

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CHOREOLOGICAL TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS

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For four years, Jorge Gayon and Miriam Huberman have been involved in designing and carrying out the first stages of an educational project which evolved out of two concrete teaching experiences in Mexico. Their collaboration emerged out of a shared concern: how to train performers in such a way that they will be able to embody the learnt choreological concepts in their creative work and performance. In this paper, they present the current state of the project: first, they describe their collaborative process and then, they analyze some of the teaching-learning issues encountered and how they propose to solve them.

In 2007, Gayon and Huberman began to work together. Three years earlier, Huberman had started teaching kinesiology and injury prevention to the members of Tampico's Metropolitan Cultural Center (METRO) Theater Company and Contemporary Dance Group and offering choreological counseling to the directors of both groups whenever they staged new works. That same year, she also gave a workshop on improvisation and composition based on choreological concepts and so, when Gayon held his Laban's Active Movement Analysis (LAMA) introductory workshop a few months later, they decided it would be a good idea if Huberman were to continue the Effort and choreutic training in order that, whenever Gayon came back, he would be able to teach a higher level.

The following year, Huberman was invited to organize a diploma course on Labanotation in Veracruz; however, she pointed out that, instead of concentrating only on Labanotation, it would be better to offer an approach that would reveal all aspects of Laban's work and, in doing so, it would appeal to more people. Thus, the renamed diploma course on choreological studies was held in 2009. The course helped the collaboration become firmly established because, among other things, all the participating teachers were asked to observe each other's classes. This gave

the authors innumerable opportunities to compare notes and discuss the pros and cons of the different approaches to the teaching-learning process of the choreological concepts each teacher displayed.

2010 was a very productive year, not only in terms of the actual teaching-learning process but also in obtaining creative results. In the first place, Gayon was able to give the LAMA Effort Training Level I workshop to the same students who had taken the introductory course at the METRO three years earlier. Knowing that he was coming to teach the next level, made Huberman concentrate on reinforcing the basics of Effort and choreutics, because Gayon had said he would be teaching the dynamosphere and introducing the concept of effort mutations,¹ both of which required a certain degree of fluency in the performance of the diagonal scale and of familiarity with the reading, writing and performance of the basic effort actions.

In the second place, all this work was done with actual performances in mind. Due to the fact that the actors and dancers were expected to create many different combinations of dynamic, phrasing and spatial patterns according to the dramatic demands of each of the pieces, a high degree of versatility and clarity in the movement was required. Sandra Muñoz was starting to stage Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*, and in it Huberman would be doing the choreological counseling; Huberman had received a state grant to create a video dance, *Lágrimas de mar*, in which dancers from the Contemporary Dance Group would be performing; and, finally, she would be choreographing the dance sections of *La tormenta: ¿cuántos somos?*, directed once again by Muñoz, in which all the members of both groups took part.

As the result of these shared experiences, the authors agreed that the project should have an inclusive character and that this inclusiveness should manifest itself in a) the project's contents, b) the teachers' backgrounds and specialties, and c) the pedagogical methodologies employed. Thus, the project is being built upon the following criteria:

a) The educational process is to have a choreological and performative approach.

The authors decided to give the project a choreological and performative approach for several reasons. Given that choreology focuses on the structural components of movement in dance as a theatre art (the moving body parts, the resulting actions, the rhythms and phrasing used, the spatial forms created and the established relationships)², it encompasses all forms of movement analysis and documentation derived from Laban's work as each one provides unique information on the mentioned components of movement.

¹ Laban 1980, 170.

² Preston-Dunlop 1995, 223.

Consequently, Gayon and Huberman consider that a choreological approach is the only existing systematic analytic method for studying dance from an intrinsic point of view, which is also objective, thorough and inclusive. For them, Valerie Preston-Dunlop's definition of choreological studies is the most appropriate:

"An intrinsic theoretical and practical study of dance form and content, focusing on a structural study of the medium of dance, that is the performer, the movement, the sound, and the space, using four interdependent modes of investigation: experiential, exploratory, analytic and documentary."³

Thus, taking a choreological approach to the teaching-learning process has two advantages. In the first place, because of its intrinsic nature, choreology studies dance with its own categories, and, as the terminology used comes directly from the movement experience, it can be easily understood as soon as it is recognized in and by the body. Therefore, there is no need to turn to other disciplines in search for a vocabulary that may be, at best, a linguistic approximation, a borrowed term, or a poetic image.

