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Dance as Communication: Accessing the Deeply Communicative Abilities of Dance to Foster
Universal Empathy

Dance fulfills a multitude of roles for humanity. For some, dance is a recreational activity, while for others it is the way they make a living. It has been used as a form of therapy, competition, entertainment, advertisement, exercise, cultural expression, and more. With dance serving such a wide array of purposes, it becomes easy to overlook the capacity dance has to convey meaningful messages that spark empathy, unity, and societal progression amongst humanity. In this paper, the role of dance as a form of communication will be examined, along with what makes it a unique and effective alternative to other mediums. The capacity for dance to convey human emotion with a precise level of accuracy will be discussed, supported by the neurological findings that enable these emotions to be perceived. The considerations necessary to effectively communicate through dance and the resulting benefits of doing so will be advocated for. In pursuance of using dance to its fullest potential, dancers, choreographers, audience members, and the general public must recognize the deeply communicative abilities dance has to convey powerful expressions of the human condition.

In order to recognize the extent to which dance can convey these powerful expressions, it is first important to understand the relevance of dance as a method of communication. Dance as a form of communication looks at the implicit expressions human's use to communicate such as body language, rather than the explicit forms such as the written or spoken word. At its baseline,

dance is essentially movement, or lack thereof. When people dance, they are producing a physical manifestation of everything that has shaped them up until the current point in time. In their theory of nonverbal communication, *To Dance Is Human*, Judith Lynne Hanna explains this as “Rooted in sensory and internal experiences, the body image comprises the memory of the individual’s body phenomenology and the cultural attitudes toward or expectations about it” (130). In this statement, Hanna is drawing attention to the fact that as one dances, it is a cumulative reflection of a person’s experiences, the effect those experiences have had on them, and the effect those experiences have had on people’s perceptions of them. In this singular statement, one can already see the complexities of what dance communicates. Hanna extends this scope of what dance communicates by noting all of the factors “dance interweaves with... human life such as... learning, belief systems, social relations and political dynamics, loving and fighting, and urbanization and change” (*To Dance Is* 3). Through the recognition of all of these factors which inform movement, one can see how vast and rich the language of dance is, making it an effective medium for communication.

With the communicative content of dance now evident, one might question why this performative medium might be used over a more explicit one. A downfall of spoken language is that while it is intended to be direct, words can often get muddled and misspoken. Oftentimes the intended meaning of words becomes far from what was actually perceived by the listener. In their research *Beyond Words: Movement Observation and Analysis*, Moore and Yamamoto refer to these discrepancies as “confusion attendant[s],” signature to “the proliferation of spoken tongues” (108). In an effort to extract meaning even in the presence of these “confusion attendants,” linguist Susan Ervin-Tripp explains that linguist “findings suggest that when there are discrepancies, the information in the nonverbal channel may be more important than its

nonverbal counterpart” (Hanna, *To Dance Is* 88). In this statement, she is suggesting that physical movement may express a more accurate representation of the truth than words. For example, when attempting to express grief, one may try to find the words to express what they are feeling, but they never reach the extent of it. Through movement however, the body is reflecting exactly how that grief inherently manifests. These findings help raise the stature of dance as an exemplary method of communication because it maintains authenticity, something which verbal language can lose.

The inherent communicative qualities dance has are not only acclaimed for their ability to authentically embody messages, but also for their ability to be automatically understood. A benefit of dance as a communicative medium is the fact that because it is based in the intrinsic process of movement, everyone can understand it, no matter the language they grew up speaking.

Moore explains:

Movement is often considered to be the universal language of humankind...
[most] people move... everyone, regardless of race, creed, or color, can understand physical action. Unlike the languages... which one must study to be able to decipher, no learning is necessary to be able to understand movement.
(108)

People grow up participating in and observing movement out of necessity. Almost all of humankind has this in common. Dance has the ability to serve as this universal language, allowing people to communicate that may not have been able to do so through words. Enriched by all of these factors, communicative dance has the capability to express the human condition in an inherent, unique way, distinguishing it from other mediums.

Now that the concept of dance as an inherently communicative tool is understood, the capability of dance to convey assigned emotions with a precise level of accuracy will be explored. Studies have found a correlation between the qualitative attributes of movement and the emotions they are conveying. One study in particular used Laban and Matsumoto ideas of weight, time, and space, to describe kinetic qualities based on certain emotions (Sawada, 701). The study observed various dancers demonstrate a single arm movement neutrally, and then with the emotions of anger, joy, and sadness. It was found that anger was generally associated with a faster and stronger quality, joy was generally associated with a sense of indirectness of path, and sadness was generally associated with a slow and less forceful quality (Sawada, 703-04). Through these findings, it becomes clear that emotions are universally linked to a unique quality of movement, supporting the idea that dance is capable of expressing human condition in a way that is precise and accurate.

Not only can dance accurately express emotion, it can also allow that emotion to be accurately perceived by an observer. Similar to the study above, another experiment had dancers express an emotion through movement as an audience watched. This time however, the ability of subjects to decipher what emotion was being expressed was recorded. Results found that there was a higher perception of joy in the dance expressing joy, a higher perception of sadness in the dance expressing sadness, and a higher perception of anger in the dance expressing anger (Sawada, 705). Through these results one can see that audiences are capable of accurately perceiving the emotions dancers are attempting to convey, furthering the argument that dance can be used as an effective, communicative tool.

