

## *Performing Arts in Higher Education: Sensing the Body to Learn the World*

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### **Abstract**

The arts play a fundamental role in the educational field. This paper outlines the importance of considering performing arts initiatives in higher education as an agent of transformation. The approach discussed outline the artistic/dance artistic residency developed at the *P. Lantz Initiative for Excellence in Education in the Arts*, a project that took place in the Faculty of Education at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Knowing their own body, working with the space to recognize one's *kinesphere*, experimenting movements from other cultures, collaborating with partners and creating dance performances allowed participants to open inner spaces, physically, critically, and consciously, increasing the respect for themselves and others. These experiences were extended to university staff, providing a transformative, human and relational perception of the participant's surroundings as a communitarian space. Presented in three acts, this paper enlarges the perspectives of the educational use of performing arts as an agent of learning and teaching, allowing the development of the student's self-development, and self-care.

Keywords: Performing Arts, Higher Education, Self-Agency

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## Introduction

Speaking of performing arts is also to speak of education, either education of the body in relation to sensorimotor awareness or in relation to the refinement of expressive sensitivity through the learning and development of a repertoire of movements, and creations. In the next pages, we intend to highlight the importance of art as a transformative educational agent. We will develop this article in three acts. The first highlights some thoughts about the arts in education. The second takes us to the role of the body in the educational environment. In the third, we explore the first author's experiences during her P. Lantz artistic residency at McGill University in Canada, and its effects on one of the participants.

### *Act I – Is Art Essential to Education?*

From the Latin *ex-ducere* – to guide, to lead, to take out of oneself, to develop, to blossom – the concept of education is vast and quite diverse. According to the *Dictionnaire Actuel de l'Education* (Legendre, 2005), “[Education is] the ensemble of values, concepts, knowledge and practices whose purpose is the development of the human being and society<sup>1</sup>.” Thinking of arts in education necessarily delves into the difficult question of *what is art?* Reflections on the context of this question are a key element to finding an answer since a definition of art is not self-evident, and even identifying what art is and what it is not presents some challenges. As Costa (2009) explains, art is such a multi-faceted and diversified phenomenon that it is not possible to find a common essence to all its manifestations, nor a condition that allows us to define it.

When we think of art, immediately comes to mind the notion of creative processes. Arts is often seen as a privileged field in which individuals have wide-ranging emotional and intellectual creativity not found in other areas (Ostrower, 2005), although the creative process is not limited to the arts. For García, Plevin and Macagno (2008), creativity is “a disposition to enter into a dynamic relationship with what the world offers, an ability to use one's imagination to discover and employ the potentialities of the environment according to one's own desire” (p. 21). Ostrower (2005) reminds us that creating is to form something new, to be able to establish a relationship between events that occur within people and in the surrounding environment... Creativity involves action and requires a body.

During the twentieth century, thinkers such as Herbert Read (2015), Margaret H'Doubler (1957), John Dewey (2008), Paulo Freire (2002), María Fux (1979) and Rudolph Laban (1990) have influenced and opened doors for the inclusion of arts in the field of education. These thinkers have understood the fundamental power of the arts in the formation of human beings. A common point among them is the vision of art as a means to transform society. Herbert Read shows us through his *Education Through Art* (2015), the importance of art in education. Drawing from Alexander Baumgarten<sup>2</sup>, Read understands art as the expression of an aesthetic sensibility, an essential factor by which humans adjust "subjective feelings and emotions towards the objective world" (Meeson, 1974, p. 5). Art can be a path to personal development (self-fulfillment) and for the cognitive and emotional development of the individual.

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<sup>1</sup> Free translation from the French : “L'ensemble de valeurs, de concepts, de savoirs et de pratiques dont l'objet est le développement de l'être humain et de la société.”

<sup>2</sup>Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) was a Prussian philosopher mainly involved with the fine arts. He was the author of *Æsthetica* in 1750, inventing the term “aesthetics” that became a philosophical discipline.

