Let's Dance! Warming-Up to All That Moves and Connects Our Writing-Centered Performances

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This chapter is written from the point of view of a writing center director working in the performing arts (primarily dance) at the University of Washington, Seattle. The author surveys and critiques the metaphors writing center scholars have conceptualized in his quest toward an action-inspired, movement-oriented metaphor for WAC and WID, whether *cross-curricular* or, in the case of high-school and college writing center connections, *cross-institutional* (Hansen, Hartley, Jamsen, Levin, & Nichols-Besel, 2015, p. 140). Complementing McCarroll's (this volume) elaboration of choreographer Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, Corbett proceeds to narrate how he came to practically and experientially appreciate this connection while collaborating with professors, professionals, and students—at all levels—in dance. The author concludes with some implications of embracing this perennially fresh metaphor for the teaching, learning, and performing of writing in and across disciplines and institutions.

Figure 14.1. UW-Seattle MFA Concert 2013 (courtesy of Tim Summers).

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A curious visitor, lithe and light on her feet, catches my attention as she enters the room. Before she can slip away, I introduce myself as Steven, director of the new dance (satellite) writing center. With a quiet smile she tells me her name is Carolyn and that she's really glad that I'm here. She confides in me a little about this teacher she had last quarter whom she had a tough time with while discussing her paper. She says her teacher gave a rather open-ended assignment, but then got on everyone's case for not having it in the proper genre. So, we talk a little about teacher expectations: how it can sometimes be hard for teachers to make their expectations clear enough to students when giving assignments. I explain that we could talk about her papers at any stage she wants. She tells me that she's not as good a writer as some of the other MFAs, that she is mostly just a performer . . .

Days later, I will watch Carolyn perform a solo dance routine in *Tenant of the Street* by Eve Gentry. In this performance, she portrays a homeless person draped in loose, tattered gray clothing. There is no music, only recorded sounds of the street: horns honking, cars passing, the din of shuffling and muffled crowds. She drags her feet slowly across the floor. She pulls herself around with her hands as if on an imaginary rope, scraping her feet—never leaving the ground behind her. The look on her face screams loneliness, lostness, exhaustion and trepidation as she tentatively moves into the light—exposing a pale grimace—or into the shadows—hiding her shame and (in)securing anonymity . . . Her movements tell me all, without uttering a single word.

I'd like to continue this story of my turn toward a new metaphor for writing center work, a metaphor also applicable to many other communicative, performance, collaborative, and pedagogical situations. Through dance I have experienced the world of a huge population of students and colleagues who do not always rely on words as their primary means of communication or learning, and it has influenced how I think about teaching, learning, and tutoring. One of the most important concepts writing centers are poised to share with all writers is just how useful realization of the mind-body connection can be in writing performances. But first, artful communication and choreography require an artful and imaginative rhetorical frame of mind . . . and body, whether in high school or post-secondary settings.

Dancers Need Writing Tutors Too Sometimes? Dancing the Talk

As I also describe in our Special Issue introduction, from 2000 to 2008 I helped direct writing centers and writing programs at the University of Washington, Seattle. The former director of the Dance Program, and co-editor of the Special Issue and this volume, Elizabeth (Betsy) Cooper, is a professional dancer and also a dance

scholar who is very interested in writers' composing and learning processes (see Cooper, 2010; 2011; 2013).

In 2002 a colleague helped us to connect and while discussing my ideas about writing center theory and practice Betsy and I became visibly and verbally excited. We quickly decided to establish a satellite center for her program.

I soon realized that in order to establish a connection grounded in mutual respect, I would have to conceptualize a "conversation" rather than a "conversion" model of cross-curricular collaboration. I would have to follow the suggestions of Muriel Harris (1992, p. 171), Barbara Walvoord (1992, pp. 15-16), and the words of Joan Graham (1992): "Faculty and graduate students in English can provide valuable writing instruction for students in the disciplines—if they go to the disciplinary contexts where students are working and expect to learn themselves" (pp. 125-126). These sentiments ring as true today as they did when they were first published over twenty years ago—and they apply cross-curricularly and cross-institutionally to high school, as well as college, settings (see, for example, (Hansen et al., 2015, p. 140; Hrenko & Stairs, 2012). I talked at length with both Betsy and the director of the 100-level dance classes, Peter Kyle. I asked them for books and journal articles I should read. They were very happy to hear my interest in learning about dance. Peter even joked that I should take Dance 101, suggesting that I might learn more about dance that way (practicing) than by reading (theorizing) alone. A week later I registered. The next quarter I found myself in a studio, sporting ballet slippers, learning the fundamentals of ballet and modern dance. More importantly, as I danced and learned to talk about dance, I also began to theorize and practice a mind-body-motion-emotion metaphor for writing applicable across the disciplines.

