

Dancing=Composing=Writing: Writing about Performing and Visual Arts through Dance

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This chapter focuses upon the way the choreographic process engages both the body and mind to create a foundation to expand writing and writing pedagogies. In this pursuit it not only explores approaches to writing about performance but also situates writing as an embodied act that must address balance between body and mind. In addition to this exploration, the chapter provides two potential assignments that can be modified for a variety of classrooms, ages, and disciplines that implement embodied writing using elements of the choreographic process.

Writing is an embodied act. Dance is an embodied act. It is at the intersection of dance and writing that we can identify the ways bodies actively compose—alphabetically and somatically—through parallel processes: writing and choreographic. By building a stronger foundation for our understanding of embodied writing because of the similarities between these processes, we can see how bodies are active participants in the recursive composing process—invention, revision and performance. These active bodies also reflect and project embodied experiences that inform the lenses that frame each act of composing, thus enacting embodied pedagogy. Tina Kazan (2005) suggests that “as we engage in an embodied pedagogy in our classrooms, we make students more aware of their own bodies in the classroom context” (p. 404). Therefore, the explicit integration of bodies into writing supports and extends embodied writing pedagogy, which challenges us to make the implicit body of the writer explicit in ways that mirror that of the dancing and performing body.

To write about a performance, often from the perspective of the audience, means that each activity that led the performance to its momentary life on stage has disappeared behind the scenes, much like a polished final draft. When we ask students to analyze a performance, we are also asking them to read the bodies on stage, so an embodied approach to writing provides a foundation that can “bestow significance to bodies that [are] interpreted” (Kazan, 2005, p. 394). Embodied writing pedagogy, then, can gain an understanding of approaches to writing in tandem with performance because the embodied element draws attention to bodies as both composers and contributing pieces of the composition; this speaks to Anicca Cox’s (2015) study results that “reinforce the potentiality for writing to access emotional or embodied spaces alongside aspects of criticality and analysis.” Therefore, accessing

an emotional or embodied space through embodied writing pedagogy creates a foundation for analysis to flourish and attend to embodied acts explicitly. As both a choreographer and a compositionist, the potential for embodied spaces in writing is of importance to me because they provide untapped possibilities (that I have seen surface in my own processes) for writing pedagogy as well as writing about performance. As such, I do not intend to simply make suggestions for writing about dance but also articulate what we can learn about the embodied act of writing through the composing process of dance to better engage, discuss, and include embodiment. It is in this spirit that I pursue the following question: how can the choreographic process enhance approaches to embodied writing pedagogy both in general and about performing and visual arts? Better understanding the positionality of bodies as dancers and writers underscores the reality that embodied activity matters not only in performance such as dance but also in writing. To that end, I set out to do two things:

- explore the ways in which the choreographic process engages the body and mind, thereby creating a foundation to expand our approaches to writing and writing pedagogy as well as
- provide two potential assignments—one major and one minor—that apply that expansion.

In so doing, I highlight the activities that are transferable across disciplines that can (re)embody writing and reinvigorate writing pedagogy in the interest of (embodied) writing about performance.

Therefore, embodied writing pedagogy can build upon the choreographic process to better accommodate embodied activity, particularly by considering improvisation, feedback, and delivery as elements of the writing process that engage the composing body. This, in turn, enhances approaches to writing about performance and visual arts because embodiment may not be an implicit element; therefore, it is possible to examine bodies as texts by analyzing the way bodies deliver a message with or without verbal cues for the audience. If a student writer is aware of their own embodied actions within the process of writing, then they are more readily able to identify embodied activity through a rhetorical lens when writing about performance. In other words, understanding the ways in which bodies function in the development of a performance allows us to facilitate analysis and study of performance because students can see how the process they engage in (writing) is like the performance they are writing about.

Parallel Processes—Writing and Choreography

All acts of composing, and the processes¹ that support them, loosely follow three

1 I acknowledge that these processes are recursive in nature as opposed to linear proscription processes.

stages: invention, revision, and performance.² My paralleling of the writing and choreographic processes to extend current writing process conversations in both K-12 and post-secondary education echoes the work of Catherine Golden (1986) wherein she pairs painting and writing. She argues that “there are useful parallels between the genesis of a painting and that of a writing manuscript. The artist’s first simple sketch seems to function like a writer’s verbal map or outline, similarly capturing the central theme of the composition: the initial vision” (Golden, 1986, p. 60). In other words, it is not new to draw these parallels, but what we can learn from them is new. By identifying similarities between the choreographic and writing processes, then, bodies become an explicit element of both, which, in turn fosters attention to embodiment when writing about performance and visual arts because students sense their own embodied actions.