For Read, formal education must include an aesthetic orientation, which he conceives of in five goals. The first, is to preserve the natural freshness of sensations and perception of the world. The second, is to facilitate the coordination and combination of these perceptions and sensations in relation to the environment. (e.g., the relationship between voice and music). The third, is to facilitate the expression of feelings with simplicity. The fourth, the promotion and teaching of modes of expression, and this leads to the fifth goal, which is the formation of artists. For Read, artists are not only those who produce artwork, but those who can express themselves in their vocational paths. Read's idea of an artist goes hand in hand with John Dewey<sup>3</sup> (2008), for whom an artist is "...someone who is not gifted with special powers of execution, but who recognizes the qualities of things with an unusual sensitivity"<sup>4</sup> (Dewey, 2008, p. 57).

Dewey questions the nature of artistic production, suggesting that rather than being a special type of creation, it evolves from the usual and necessary actions of life, adaptation to the environment, and the human need for satisfaction. He sees the experience of creation as an interaction between outside resources and the individual to find a solution to a problem or to intensify the experience. Art is a tool for emotional adjustment to the exterior world and provides humans with a way to perceive reality helping them to better live with themselves and with the environment. The conceptions of Dewey and Read are the foundation for a student-centered view of education in which art is emphasized as a fundamental element of learning.

## **Act II - Body: The Essential Overlooked**

It is critical to consider the body in education. Cognition is deeply related to the relationship that the body establishes with the environment, reflecting the way that reasoning and thought are embodied. According to Lakoff and Johnson<sup>5</sup> (1999): "Mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical" (p. 3). By using the term "embodied," Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (2016) highlight that "cognition depends on the kind of experience that comes from possessing a body with various sensorimotor capacities..." (pp. 172-173). Also, these capacities are embedded within the contexts of our biology, psychology, and culture. Thus, from the perspective of Embodied Cognition theory, thinking *is* body.

The interaction of the body with the environment generates an interactivity of cognitive function and the world, making possible the action of learning (Shapiro & Stoltz, 2019). The more we experience similar stimuli in the environment, the more likely we are to respond to these stimuli in a similar manner. This is how habits and worldviews are established. Bodily habits influence not only the execution of our desires but also the formation of ideas that convert desires into concrete actions (Shusterman, 2008). The presence of one's own body in the world is assumed by the perceptive experience. For Damasio (2006), the reference that the body provides to the mind is essential to develop the notion of the self.

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<sup>3</sup>John Dewey (1859-1952) is recognized as the father of the progressive school (Lord & Raymond, 2018) and influenced an entire paradigm of thought about education in the 20th century.

<sup>4</sup>Free translation from Portuguese: "É alguém não especialmente dotado de poderes de execução, mas também de uma sensibilidade inusitada às qualidades das coisas."

<sup>5</sup>Lakoff and Johnson have made a huge contribution to the study of the role of the body in cognition. Their book *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999) is the most complete statement to date of the claim that the bases of cognition are embodied, especially considering the dependence of thinking on its underlying neurological system.

Understood as total immersion in the flow of movement, dance sets up a relationship between the body and the environment. Movements (e.g., walking) depend on our physical structure, as well as on our environment (e.g., surfaces or the shoes on which we walk). The dancer and the dance are embedded in individual, cultural, and social constructions including body image, sexuality, gender, religion, and spirituality (Hanna, 1992). The image of the body and its formation is closely associated to the culture from which it originates (Arendt, 1983, Héritier, 2006).

Culture has an influence on perception, expression, and thinking (Andrieu, 2010), however, each individual perceives the world in an individualized way. We learn when we interact with others, with our culture, with our environment and we build our knowledge about ourselves through the biasing perspective of our individual body. One of the ways in which art is relevant for education and for social transformation is the way it opens us to the world. An artistic work that acknowledges each person's individuality permits the remaking and reconstruction of ingrained patterns, allowing a sort of updating of the relationship between this individual and the environment. Within the Performing Arts, dance is a relative newcomer to the formal educational system (Bonbright, 2000).

Considering that perception is a mental elaboration of sensations, the more our conscious perception expands, the more we are able to produce a *present presence* in a permanent state of sensory excitability and sensitivity in the world. Consciousness in perception protects us from alienation. Individuals that develop a sensitive perception of the world may potentially act with more empathy, compassion, and respect for differences and equality. Art comes, in this way, as a sense-fulfiller, saving us from the alienation of ourselves. Therefore, it is impossible to talk about either education or society while ignoring the body, and it is impossible to significantly improve either education or society while ignoring the body. In the next lines, we will describe the first author's artistic residency, and how dance could act as a perception modifier.