In the second place, thanks to the large amount of specialist fields of knowledge that have evolved from Laban's work, dance can be examined from different angles simultaneously (Kinetography/Labanotation and Motif Writing; Effort and Effort-Shape; Choreutics and ChuMMs). This way, from an early stage, the students learn that they have many analytic tools at their disposal and they can choose the most appropriate one(s) for dealing with the practical dance situation at hand.

Since the authors are interested in training performers who are expected to be more than just technical virtuosi, the skills that give dramatic and interpretative life to movement must be developed. This is why the concepts of embodiment and the performative are crucial to their educational project. They think that, without embodiment, performers cannot give life to ideas, emotions or roles, for, as Preston-Dunlop says, "embodying is a process which gives tangible form to ideas".⁴ It must be said that it is also a consciously intended process which transforms a body from being a mere conveyor of technical and stylistic information to being an active, committed and meaningful participant in a performative event. Preston-Dunlop goes on to explain that "While all dances are potentially performative, some performances address their spectators minimally laying emphasis on what is being presented and by whom. Others deliberately address their spectators, aim to and do arouse a response so that engagement and transaction take place."⁵

In other words, Gayon and Huberman consider that, in order to arouse emotionally stimulating and kinaesthetically challenging responses, performers must have studied

³ Preston-Dunlop 1995, 540.

⁴ Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez-Colberg 2002, 7.

⁵ Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez-Colberg 2002, 1.

dance in its own terms and with its own tools, and therefore, to them, a choreological and performative approach is the ideal means to that end.

b) Teachers from all Laban-based backgrounds are included in the project.

The fact that there are different conceptual interpretations within the Laban academic circle in both Mexico and other parts of the world can make organizing a Laban-based educational project a complex affair. Concerned by this, Huberman had a talk with Preston-Dunlop about the subject in 2008. Huberman asked for her advice on how to deal with this issue as she was inviting teachers who came from different backgrounds to participate in the diploma course, and Preston-Dunlop answered: "Be inclusive".⁶

So that is what Huberman tried to do. To give the diploma course a choreological outlook seemed to her to be the most inclusive attitude, given the fact that the teachers who had been invited had studied in different places (LIMS, DNB, CNEM, the Laban Centre) and had different specialties (LMA, LOD, Kestenberg profile, Labanotation, Kinetography, LAMA, choreological counseling). Because most of the teachers knew little about choreology, they were given a brief introduction and Huberman set about designing a curriculum which turned out to be a compromise up to a certain point.

Realizing that it was not possible to get them all to think in choreological terms in such a short time, she organized their specialties in thematic sections, which corresponded to the above mentioned structural components of movement –the "movement star": body parts, action, dynamics and phrasing, spatial forms and relationships.⁷ Thus, to give a few examples, the LOD teachers did not give a regular LOD course: the Movement Alphabet was taught in the Action section, and relationships, in the Relationship section; in the Dynamics and Phrasing section, the students learnt about the Kestenberg profile, Effort, accents, rhythms and phrasing.

c) Elements from different pedagogical methodologies guide the curricular design.

The idea of using action research, competency-based education and constructivism as the pedagogical guidelines for the curricular design was introduced in the diploma course in Veracruz because a solid pedagogical structure was required. This would allow the teaching-learning process to evolve in such a way that all the teachers involved could be sure that the material being taught by others had been assimilated by the students so that, when it was their turn to teach, they would be able to build new material upon that.

⁶ Informal conversation between Preston-Dunlop & Huberman, London 2008.

⁷ Preston-Dunlop 1995, 223.

Action research served as the model not just for the teaching-learning process, but also for the way Gayon and Huberman have been collaborating, which is distinguished by an explicit integration of research and teaching. This pedagogical methodology moves in action/reflection spirals⁸ which produce continuous change in the strategies used because, instead of being regarded as fixed by usage and tradition, they are considered to be “the product of an on-going investigation on the peculiarities of a concrete situation.”⁹

Thus, in the diploma course, all the teachers were expected to attend each other's classes and every other day there was a meeting in which feedback was exchanged and the necessary modifications were made to next day's material. The authors have kept this as their regular working method.