Figure 14.2 UW Dance class, June 2013 (courtesy of Tim Summers).

A Turn to Choreography: Metaphors to Teach, Write, and Collaborate By

The power of tropes like metaphor lies in their ability to turn our words into more usable ideas and forms for more people to identify with and understand. The word

"trope" itself etymologically stems from a movement-oriented Greek definition involving a figurative *turn* in the direction or meaning of a phrase. But the thing about metaphors is that, once created and instantiated, they can take on a life and momentum of their own, a momentum and energy that can be tough sometimes to redirect the flow of. My years spent working side-by-side with dancers, MFA students of dance, dance majors, choreographers, scholars, and students taking Dance 101, moved me toward identifying with a new metaphor for tutoring writing, a metaphor with some similarities to previous composition and writing center metaphors.

Figure 14.3. UW-Seattle MFA Concert 2013 (courtesy of Tim Summers).

Several writing center scholars have written on the metaphors we tutor by. Harris (2007) recognizes that we have done an ample job of categorizing "the destructive metaphors and myths that capture how others regard us—as jailers who correct linguistic crimes, medical doctors who cure the wounded, gas station attendants who tune up conked-out prose and so on" (p. 75). But she laments that we have not done an adequate job of creatively communicating why and how we can be so central to academic writing instruction. Melissa Nicolas (2007) likewise critiques writing center metaphors from Andrea Lunsford (the "storehouse," "the garret," and the coveted "Burkean parlor"); Wendy Bishop (writing center as "haven"); and Stephen North and Peter Carino (writing center personnel as "'hostess,' someone to make sure the chairs and tables are set up, the coffee is hot, and the conversation

never veers too far off the topic of writing") (p. 5). Nicolas argues that these types of metaphorical narratives, while attempting to paint a more positive portrait of one-to-one teaching, have continued to place writing centers in a dichotomous, contentious spatial relationship with the rest of the academy. (For a further review of spatial metaphors, including writing center as "home/comfort," "thirdspace," and "nonplace" cf. Singh-Corcoran & Emika, 2012.)

Those involved in WAC/writing center "decentralizing" outreach initiatives have likewise developed their own set of metaphors, metaphors that attempt to close the gap between the center and the rest of the writing academy. Carol Haviland, Sherry Green, Barbra Shields, and Todd Harper (1999) Teagan Decker (2005), Steven Corbett (2005), and Carol Severino and Megan Knight (2007), in their descriptions of course-based and writing fellows tutoring programs create metaphors of tutor-as-emissary or ambassador. For these authors, the tutor-as-emissary or ambassador works against the grain to help revise the above missionary "conversion" metaphor—described by Walvoord (1992), Harris (1992), and Graham (1992)—to move toward a more synergistic, negotiated model of collaboration. While I appreciate this tutor-as-emissary or ambassador much more than the tutor-as-missionary metaphor, I still feel as if it places the burden on the disciplinary partner as "hostess" to the tutor, much like the writing center described by North and Carino. My favorite metaphor for WAC interactions, and also one of the earliest, comes from the (1986) "Independence and Collaboration: Why We Should Decentralize Writing Centers."

Figure 14.4. "Eleven," UW Dance Majors Concert, 2013 (courtesy of Tim Summers).

In this influential essay Louise Smith provides one of the earliest critiques of Stephen North's ubiquitous "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984) by drawing on The Queens College model and, especially, the UMass Boston's tutoring program to illustrate how "the idea of the 'center' has gotten in the way" of productive Writing Center and classroom collaborations (p. 22). Smith urged writing center directors

and faculty across the curriculum to look at the "choreography" between UMass Boston's English Department and Writing Center. This dance paired one tutor to each section of freshman English. Tutors and instructors negotiated the role of the tutor according to the teachers' pedagogical preferences. Tutors, in turn, helped teach in the class with the instructor with the goal of trying to present to students an approachable, knowledgeable person who functions more as a concerned peer (listener) than a judge and grader. And just as dance is as popular today as it ever has been (consider the huge international success of TV shows like *Glee, Dancing with the Stars,* and *So You Think You Can Dance,* and edgy films like *Black Swan* and *Magic Mike*), seventeen years later Smith's original message was just as relevant to writing center professionals, enjoying a reprint in a special (2003) edition of *The Writing Center Journal*.

