from the schools of Art & Design, Art & Architecture, and Engineering. The cohort of students move through two week sessions in each discipline and create a “mini-project” at the close of the session. I avoid using the term “dance” to describe the goals of our two weeks together, and assure the students that gaining proficiency as a dancer is not necessary. Most students have only a vague idea of what a life as a dance artist/educator entails and what goes into the training of dance students. The demographic is multi-cultural/international, unlike the predominantly white, Caucasian, Midwestern students in the Department of Dance. I take them through a series of experiential exercises that introduces them to the concept of making meaning out of movement and how physical expression of ideas can be transformative, and cracks open assumptions about the potential for thinking and acting creatively. We improvise as soloists, duets and in groups, sharing movement ideas and talking about how we see and interpret movement. One exercise involves shifting back and forth from writing and moving, creating movement scripts for classmates to interpret.

One exercise early in the semester seems to give the Creative Process students agency to trust and embrace the ways they interpret abstract movement. Improvising as they watch, I ask them first to try to describe as accurately and vividly as possible the actions they see. I urge them to enlist verbs, adverbs and adjectives that have heft and produce a visual counterpart: twist, collapse, contours, jagged, dripping, floating, punch, retreat, enfold, grab are some of the descriptors recorded from the last session. I ask them

not to project value or encode their words with qualitative definitions. Then I perform a second improvisation with the direction to interpret what they see in any way they want—to enlist poetic, character driven narratives, to allow personal influences to show up in their language, to play with metaphor and allegory. This exercise usually reveals fantastic stories and images, and the students delight each other with their vivid story telling skills. This gives them permission to play and avoid editorializing the ways they see and interpret actions. I can feel the rigid expectations fall away—the desire to be “right,” to get a good score, to find the correct answer.

Course Description

Creative Process is a course in which students are encouraged, in an interdisciplinary way, to explore processes of creativity. Activities are organized around a series of two-week hands-on workshops, weekly colloquia, and a final project, all of which are designed as opportunities to learn and practice--and even get good at--being creative in all sorts of ways in all kinds of situations. Aptitudes like empathy, storytelling, and experiencing awe will be fostered, along with the ability to identify opportunities where none are apparent and the courage to make and share things that are beautiful and joyful. A team of five faculty from four different UM schools will work closely with students to illustrate how thinking and working creatively bring greater productivity, accomplishment, meaning, and richness to life, academic, professional and personal.

(Professor Stephen Rush- School of Music, Director of UARTS 250--Creative Process, Winter 2014)

Movement – How are ideas expressed through movement? How do we translate movement into textural and spatial narratives? Engaging with improvisational exercises, cultivating keen observational skills, experimenting with sonic elements (sound, voice, music) and developing an imaginative language of gesture and play, we will create movement studies that have shape, intention and intrigue. Viewing and discussion of dance/theater videos will support our investigation. A final movement event will be created individually or in groups and presented to the class.

We discover how our choices are implicated and mediated by our histories and use of language. Many students begin the session feeling very intimidated by having to move or dance in front of the others, but by the end of the two weeks of exploration, have gained measurable confidence and proficiency in expressing ideas through performance. They are also cultivate and gain a language for observing and talking about dance and performance, and in doing so, find connections between methods of imaginative problem solving that cross disciplines. We look at videos that have sophisticated, cutting edge technical components—scenic, video and sonic elements—that point out the vibrancy of collaboration. They learn the ways that loosening their expectations for “success” and “achievement” and commitment to risk taking, trial and error and vulnerability is rewarding and promotes a willingness to try new things and appreciate the labor and experimentation of their peers. And finally, for most of them, using their bodies to express ideas feels exhilarating and new. Being in a three dimensional, temporal based

practice counters the reliance on verbal, digital and “flat” milieu they inhabit in most of their other pursuits.

Sharing your struggle to gain proficiency or clarity is disarming and can feel vulnerable. If a safe atmosphere is cultivated, we are often rewarded with surprises and unexpected outcomes, along with a sense of confidence that being vulnerable in the process is worth the uncertain outcome. Sometimes it helps to have someone view a familiar scene with you. It’s as if you see through “new” eyes or, sometimes uncomfortably, through *their* eyes. It suddenly seems so easy to see the things that are out of place, shabby, unnecessary—a consequence of assuming something was or should be a certain way, but is not, or should not be. David Sedaris (2004) describes this feeling in a short story called “The Living Dead.” While living in Normandy, the writer finds himself attempting to drown a mouse in a bucket of water on his front porch. A van pulls up on the road in front of his house. It’s three in the morning and the streets are dark. The occupants of the van have gotten lost trying to find a nearby house. When Sedaris invites them inside to look at a map, he is struck by how his furnishings look. They seemed drab, colorless, and mismatched, the decorations are odd, ominous, even threatening. “The Visible Man on the table lay in the shadow of a large taxidermied chicken. The table chairs were mismatched and in disrepair.” A keychain that resembles an amputated finger, an odd novelty, is lying on a counter—“Where did all this stuff come from?” he asked himself. How could it be that this is his living room in his house? Is this insight? A natural consequence of rearranging the ordinary objects in front of you, or in your mind—seeing and experiencing in a new way without questioning the purpose or reasoning? Or is this clarity derived from acute discomfiture? I would argue that opening up ones