### ***Act III – Outcomes of an Artistic Residence in Dance***

I started timidly. Other artists had already sowed the seeds of the journey in previous years. My introduction to working with dance and movement in the Faculty of Education at McGill University began with an invitation from Professor Dr. Claudia Mitchell and Dr. Maria Ezcurra for a 15 days-visiting artist period with the *P. Lantz Initiative for Excellence in Education in the Arts*<sup>6</sup> program. This period evolved into an artistic residency during the 2018-2019 school year. During this period, I aimed to develop activities especially related to conscious movement and performative experiences to allow the participants to understand the power of conscious movement in our lives. Among other activities, I facilitated the weekly one-hour *Dancing on Thursdays*.

*Dancing on Thursdays*, initiated in September 2018, had a strong connection with an expressive and artistic feature. It was important to build a welcoming and safe environment for self-awareness that could help participants explore their bodies processes. Sessions were accessible to people who were not accustomed to experiencing their bodies as creative expression, and allowed students, staff, and community to break stigmas, especially that art is for artists and dancing is for dancers. The contact with the physical body, and more particularly with the physical body in movement brings up fears and delight. The image of

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<sup>6</sup> For further information about the *P. Lantz Initiative for Excellence in Education in the Art* project, please visit the address <https://www.mcgill.ca/p-lantz/>

the body in dance – demanding body’s motor and expressive capacities – contrasts with the image of the body in an educational environment, which privileges the immobility.

Participants’ motivations for joining *Dancing on Thursdays* were diverse. Some were present at McGill’s Art-Hive studio<sup>7</sup> making other kinds of art and spontaneously joined the movement and dance activity when it started. Some learned about *Dancing on Thursdays* through publicity at McGill. Some were invited by other participants. Even though there was no need for a consistent weekly presence, shortly after beginning, a regular group of four McGill students became regulars. One of the regular participants was Aron Rosenberg, who had a background in theatre and was a Ph.D. student at McGill’s Faculty of Education at the time of the artistic residency. He documented his participation in the *Dancing on Thursday*’s activities in a *board journal*, capturing daily notes about bodily sensations and insights arising from the activities.

Because of the unpredictability in the number of people present and the diversity of participants, I prioritized working with improvisational dance forms (e.g., Contact Improvisation, contemporary, and dance-theater practices), valuing dance as a process rather than a product. Different from dance choreography, where the participants develop movements through an outside-in process, the improvisational act opens multiple potentials and permits participants to reconfigure their own learning experiences.

Performance-based dance work often requires the student to be goal oriented rather than being in a learning process, reinforcing the image of the body as an object. The conception of the body that underpinned *Dancing on Thursdays*’ movement work was that of body-subject, in which rigor and physical exhaustion are not the aims (Leclerc & Andrieu, 2013). In *Dancing on Thursdays*, we opted for an artistic-pedagogical practice in the Freirean and Fuxian<sup>8</sup> sense, by which, in every educational practice, we ‘learn in teaching, and we teach in learning’ (Freire, 2002; Fux, 1979). The educational nature of free dance is holistic, engaging the intellect, the feeling, and the spirit in a creative moving activity. As Aron Rosenberg shared:

Today’s movement class was simple and was structured openly, without much direction. It allowed us to explore our bodily sensations in earnest. Time flew by and my breath became attached to my body, my thoughts became detached from the horrors of the world, and I started to exist peacefully within myself, or more accurately perhaps, as myself. (Rosenberg, January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019)

The corporeal relationship with the world in a body-permissive environment favors the learning of movements that are not part of the participant’s cultural or personal repertoire. This learning process may happen through observation or by discovering new possibilities of movement through experimentation. To provide different cultural patterns of movement to the participants, I demonstrated several structured dance styles, including reggae and samba<sup>9</sup>. It is often a challenge to access new patterns of learning, but since there was no demand for good performance, participants were willing to try. Although the movements were new,

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<sup>7</sup> It was through McGill’s Art Hive that we developed the majority of the activities related to the Artistic Residency in dance. For more information, please see <https://www.mcgill.ca/arthive/>