This idea of tutoring as a dance immediately struck a melodious chord. Finally, I had stumbled upon an organizing metaphor that took into account place, space, and people on relatively equal footing. A metaphor that seemed to move beyond the spatial a bit more toward the interpersonal and relational—a bold metaphor and conceptual frame (of mind) that invites us to consider the place of living, breathing, moving, thinking, desiring human beings (human bodies) in action and re-action.

Figure 14.5. University of Washington, Seattle, 2013 beginning modern technique class (courtesy of Tim Summers).

Dance, Teach, Write: Collaboration in Motion

While I sometimes worked with graduate student MFAs like Carolyn (who will reenter our story soon), I usually worked with undergraduates—taking either introductory gen-ed courses, like the one I experienced with Peter Kyle and fellow students, or dance students writing papers for courses in the major. Writing center folks are uniquely poised to co-choreograph and enjoy close relationships with students, teachers, program directors, and administrators at all levels. And thinking of these relationships in terms of motion and dance can result not only in better practice but, sometimes, in long-term connections, collaborations, and friendships.

Once I was sitting in the office when Betsy came in looking frazzled. I asked her how she's doing. She said dramatically that she's "drowning." She had a huge stack of papers from her class of sixty-five. She told me that she doesn't know how she's going to have time to assess all those papers. I told her that I could help her, that Friday I have three open hours. We talked a little about how she grades and what she looks for. I told her I should have no problem assessing papers if I could use a check system. We proceeded to talk about the value of low-stakes writing-to-learn assignments graded with a check, check-plus, or check-minus. I asked her to just do a few examples for me to gauge from and I'd work through as many as possible. She showed her appreciation through heartfelt thank yous, smiles, and a hug. Helping her to assess papers becomes a regular part of my practice only for a little while. I understand that readers may be grimacing as they read these words, that it might upset the typical tutorial dynamic to assign grades. And normally, I would agree. (In fact, after reconsidering, this was the only course I ended up grading papers for.)

But this aspect of my involvement with dance lead to conversations with Betsy and other dance instructors that gave me a much better idea of ("normed" me to) what is valued in writing about dance. It is akin in some ways for a tutor to be willing to do a "grammar check" of a student's paper in order to get, perhaps, to higher-order concerns like claim, evidence, or analysis. It could perhaps even be thought of in terms of Elizabeth Boquet's encouragement, in *Noise from the Writing Center*, of "higher risk/higher yield" tutoring on the edge of our expertise (2002, p. 81). My willingness to traverse beyond the typical writing center/writing classroom, tutor/teacher dichotomies, I believe, enabled me to move on to co-choreograph other close collaborative interactions with my new colleagues. I think it helped "persuade" them to trust me more. This closer collaboration led to other, more orthodox, WAC activities like helping instructors design more effective assignments (e.g., Harris, 1992, 2010; Soliday, 2011). Mary Soliday (2011), in her description of the apprenticeship model for CUNY writing fellows, offers a complimentary view of the social and contextual dynamics of assignment design when she writes that "it is not enough to describe requirements on a prompt. Because a prompt embodies a social practice, we would not *give* assignments as much as we would try to *enact* them in our classes" (p. 3). My closer understanding of the instructional context of Betsy's course allowed me insight into the sorts of information they might consider in their assignment design, delivery, and assessment. It provided me a much clearer view into what sorts of writing styles and elements are valued by teachers of writing in dance.

For example, I tutored a student, Helen, trying to set up an historical analysis of a dance by an influential twentieth century female choreographer of her choice (Betsy's next assignment). Helen chose Martha Graham, the "Picasso of dance" and founder of the oldest dance company in America (to view the current Martha

Graham Dance Company repertory visit http://marthagraham.org/). Helen was not a dance major. Since I had just assessed her paper, we talked a little about it and how she could apply a bit more kinesthetic, or bodily movement, details to what I deemed her strongly expressionistic treatment of Graham's choreographic innovations. Betsy believes in a pedagogy that encourages students to revise for a better grade, so Helen could perhaps take her check and transform it into a check plus by detailing the connections between Graham's groundbreaking choreography and the historical context that influenced her innovations.

Figure 14.6. UW Advanced Modern Technique Class 2013 (courtesy of Tim Summers).