process to others, even when work is in a formative and raw state, is enormously beneficial. As a seasoned educator, I still very much appreciate peer reviews of my work in the classroom, though post-tenure, it doesn't happen often.

Anne Bogart (2005) writes, “Over the years, we have simply articulated a set of names for things that already exist, things that we do naturally and have always done, with greater or lesser degrees of consciousness and emphasis” (p. 7). Enter the self—where is the I in this, this entity that decides what to do when with what? How do we optimize the psychic energy generated by the nervous system and organized, evaluated and integrated into precise bits of information by distinct areas of the brain? “Information enters consciousness either because we intend to focus attention on it or as a result of attentional habits based on biological or social instructions” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 7). This sounds so dry and analytical and the burst of enlightenment (a gamma burst in your frontal lobe, in fact), feels just the opposite- serendipitous, un-summoned and slippery. When you least expect the answer, sometimes it lands right in front of you, accompanied by a sweet exhalation sounding like “oooohhhh.” When does the shift occur? While you’re attending to another completely unrelated task, something mundane? In the shower, riding your bicycle, talking to yourself, watching a movie? Yes, yes, yes and yes. The something you were seeking is unearthed, you turn your head just the right way and the gears ungrind, you stumble and thoughts realign, a different light is cast on whatever it is that you’ve been inspecting. The accumulation of questions about how to proceed, the tangle of mounting frustration settles into a readable, reachable form.

The choreographer, writer, and actor Peter Schmitz sat in on my rehearsal for a dance I was creating with a large cast of students at the University of Michigan. I had

been toiling away, with what felt like diligence and discipline to craft the opening of a section of a longer work. All the effort showed- all the choreographic sharp elbows were flying and landing blows. The effort of organizing the dancers in space, in a coherent way was painfully obvious. It was very clearly “choreography,” nothing more—the method of moving bodies in time and space, without much joy or mystery. It felt like the more things I tried, the stiffer everything became. I was digging a nice hole for myself. Peter watched from the corner and then simply said, “...It seems populated...” I could see it too. Finally! I cleared away the entire overdone, unfocussed goings on, eventually ending up with solo material and it seemed to fall into place. The dancers who had been working very hard to nail down the complex patterns and phrases and were then edited out weren't too pleased, but I think they could sense what had happened.

I teach movement technique as indistinct from composition. Yes, we consider structure and form, correct anatomical alignment and elements of locomotion and spatial dynamics, but in intimate relationship to intellectual and emotional curiosity. What if we make associations based upon projection instead of real experience? We construct meaning by doing, but also by imagining endless possibilities. We hope to be spurred on by questions about what could be. What if modes of learning are acknowledged as being chimerical? And what if this is a good thing? In teaching, and searching for ways to teach, I wrestle with how to guide students to construct their own pathways for discovery. While teaching a three-week composition class as a part of The American Dance Festival—Henan, in Xinxiang China in the summer of 2012, I came up against one of the most daunting challenges so far in my teaching career. Many of the students were from

mainland China and had significant training in Classical Chinese dance, but less exposure to contemporary Western forms.

It's about 9:30 AM, August 26, 2012, the last day of the American Dance Festival (ADF) in the Pavarotti Music Hall, Henan Normal University, Xinxiang, China. Students, faculty, and administrators are gathered to witness and celebrate the results of three concentrated weeks of classes in movement composition, repertory, contemporary technique, and voice and gesture.

We were asked to open our souls and look inside. We were urged to see new things, and experience new ways of thinking about dance—to free our thoughts from the past. Amy brought us the freedom of America.

I had asked my composition students to give a brief introduction and description of the work we'd done before showing their movement studies, and two students had volunteered. A third student was translating from Mandarin to English. The assessment was from a seasoned dancer and teacher who had a strong practice in traditional Chinese dance. I listened in amazement at the description. I glanced at the other American faculty and noticed that they had surprised smiles on their faces.

Throughout the festival, I struggled with how to bring ideas, methods, and practices of contemporary Western dance making into the compositional work we were undertaking, while incorporating and learning from the traditions and histories of the Chinese students. Although I'm fascinated by and often embrace highly politicized analyses of events and demographics, I had never spoken a word about an "American way" of doing anything, or that America represented *freedom* in any of my classes!