<sup>8</sup> Paulo Freire and María Fux have in common a strong belief that the interaction between students and teachers in a learning process makes both grow together, featuring a constant interchange in the production of knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> Reggae is a musical genre originally developed in Jamaica in the late 1960s. Samba is a musical genre that originated in the *batuques* and samba circles performed by Afro-Brazilians in their moments of leisure.

engaging in the new experience helped them to widen their perception of themselves and their limitations, as indicated by Rosenberg:

I know the separation is a social construction, but my mind felt distant from my body when I tried the samba steps. I could watch what Deby showed me, and my mind understood those movements, could see them as Deby moved, but could not translate them into movements of my own body. That's when I felt the greatest separation, and it helped when Deby encouraged us not to think too much, to just feel the rhythm of the music and move our bodies as they want to move. But nevertheless, it wasn't a nice realization that neglecting my body has led to a distancing of mind and body. I want to close that distance. (Rosenberg, January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019)

Rudolf Laban (1990), the prominent theoretician of the expressive and educational dance of the 20th century, reminds us that any type of human activity consists of a succession of movements and actions that he describes as *efforts* defined by four factors: *Weight, Time, Flow, and Space* (Carsile, 2011, Laban, 1990, Lord and Raymond, 2018, Pinard, 2016). Whereas in everyday life we press and twist objects to achieve some goal, in dance these same actions are performed as ends in themselves. Instead of actions to affect objects, the body itself is affected. The educational value of dance is due, in part, to the universality in which the flow of movement permeates our lives. According to Rudolph Laban, a dancer is "that new person, who does not draw his awareness one-sidedly from the brutalities of thinking, feeling or will. He is that person who strives to interweave clear intellect, deep feeling, and strong will into a harmoniously balanced and flexible whole whose parts are interrelated" (McCaw, 2012, p. 45).

As the *Dancing on Thursdays*' participants became more familiar with each other as well as with our movement practices, I began to introduce body manipulation exercises. In these practices, one participant moves their partner's body using the hand or other body parts as a guide. By using Steve Paxton<sup>10</sup>'s spinal awareness, a practice that links awareness from the spine to the periphery, we could enhance and generate a transformation in the sensory-motor organization, which significantly collaborates with the evolution of body kinetic integration.

The person that was being moved allowed their own body to become flexible to their partner so they could guide the movement as if the person being moved was made of rubber. Exploratory studies of manipulation, through activities in pairs or groups, show that the experience of having one's body moved passively leads to stretching of ligaments - body parts are pulled in opposite directions, causing joint spaces to appear or be noticed - which may increase the participant's sensitivity to movement and to others in the group (Souza, 2020). This can change emotions and increase trust, as described by Rosenberg:

We are only ever as strong as our communities, as our connections. As the movement class proceeded, people's bodies loosened. We rolled each other in a way that cracked space into ourselves, sharing trust and mutually benefiting the other. Then we rolled on the ground in a way that resisted momentum and stretched those wingless parallel points, opening space, creating breath between the shoulder blades, within the hips. And eventually-feathers dusted, feathers spread-we returned to the circle with all links much more trustingly and weightily suspended by the whole. (Rosenberg, January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019)

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<sup>10</sup>Steve Paxton is a North American dancer, choreographer, improvisator, and dance pedagogue. He was the creator of the dance style Contact-Improvisation, in the 1970s.

In our classes, improvisation exercises included moving with or without contact with a partner while employing various metaphors to influence the participant's contact with space, as well as using Laban's (1990) four factors of movement (*Weight, Flow, Time, Space*). *Qualities of movement* is the name given to variations of those factors. *Weight* has gradations from light to strong; *Time* factor, from decelerated to accelerated; *Flow* factor from free to restrained; finally, *Space* from indirect to direct movements. These qualities are described in terms of levels (high, medium or low). Each individual has a preferred manner to move using the weight, the flow, the time and the space, and the qualities for each of the factors. These differences are often linked to their habits and unique life history (Pinard, 2016, Tremblay, 2007).