Competency-based education focuses on what students need to know and be able to do in varying and complex situations. In this methodology, competencies are carefully selected and the theory is integrated to the practice of skills. Also, large skills are broken down into smaller units and students are expected to demonstrate they have acquired those skills and to apply them in real-life situations.¹⁰

Gayon and Huberman have tried to do all this in the educational project. For example, in the case of the scales, the authors emphasize the understanding of the concept of the axes and their embodiment in practice, and then the same process is repeated with the planes, rather than just learning the scales by copying the teacher. Or, turning to Effort, they make sure that the students can fluently perform, observe, notate and read each of the two elements of the motion factors before undertaking the study of the basic effort actions or the dynamosphere. At the end of the diploma course, the students were asked to apply what they had learnt to a specific problem they had and which they thought could be solved by using one of the choreological tools they had learnt; in the case of the METRO actors and dancers, they are continuously being asked to apply the recently acquired experiential and conceptual knowledge to the play or choreography they are working on.

In constructivism, teachers become facilitators who provide situations whereby students actively construct their knowledge, using what they already know and their past experiences as building blocks. By having students solve problems on their own, constructivism promotes an independent and analytic thinking that “does not look for explanations but seeks to comprehend phenomena.”¹¹

⁸ Elliot 2000, 95; Elliot 2000, 316-7.

⁹ Pérez Gómez 2004, 189.

¹⁰ Díaz Pinto 2010, 241.

¹¹ Díaz Pinto 2010, 244-5.

In the educational project, students are provided with numerous occasions for the exploration, observation, notation and performance of the movement material in which the creative decisions are made by the students individually, in small groups or by the whole company, while the authors' role is mainly to evaluate the appropriateness of their proposals. When Gayon and Huberman speak of the embodiment of the choreological concepts, they are seeking what may be regarded as the equivalent to comprehension in the constructivist sense: students should be able to go beyond the repetition of actions, spatial forms and movement qualities and, instead, become those categories. Or, as Preston-Dunlop says, "It is more than getting movement into the performer's body, more than their physical muscle, bone and skin. Embodiment of movement involves the whole person, a person conscious of being a living body, living that experience, giving intention to the movement material."¹²

As the collaboration evolved, a series of issues came up in the day to day teaching-learning process which made the authors question what was happening and this led them to look for ways to deal with those issues. While working in the diploma course with teachers who came from a variety of backgrounds, what caught their attention was that in almost all the thematic sections there were differences in the conceptualization, the analysis and the performance of certain aspects of the movements being taught. In this part of the paper, the authors will limit themselves to describing the issues they detected in the Dynamics and phrasing section, specifically with regard to Effort.

Gayon and Huberman consider it important to address these issues because of the impact they were having on the development of the teaching-learning process. Based on what they had witnessed, they concluded that, for students to learn to embody a specific movement quality or a mutation from one basic effort action to another, a minimum of conceptual clarity was required, and so, if the verbal language was not clear, then they would encounter difficulties in exploring, observing, analyzing and performing that movement.

The first thing the authors did was to go back to the sources: they re-read Rudolf Laban's *Mastery of Movement and Effort* and Marion North's *Personality Assessment through Movement*, looking for suggestions on how to deal with the issues. The task was enlightening because, though they found what they were looking for, they also discovered some inconsistencies (see below). They discovered that Laban recognizes that verbal language has its limitations and, even if he is referring specifically to the basic effort action variations, what he says is applicable to other instances:

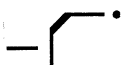
"Concerning the terminology, it must, however, be said that our ordinary language does not depict effort actions exactly; names have a hazy meaning and are often used in a slightly varying sense. The designations above have been carefully chosen in *an attempt* to make

¹² Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez-Colberg 2002, 7.

the changes of action contents in the variation of basic efforts comprehensible to the mind.”¹³

What is important is that Laban also pointed the way out of these difficulties: “It is useful to observe oneself doing the basic effort action one at a time immediately followed by its variation. Thus one will learn the feel of each and the name given to it.”¹⁴ The message was clear and so, the authors returned to the studio, to their bodies, to explore, experience and document each of the issues, and then they tried out the different solutions with their students.