Differences in geography, history, movement styles, philosophy, aesthetics, motivation, and language can create obstacles. I had taken care to eliminate an acculturated or polemical slant in my critiques of student work. Although I had spent three intense weeks working with the students at ADF/Henan, I recognized that there was so much that I missed, or could not work out. Inevitably, some things were lost as we attempted to transmit information across unseen and unspoken barriers. Yet, by the close of the festival, a deep intimacy and trust flourished. We improvised, exchanged ideas, and made dances together in a shared fluency that erased differences.

We also found much to laugh about, often stemming from my attempts at or adaptations of Mandarin into class directions, as in *dway y'all!* or, *shinga ma?* The cross-cultural lingua franca that we'd created together gave us irrefutable common ground. It is surprising territory. Dancers understand that this is a place where partnering, supporting, yielding, and experiencing the charged connection of a gaze or a touch is part of our special circumstances. We grapple with this paradox of similarities and differences in meanings and interpretations all the time.

As I search back through my journal of my teaching experience in XinXiang, I was drawn to the reflections recorded after the first day of composition class:

Had the first composition class today and realize what a challenge this will be. In general, these students are less experienced in modern or contemporary Western dance than in Beijing (where I was teaching prior to this engagement). They are familiar with the kind of classes where they are given a set of directives based on traditional and long practiced forms. The idea of shifting and changing textures and mutability is unfamiliar. They expect me to provide answers, a solution about

how to execute a specific movement narrative or gesture. They want to get good at doing the “thing” rather than wondering what it might be. Trial and error is very embarrassing for them. These are questions posed to me at the end of class—when most everyone looked very perplexed:

We want to learn moves that will improve our choreography.

We want to learn ways to show anger—not only shaking our fists.

We want to know what these exercises will teach us because the material is not beautiful.

Why would I change the speed of this movement? It looks funny done quickly and beautiful done slowly.

It was a slow process. I asked them to bring in images from magazines or photographs, and stressed that it didn't matter what the image was, only that it had linear complexity. Then I asked them to transfer their images to the classroom floor.... To enlarge the image so that it became a map and then to traverse the lines in any sequence they chose, but to stay true to the spatial divisions and lines. I asked them to work on clarifying their path, and for now, not to consider their mode of locomotion. They thought it was incredibly boring to be walking around the studio. But when we sat and watched several students perform their maps simultaneously, they began to see how this “simple” exercise shifted the way they saw and experienced the space. We noticed intersections and repetitions, and how figures moved around each other if their lines crossed. I attempted to tell them about the Australian Aboriginal concept of songlines and dreamtimes, but, even with my skilled interpreter, I think this concept remained fuzzy for them, but it made for some amusing cross-cultural exchanges. They did tap into the metaphorical possibilities that

coincidence offered as they noticed and commented on the poetics of seeing two people approach, encounter each other and navigate a passing.

Eventually, I asked them to play with different levels and speeds, and to vary their modes of locomotion. From this troubled start, very sophisticated compositions emerged and we were able to find common ground in subsequent studies. Some of the classically trained dancers experimented with a fusion of their familiar movement language and the new techniques for manipulation and generation I offered. We were all surprised at the unusual qualities and indescribable styles that materialized.

Michel Foucault's (1997) essay, "The Order of Things," meditates on how categories can limit and constrain, how the naming of things can calcify our ability to perceive and experience. "Foucault is breaking out of mental categories as a way of taking a fresh look at the world, not only uncovering in the process cultural and mental habits, but also asking the question: 'Says who?'" (Barron, Montuori, & Barron, 1997, p. 108). Foucault (1997) then quotes from a list of animals that Jorge Luis Borges found in a Chinese encyclopedia: "animals that are divided into" a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, etc..." (p. 108).

Over the last several years, I have launched a direct effort to puzzle out questions about teaching movement technique. I don't teach an idiom from a particular historical legacy (Graham, Limon, Horton, or Cunningham), but draw together the influences from my training and fuse it with compositional improvisation and choreography. Inevitably I include influences from my work and experience in the field, and beyond. I taught a workshop at *The World Dance Alliance Americas–Festival and Conference/ Evolve + Involve: Dance as a Moving Question*, in Vancouver BC in August 2013, that pulled

together these questions, and I continue my research in my classrooms at The University of Michigan's Department of Dance.