Like Golden’s discussion of painting and writing, choreography can contribute to writing pedagogy through embodied action because dance marries physical movement with aesthetic qualities (and rhetorical purpose); often, it communicates the choreographer’s intention through the movements dancers execute within space and time. Kenneth King’s (2003) claim that “moving the body—dancing—can be synonymous with seeing, thinking, doing—with action!” underscores how dance is a full body experience that engages the integrated mind-body pair (p. 3). In fact, James Birch (2000) claims that “dance is a subject that uses all three domains of knowledge: cognitive, affective, and motor,” which points to the way dance creates an experience and a message that is embodied, cognizant, and integrates multiple elements (p. 223). Additionally, Judith Hanna (2008) has “traced the path of dance into the university and, consequently, K-12” (p. 497). She suggests that “the key concepts of dance; dance’s power as nonverbal communication; and the mind-body connection in dance as cognitive and emotional communication; and critical thinking in dance-making and dance-viewing” transfer valuable skills to students both pursuing dance as a career path and those not studying dance directly (p. 497). Therefore, dance can be integrated across all levels of education through embodied pedagogy to foster the teaching of these elements through the exploration of how students’ bodies participate in the process of writing about a performance while also engaging all three domains of knowledge. These brief defining qualities of dance highlight potential connections between dance and writing: rhetorical effects, action, knowledge domains, critical thinking. Although the processes are similar, choreographers like those in “art-making domains,” “frequently see writing as a component part of a larger process connected to the making of art objects, conceptual concerns, or perceived identity” while “writing studies frequently utilize the writing process to arrive at a written or ‘textual’ ‘product,’ making writing itself

2 Performance is the chosen word here because it allows for acknowledgement of embodiment across processes and speaks to notions of “writing as performance” (George, 2012).

the ‘object’” (Cox, 2015, pg. 2). As a choreographer, I have dancers, ages 10–18, write choreography as they learn it to reinforce their learning process, which reflects Cox’s point that writing is often a part of the process of creating art objects; we participate in activities that are not written when writing is the goal, but we do not often directly identify these acts as contributing to the larger process in the same way. Through the implementation of embodied writing pedagogy, we can actively engage non-writing acts and understand their embodied nature and influence throughout the process of writing akin to the ways in which writing supports the larger choreographic process. Writing is a mode of action that is communicated through the medium of a body, enacted through a recursive process.

To begin both the choreographic and writing process, invention is a lengthy part because each contributing element is impacted by the others. This results in a slow evolution toward completion through the activities of creation (development of composition) and design (mapping and planning). Invention, then, is the space wherein the ideas are developed, discovered, and potentially mapped, which is based on definitions in the field of Composition Studies. For instance, Irene Clark (2003) defines invention as “the process writers use to search for; discover; create; or ‘invent’ material for a piece of writing” (p. 71). Invention often occurs throughout the process, but there is a concentrated effort at the beginning that generates initial ideas and directly connects to the term *discover*. Discovery is a key component in improvisational dance—wherein dancers move through space to discover new ways they can move. Improvisational dance (Improv), although a genre that is performed on its own, is often used to generate choreography, or to invent it. What is particularly interesting about invention within choreography is that it necessarily attends to the location, bodies (performers and the audience), and potential message. This can be seen in the way J. Michael Rifenburg and Lindsey Allgood (2015) articulate invention within their analysis of Allgood’s embodied performance art. She constantly considered the constraints and affordances of the location and the participation of both the performer and the audience to create through her acts of invention. Because “embodied writing tries to ‘presence’ the experience in the writer” (Anderson, 2001), the invention work in choreography is particularly important to consider within the writing process. Christopher Worthman (2002) echoes presencing of experience during his study of TeenStreet³ when he identified “the experiential nature of the somatic and mental imagery in the prosaic effort to help teenagers reclaim or re-create language that speaks to their lives as they live them and not as they are perceived by others” (p. 32). If students engage in embodied activities, such as improvisation, then they can become aware of how they write through embodiment and, in turn, can attend to embodied acts

3 TeenStreet is an ensemble of teenagers in Chicago that is a kind of school-based creative arts program (Worthman, 2002, p. 6).

when writing about performance. Improvisation (or movement) can be integrated into embodied writing pedagogy because it functions as a prewriting activity; it does “what many composition scholars and researchers believe prewriting exercises should do—they help students tap into their experiences” (Worthman, 2002, p. 120). As we ask student writers to cultivate their own, student-centric, writing processes, it is important to keep in mind that “human beings first learn through movement, and movement facilitates learning” (Hanna, 2008, p. 493). Therefore, improvisation also creates the opportunity for discovery in writing at all levels—elementary, secondary, and higher education—since it engages kinetic learning while fostering creativity and discovery.



Figure 13.1. Improvisation for my 2015 Feminisms and Rhetorics project (photo by Molly Daniel).