While experiments such as the ones above have shown that dance has the power to accurately convey emotion, structural and procedural workings of the brain also support these

findings. In their research “Dance as a Subject for Empirical Aesthetics,” Dr. Julia F. Christensen explains that in the brain there is “a region in the extrastriate cortex, known as the extrastriate body area (EBA), [which] responds specifically to the sight of human bodies” (77). While explaining how brain activity increases in this area while observing physical movement, Christensen emphasizes the fact that “similar action–execution and action–perception systems exist in the premotor and parietal cortices of the human brain” (77). In other words, the brain processes of executing and perceiving a particular action are closely related. The emotion a dancer is expressing through action can be kinesthetically understood by the observer, since both parties' brains are going through similar processes to do so. This idea is known in the dance field as “kinesthetic empathy” (Christensen, 87). Christensen deepens support of this idea by explaining that “neuroimaging studies have shown that understanding the emotions of others engages brain regions normally involved in experiencing the same emotion” (78). Here one can see that empathy occurs because the brain reminds a person of what a certain emotion feels like after they recognize it in someone else. Through the process of seeing movement, linking action to perception, and then relating that perception to past experience through empathy, one can see how processes in the brain allow for dance to effectively communicate to audiences.

In order to ensure the most effective communication through dance, there are some important ideas to consider. The first idea to consider is that certain emotions may be easier to communicate solely through movement, while others may need help from additional factors. In the empirical study described above, Christensen notes that audiences are generally more likely to accurately perceive dances that they like, which usually entail high-speed movement (79). Because high-speed movement is a physical quality of anger, happiness and sadness might be more difficult to convey. Through the use of facial expression however, movement can be

adequately supplemented to achieve the desired expression. Christensen explains that “faces are processed automatically and effortlessly by specific cognitive and neural mechanisms and have a strong perceptual and affective effect on viewers” (80). Not only do facial expressions prove to be an effective supplemental tool, research also suggests that static postures in dance have these same strong perceptual and affective effects on viewers (Christense, 77). Using a combination of these two factors to supplement the actual movement in a piece will best translate the desired expression to viewers, ensuring effective communication.

Another idea to be attentive to when creating communicative dance is that duration affects perception. When discussing the duration of dynamic changes within a dance, Moore notes:

Movement is a dynamic process resulting in a change over time in spatial position...some changes occur too slowly for our senses to perceive... others happen too quickly... between these two extremes, we live in a world full of perceptual dialectic. (41-42)

When taking this information into account, choreographers can ensure that the dynamics in their pieces rest between these durational extremes. This way, their work may most clearly translate to their audience. Christensen also notes that the duration of a piece itself impacts its effect on an audience, with longer segments of work “elicit[ing] genuine emotional responses (78). Here it becomes clear that using appropriate durational dynamics and work lengths help access the communicative abilities of a dance.

The final factor to consider when attempting to create communicative dance is music. In empirical studies of dance on the brain it was observed that music elicited emotional movements from a listener. As someone watched the listener move, activity in their brain increased

(Christensen, 78). This shows that while movement has the power to convey emotion on its own, the physical movements inspired by music also have the power to be perceived by audiences. This calls for choreographers to be very selective when choosing what music to accompany their piece with. This ensures that choreographers evoke the emotional response they intend to achieve, rather than distracting from it. Thoroughly understanding the influence all of these factors have on dance encourages dancers and choreographers to make artistic decisions that authentically display the desired expression, helping dance communicate to its utmost potential.

With an understanding of how dance can be used to accurately express human condition, it is vital to push for its use as a tool to inspire empathy and unity across mankind. One benefit of communicative dance is that it reminds people that while their experiences are unique, they never go through them alone. In their research “Community Dance as a Democratic Dialogue,” Serenity Wise explains how this is done:

Dancers carry their experiences of the world into the community dance space, including their pain and their vision on how to reconcile said pain. We are affected by these events in indirect and direct ways, and when we enter the working space of dance, we consider the large and small ways that we witness and experience issues of empathy, trauma, and “othering.” Most importantly, we find ourselves seeking agency to use our skills to do something about systemic challenges to the world around us. (377)

Through Wise’s expression, a connection is made between what the audience perceives and how that drives them to react. When dance encourages one to empathize, it inspires them to go out and make positive change in the world, supporting those around them. In a discussion of including dance in the K-12 academic setting, Judith Lynne Hanna highlights the reciprocal relationship dance and culture have on one another: “Dancers may reflect and/or influence

culture, engendering visions of alternative possibilities. History attests to dance as a means of sending messages of grievance and remedy” (Hanna, “A Nonverbal Language”). Dance has the potential to let people see what is and what could be. Through inspiring people to analyze what is and isn’t working well in society, dance has the power to make history, igniting social change. With an understanding of the factors that can support effective dance communication, and being open to receiving these messages this way, humankind can utilize dance as an outlet to inspire empathy and change.

In conclusion, dance holds deeply communicative abilities that deliver messages in unifying, inspiring ways. The means through which dance communicates is inherent, authentic, and can be understood by diverse walks of life. The emotion dance evokes can be universally felt amongst all participants on a level that ensures precise accuracy. With careful consideration and attention to detail, expressions that foster emotion, empathy, and social change can be achieved. While recognizing dance as an opportunity for human connection, it can be pursued in its most sincere form, conveying powerful expressions of the human condition, reminding people that they always have a shoulder to lean on.

How I Will Apply My Research In Capstone 2

Through completing this research process I was able to gain a lot of information that will help inform my creative project. In my creative project, I’d like to create a dance that explores a particular emotion or state of life that my audience can relate to. I would like to use the information found in my research regarding weight, time, and space, to determine what movements my dancer’s will complete to accurately reflect that emotion. In my research I found a piece of information that said an audience is more likely to perceive an emotion if they are

actively involved in the piece rather than just passively watching (Christensen, 78). I think I might put a rhetorical question in the program for my audience to think about as they watch the piece to achieve this. With the information about how music elicits a response within a mover's body, I will be very careful in my selection of accompaniment for my piece to make sure it matches the emotion I am attempting to convey. I will also consider durational factors, information about the brain, and facial expression in my process.

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