Class description:

Technique + Choreography: Inseparable Acts—Expanding technical limits can promote a curious compositional mind. How can we animate our choices? How do we cultivate specificity and attention to detail with humor and imagination? Challenging assumptions about sequencing and habitual pathways offers inventive, vivid and unexpected movement qualities. Loosening attachment to familiar or recognizable results can offer up surprising qualities, valued in both technique and choreography. Why should these practices be separate? Building extended phrases of idiosyncratic movement with both set and improvised material, we will tap into a physical experience that is rhythmically, intellectually and creatively thick and rich. The constant flux and exchange of doing and reflecting heightens awareness of compositional choices and delivers work that has immediacy and force.

At the close of the Fall 2013 semester, a graduate student in music composition wrote the following in a summary paper for her work in my dance technique course:

It was like trying to listen to myself speak a different language and questioning whether I was actually hearing my own voice. I was moving with a different sense of flow and a different vocabulary of movement. Most radically, I moved without stopping, whereas before I would have stopped improvising after only a short while. It was not a change in endurance that really kept me in motion, but a

mental change: a heightened sense of exploration and wonder in the movement.

(C. Hedden, summary paper for dance technique, Fall 2013)

This reminded me very much of Dalcroze Eurhythmics, where the primary pedagogical philosophy is “Experience first: Analyze second.” The idea is that a student has to know how something feels first, before they can start to understand it cognitively. Hence, in Eurhythmics, musical ideas are taught through movement. In this way, a student physically comes to know what a particular rhythm or musical phrase feels like in their body.

Like many people, I collect artifacts, talismans, and mementos in my travels. Stones are a favorite. Each smooth stone provides sensory delight and a cache of recollections—I can roll them over and over in my palm, while remembering—more than remembering... almost being transported back to the time and place I picked it up through the physical act, by the sensations and textures. Details flood into awareness:

Oh yeah, I picked that up while camping along the Yellowstone River. That was when a moose stamped down on a low leaning sapling causing the trunk to strike my dog, and when my companion and I had the first of many spectacular fights that would extinguish our relationship. I stayed up late into the night looking at a map of Wyoming tracing my finger over and over the route from the east coast as if locating the exact spot on the map where the blow up occurred would explain what went wrong. But the campsite was perfect. Near where I slept, the glass-bottle green water rushed by, serenading me through the night. The rocks were a mineraled bottle green too, polished smooth and shaped like three-dimensional amoebas.

My memories of the event are bound up in the stone, colored and influenced by everything that has happened to me since I leaned over and picked it up, subject to and legislated by who I am now reflecting back on the experience. Being cognizant of how these slips and pitfalls shape meaning is helpful, but not always reliable.

I like to find stories and images that have tactile as well as visual resonance when explaining or demonstrating a movement or compositional concept. I encourage my students to use metaphors and visual imagery in composing and responding to movement. They search back through their memories of similar experiences to find a way forward, and possibly a new way to behave and perform. I visited a student rehearsing for her BFA concert recently and treated to a vivid explanation of her method for devising her solo. She imagined that she was in very specific landscapes with two other figures or people. She gave herself the task of encountering, supporting, being supported or manipulated by her unseen companions throughout the solo in very specific ways. This gave her movement and her choices fascinating texture and timing. Without knowing her strategy before watching her run-through, I could sense the space around her, the quality of light, and the density of the air as she carved through, punctuated and scored the atmosphere.

Lately I have been thinking about talismans as a body source, gesture or ritual. An act, or gesture that can connect a student to a specific state of readiness and resourcefulness. The Movement and Voice teacher, Rafael Lopez-Barrantes talks about eclipsing yourself in your work, which means to shift the focus from yourself to the task or act. This is an intricately entwined emotional, physical, intellectual and visceral endeavor. I think we all do this to cope with stressful situations. We employ a sigh or a

stroke a finger over our cheek, fold our arms across our chest, rock back and forth on our feet. What if a specific and unique gesture was created to launch or complete a challenging session or exercise? And what if this action or gesture supported breath, energy and alignment in revitalizing and reachable ways? In the vocalization exercises in Lopez-Barrantes' classes, we are asked to come up with three or four physical tasks to perform while working. If we get distracted by our efforts, elements of self-consciousness stream and clutter the discovery process, he intones, "return to your body source" as a way to touch down. He also throws in "eclipse yourself" as we improvise and sample different states and sensations. As a performer, I've experienced this "eclipsing" or "out of body" sensation, and I've felt it take over my activities and work in the classroom. The sensation of watching yourself, with confident energy, with a welcome and steady flow of ideas and connection to the work and/ or the students comes with preparation and attention to details, but also seems to emerge, become visible and tangible serendipitously. Perhaps this is the flip side of the David Sedaris description of having a stranger step into his living room at an unscripted and unexpected time. But at the heart of both situations is the state of being exposed. Of stripping away conventions and tropes and searching for the words or actions that will pierce through the air, and launch a new discovery—and artistic agency.

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