So far, Gayon and Huberman have identified the following issues when confronting verbal language to the movement experience. First of all, an example in English taken from Laban’s *Mastery of Movement*, in which he places the action “cut” as a variation of “press”:¹⁵



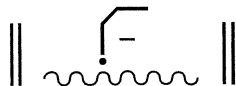
This would be an accurate notation if a person is cutting cardboard with scissors; but, if the person cuts paper with scissors, then that would have to be notated as:



And therefore, the action “cut” cannot be taken to be a variation of “press” without adding more descriptive words –in this case, specifying the materials involved. A similar example in Spanish of using the same word to describe two different physical actions would be the verb “sacudir”, where one version can be done like «flick» and the corresponding notation would be:



And the other version can be done like a vibrating phrase and the corresponding notation would be:



Another issue concerns the extreme difficulties encountered when trying to do an exact translation of the Laban terminology from one language to another. While

¹³ Laban 1980, 172. The author’s italics.

¹⁴ Laban 1980, 172..

¹⁵ Laban 1980, 171.

there are several cases in which this occurs, the authors will give only one example: “flick” (see above), one of the basic effort actions, is usually translated into French as “épousseter” (to clean with a duster) and into Spanish as “espantar un insecto” or “sacudir una basurita” (to scare a bug away or to flick away a speck of dirt). Once again, there is a need to add more words – in these cases, describing the action fully.

Then there is the issue of the time it takes students to stop associating the Laban terminology with the common usage or the dictionary meaning of the words and start thinking in terms of movement. For example, students frequently associate the free Flow element with things like political freedom, doing what you like, New Age; while the bound flow element is linked to authoritarianism, censorship and control. What must be done is to point out that these kinds of associations have nothing to do with the actual movement and its qualitative interpretation.

The final issue is about the lack of clarity in the analysis and performance of the Space motion factor. Gayon and Huberman, in their teaching experience, have noticed that some students find it difficult to distinguish whether a movement is direct or flexible and they attribute this confusion, once more, to language.

According to Laban, a direct movement “consists of a straight line in direction and a movement sensation of threadlike extension in space, or a feeling of narrowness”¹⁶, a “restriction in the use of many space directions”¹⁷, and North adds that it is a “straight, line-like, restricting the use of body in space”¹⁸. On the other hand, Laban says that a flexible movement “consists of a wavy line in direction and a movement sensation of pliant extension in space, or a feeling of everywhere-ness”¹⁹, and North explains it as “wavy plastic lines in space, body plasticity in action”²⁰; Laban goes on to say that people who move in a flexible manner “apparently swim, circulate and twist most thoroughly through any possible region of space”²¹.

After reading this, the authors concluded that, while all these verbal descriptions may be interpreted in various manners by different people in different cultural contexts, they also contained information that could lead to solving the issue. They began a systematic exploration of the movement categories to determine which of the verbal references furthered comprehension and embodiment, and which did not. In an attempt to be thorough, they also examined quantitative aspects to see if there was something there that could benefit the teaching-learning process.

¹⁶ Laban 1980, 73.

¹⁷ Laban & Lawrence 1979, 64.

¹⁸ North 1972, 234.

¹⁹ Laban 1980, 73.

²⁰ North 1972, 234.