While we talked, I made liberal use of my own body to illustrate for Helen the precise sorts of detailing she would want to apply toward her revision. My arms subtly swooped in various *positions de bras*, my legs jutted out in circular *ront de jambe* or pointing *relevé.* Helen watched and listened raptly, becoming increasingly excited and engaged in our dance, both physically and verbally. Motion gave way to emotion, which in turn gave birth to mutual understanding of each other's writing—and communicative—expectations and concerns. What we talked about (and rhetorically acted out), the moves, gestures, we did our best to transcribe into words. We were enacting the potential of our *sundromos*, an ancient Greek term described by Debra Hawhee as "an intensive gathering of forces (of desire, of vigorous practices, of musical sounds, of corporeal codes), trafficked through and by neurons, muscles, and organs" (2002, p. 160), with each breath, each smile, and each exclamation. We were enacting what Perl (2004) describes as the felt sense of realizing mind-body communicative synergy: "When the words that are emerging *feel* right, we often feel excited or at least pleased; we experience a kind of flow. Physically and mentally, we are aligned" (p. 3). The potential of our bodily energy reciprocally informed and inspired our words, ultimately making the read and *feel* of her writing more vivid and alive.

Figure 14.7. UW Intermediate/Advanced Ballet Class 2013 (courtesy of Tim Summers).

The sorts of lessons I learned working between instructor assignment sheets and student attempts at enacting those assignments, paved a productive two-way street for enhanced collaboration. I was able to discuss with Betsy some suggestions for possible ways to emphasize her desire for more detailed kinesthetic descriptions in her assignment design and delivery. Additionally, while working with dance students I kept my eyes open for potential tutors: I recruited an exceptional tutor, then only a sophomore in one of Betsy's classes, after reading her evocative, sophisticated descriptions of dance performances. This former tutor is none other than co-editor Dr. Jennifer LeMesurier. She, like many artists, is making the most of her multiple ways of knowing, doing, thinking, and performing.

Exploring the meaning-making process of other disciplines demands a willingness to learn other disciplines' ways of thinking and knowing first, or at least while, we share our own. The performing arts have much to offer writing teachers of all stripes, and the cross-curricular-curious will be rewarded for their actions. Through dance, I've come to realize that no matter how beautiful or confident someone appears, when it comes to our art—be it writing, dancing or anything else—we are all still unsure apprentices trying to become confident masters in an eternal chorus. We all feel sometimes strong, other times weak, in body and in spirit.

Our Visitor (Still Curious) Returns

Carolyn came back to visit me with her graduate seminar paper on site-specific dance. Site-specific dance, or art, involves taking the performance outside of the typical stage setting; usually, the artist considers the location while planning the work (similar to tutoring programs that choreograph classroom visits, course-based

tutoring, or satellite centers). She spoke in a low tone and often asked how I felt about what she had written. Betsy was the class instructor, and one of the emphases of the class was to compose a publishable essay. So, I talked with Carolyn about some of the different dance academic journals I had recently investigated and some of the different conventions associated with each. I explained how she will want to target a specific journal or two, and then research a little into that journal, how they cite, how they use footnotes, how the language sounds. I read her essay, impressed from the start. Carolyn not only provided the theoretical and practical precedence for site-specific dance, but she also illustrated the degree to which she had participated in this innovative art form. She had experiences performing with some ground-breaking choreographers in this genre, performances in busy streets or on makeshift outdoor stages. I gave her lots of honest praise because I felt this was an important, publishable work. I supplied a few suggestions, mostly involving word choice and a few other minor concerns. The best thing I could offer, though, was encouragement to send her fine essay to a journal or two.

I later learned that Carolyn would present her paper to an international dance conference in Portugal. Soon after, the same paper was published in a distinguished international dance journal. Granted, for some readers, it may sound like I did not do very much to help Carolyn realize her true potential as a writer. In fact, Betsy helped her along with drafts of the essay much, much more than I did. But I would say that each writer we work with requires something different, and oftentimes different readers have different gifts to offer. Sometimes, what some writers need more than anything is someone who will listen and encourage—a partner who may need to *directively* lead/talk less and *affectively* follow/listen more (c.f. McCarroll, this volume).

Whenever we would pass each other in the halls between offices and studios Carolyn would give me that same quiet smile I saw when we first met. Little more than "hi" was required to evoke memories of wordless motion and wordful emotion. Today I am left reflecting on my lovely partners in art, their movements, their thoughts, our felt sense, our *sundromos* . . . body and soul.

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