Laban (1990) distinguished between a wider space and the more intimate space that he named kinesphere, understood as one's personal space, in which the person moves, and is spatially limited by the extremities of the body from a fixed point. A strategy I used during the *Dancing on Thursday's* sessions was to play with participants' kinespheres. For example, we engaged in practices in which participants were asked to move while inside an imaginary bubble or to move using the whole space of the room. We embraced the assumption that in order to deeply meet others, it is fundamental to first have an encounter with one's own body and one's own space. Working the kinesphere may work as an opening to the world of one's own body, and eventually to the bodies of others. From a social perspective, through this opening to the other, it is possible to create healthy human relationships, and thus, support a person to develop their own abilities. Rosenberg stated:

He awoke-or maybe it was I who awoke-as he normally did-or maybe as I did-and opened his eyes-or maybe they were mine. It was unclear whether he/I awoke before or as he/I opened his/my thoughts and ideas before or as he/I spoke to them-but nevertheless, everything was on and open. (Rosenberg, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019)

Exploring Laban's concepts with participants at McGill was fundamental to working the connection of the individual to the environment. For example, to understand the *Time* in Laban's theory, it is important to take into consideration both the internal time of the mover (breathing, pulse) and the external time (of music and environmental sound) (Perez, 2005). Our concept of *space* (up, down, forward, back, on, in, directions, levels, orientations) is deeply tied to our bodily orientation in the world (Oreck, 2007). When we are aware of our "interior space" (i.e., kinesthetic sense), such as our body parts when we explore the movements of our joints (through rotation, flexion, extension), or when we use basic actions to move our bodies through space (e.g., by walking, running, jumping, crawling) (Perez, 2005) we realize our presence in the world – not only our physical presence but also our social presence and communitarian connections.

The artistic experience may provide a constructive and transformative sense of critical perception for an individual in which one learns about oneself in relationship with others and with the world (Laban, 1990). Another concept worked at McGill's residency, the conception of corporality – thinking about the body as a living phenomenon – fine-tuned participants' potential for reading the world within a perspective of an artistic expression towards self-consciousness. This helped participants, according to Fortin (2018), "to act, to position oneself, and to make choices according to one's own free will and not according to an external norm or ideology<sup>11</sup>" (Fortin, 2018).

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<sup>11</sup> Free translation from French : « [...] Rend possible la capacité d'agir, de se positionner et de faire des choix selon son libre arbitre et non en fonction d'une norme ou d'une idéologie extérieure. »

In the artistic residency, I taught in a way of having a direct relationship with the student, not in a mere transference of information, or passing on supposedly ready-made knowledge. My perspective was of humans are (trans)forming beings, capable of establishing relationships between events that occur around and within them, forming not only links to others but also to themselves. Beyond the idea of whether we fit into culture and society, the arts call us to change this reality, broaden our horizons, and create knowledge with sensitivity.

## **Conclusion**

Art, as a modifier of reality, makes us all builders. According to Paulo Freire (2002), we are not only an object of history but also subject of this history. As we mentioned earlier, to form oneself is to give rise to a new form that will allow us to live our actions and the world differently (Oreck, 2007). We are in the world not to adapt to it, but to change it, and through education, we have its most powerful tool. Paulo Freire claims that education itself is already an artwork and the teacher, is an artist whose role is "to redo the world, to re-draw the world, to re-paint the world, to re-sing the world, re-dance the world..." 12 Months after I concluded the artistic residency, Aron Rosenberg described how the work continued to reverberate within him.

On the most basic level, I remember ending each class feeling looser, like my body had more open spaces between my backbones in my hips, feet, hands and wrists, and so on. This impacted how I oriented myself to my surroundings. I was primed to respond to the world with greater flexibility and fluency. It was like opening up more spaces in my body and also opened up more potential in my everyday choices and actions. [...] A few weeks after starting doing the movement work, I noticed myself becoming more open to ideas I had been scared before. [...] As a grad student, I sit around a lot and try to understand embodied experiences in theoretical or academic ways. There's something lacking in an approach to understanding that's limited to thinking (Descartes was wrong.) A fuller understanding of life relies on taking time to focus on the body and to nurture openness.

We hope that his testimony can stimulate more incursions of dance into universities, colleges, and educational environments, working towards creating sensitive beings and stimulating sensitive acts in the world. Being in contact with our living bodies is one of our most essential drivers and vehicles for humanization.

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