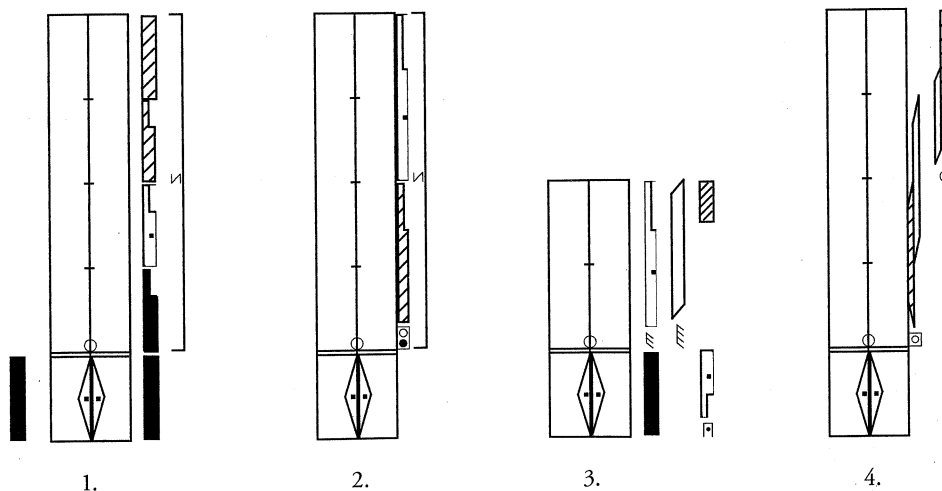
²¹ Laban 1979, 64.

Their first consideration was that, biomechanically speaking, all joint movements describe arcs and are measured by angles.²² So, if all movements are arcs, then it is not very useful to say that direct movements are “straight lines” and that flexible ones are “wavy lines”; they think that it might be better to simply say that the resultant motion, ChuMM or trace figure are straight or wavy.

Their second consideration has to do with another set of words that may be a key to solving the issue: on one hand, a “feeling of narrowness” and a “restriction in the use of many space directions”, and on the other hand, “twist most thoroughly through any possible region of space”.²³ In the studio, Gayon and Huberman tried to figure out what could account for those descriptions. What they discovered was that direct movements usually involve one and maybe two axes, while the flexible movements involved always three. And also, that direct movements are usually product of moving a joint or several joints along an axis, but in flexible movements there is a combination of both several joints and all three axes.

Their third consideration was that, in flexible movements, because of the two observations just made, sometimes one can observe a combination of flexible and direct movements in what appears to be only one movement, either because one movement mutates from flexible to direct or vice versa, or because simultaneously or in succession, one body part moves directly and another, flexibly.

Below are four notated examples of direct and flexible movements. Examples 1 and 2 are direct movements in which the movement occurs on two axes (the vertical and sagittal axes, in both cases) and only one joint is used (the shoulder joint in 1 and the hip joints in 2). Examples 3 and 4 are flexible movements, where the above-mentioned considerations may be seen: several body parts move simultaneously (the elbow and the wrist joints in 3, and all the vertebral column in 4).



²² Kapandji 1989.

²³ Kapandji 1989.

In general terms, the way Gayon and Huberman have decided to deal with these issues was to try to be congruent with their stated criteria: if they are embracing the choreological and action research perspectives, then they had to give priority to the movement experience and, at the same time, they had to intentionally refer to the established movement categories and terminology as arbitrary linguistic approximations to a physical yet ephemeral reality.

To be more specific, the following are some of the main strategies they have been applying to the educational project:

- Give priority to the movement itself. By this the authors mean several things: they start teaching first the movement and then use words, explaining that they are only approximations to the movement experience; then they ask the students to suggest movement experiences they can associate with the specific movement, creating analogies and comparisons with “as in”, “as if”, “as though”; another thing is that they do is that they do not write down words on the effort graph or the basic effort actions but leave the symbols alone.
- Color the effort graph at the beginning of the teaching process so as to give a visual reference instead of a verbal one to indicate the yielding/resisting character of the analytic method. This also helps understand the mutational process without insisting on using words to name each mutation.
- Add the word “factor” whenever addressing any of the motion factors so as to constantly remind students that they are dealing with specific movement categories that are not necessarily being used in the same sense as a common usage or a dictionary definition.
- Dedicate more time to practice: having seen the results of different workshops and courses, Gayon and Huberman conclude that the ones which were most successful were those which assigned a considerable amount of time to intentionally developing the fundamental skills -performing, observing, reading and writing movement material- and applying these skills to the students’ training and performing practice.
- Integrate Etienne Decroux’ repertoire²⁴ to help students have a clear movement reference for a mutation or a variation, instead of relying on verbal references which may have different movement interpretations.

²⁴ See Jorge Gayón’s paper: Laban’s Active Movement Analysis (LAMA). Applied Qualitative Movement Analysis and Effort Training. Presentation and Workshop.

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