Similar to writers during revision in the writing process, dancers and choreographers participate in feedback (suggestions, critique, collaboration) and refinement (fine-tuning and polishing the whole piece). Betty Bamberg’s (2003) description of revision suggests it includes rethinking and reconsidering “initial rhetorical choices about content, development, and organization,” and she adds “sentence structure, and word choice” (p. 107). Revision relies upon re-seeing and making changes that arise from a need within the work, which also occurs during the choreographic process. Revision, then, is enacted by dancers and choreographers reshaping a work before it takes the stage—major changes such as reorganizing steps or changing movement and pathways (like moving paragraphs in written revision or adding

and deleting content) as well as minor alterations such as facial expressions and timing within music (like sentence level editing of grammar, usage, mechanics, and punctuation).

Since bodies are constitutive elements of a choreographic work, they not only enact and provide feedback and refinement, but they also embody refinements because of the feedback provided. For instance, as a choreographer, I provide feedback to refine movements executed by my dancers' bodies as seen in Figure 13.2. Similarly, as a composition teacher, I give detailed feedback (example in Figure 13.3) to students' writing to help them refine.



Figure 13.2. My feedback to dancers during rehearsal (courtesy of Huntington Dance Theatre).

ich originated	Molly Daniel Perhaps consider how you can make this introduction more effective. Perhaps describe the scene people think of when they hear the word soccer...
arth. It would be	
most famous player,	
If comes with risks;	
ay. Players have	Molly Daniel What is the is sentence's function? Is it necessary? What sentence do you see as your thesis?
[his paper will	
juries, or if there	

Figure 13.3. My feedback to a written draft.

True, written refinement is not applied directly to bodies, but it is implemented through the integrated mind-body pair of the writing body; however, when the topic of the draft is a performance, writers are refining their articulation of embodied experiences. A writing body comprehends and implements refinements that produce a revised composition. Because bodies actively function as agents and components in these activities, the affordances and constraints of them impact the ways in which revision is achieved, and when engaging in embodied writing, the bodies of the writers are also agents within revision.

Finally, all the work and rehearsals culminate in performance wherein the dancers rely on bodies and the atmosphere created on stage to incarnate the performance. Performance in this context relies upon the preceding stages for an audience to fully experience the composed piece. It is situated as the final part of the process, akin to the final draft of an essay. This relies upon the premise that performance functions as two differing concepts, “one involving the display of skills, the other also involving display, but of less particular skills than of a recognized and culturally coded pattern of behavior” (Carlson, 2007, p. 72). While skill, or mastery, of dance technique allows the performance to take shape just as writing skills contribute to a composed final draft, both also articulate a message that is rooted in these culturally coded patterns of behavior that connect to the audience through cohesion (semiotic relationship between the assembled elements) and delivery (conveying the purpose to the audience). The body is the conduit for cohesion in delivery because it enacts the culminating performance and engages with the contributing elements that were created and refined. Although less obvious, the body is also the conduit for cohesion in written delivery because it engages in the embodied process and enacted revision to cultivate the final draft.

Application in Assignments

Based upon the preceding discussion, I suggest two assignments: one minor (in class) activity and one major project that integrate embodied activity and the analysis of performance. The first interweaves movement into invention strategies, rooted in the act of improvisational dance, while the second is a rhetorical analysis of performance, focusing on embodied interaction. Both draw awareness to the embodied acts of writing and dancing while positioning bodies as textual, not supplemental. This integration in the classroom works to mirror the findings of Kelly A. Hrenko and Andrea J. Stairs’ (2012) study that examines the intersections of art, culture and writing with grade 8 and grade 9 students because students not only are analyzing and writing about a performance but also using embodied activity to better understand it. Engaging in embodied writing allows writers to discuss bodies and explore experiences from the bodies’ (their own and those on stage) perspective (Anderson, 2001, p. 2). Using

the assignments together fosters an embodied approach to writing by first incorporating the in-class embodied activity into invention and then using their embodied knowledge and experience to identify embodied elements in the performance topic of the major project. This scaffolding, while reinforcing the embodied approach to writing, also enhances and supports students' learning.

*Minor Activity—Move to Write, Write to Move.*⁴ This in-class activity invites students to think alphabetically and linguistically as well as kinesthetically, highlighting the reciprocity of language and (embodied) experience as students move and write. Cathy Smilan (2016) suggests, “art integration best serves students when teachers employ art-based strategies for inquiry and authentically engage in the act of learning through discovery” (p. 172). So, within the context of performance, students engaging in improvisational dance, or movement, prior to writing about an embodied performance use a choreographic discovery method to support written invention. It fosters creative invention through embodied activity, and it uses approximately 45 minutes. An outline is provided for this activity:

- Create space in the classroom by moving furniture or moving to a spacious location when possible.
- Make a music selection that is instrumental and provides a beat without an overpowering melody (silence works too if preferred). Music can play for the duration of the activity or just during movement.
- Write for 5–7 minutes: collecting thoughts, drafting, freewriting, based upon the music and/or in preparation for a larger project that will expand upon this invention exercise.
- Move—or improvise—for 3–5 minutes within the space to articulate somatically the written work that students just composed individually. Be cognizant of the other moving bodies.
- Repeat steps three and four 2–3 more times.
- Group students into sets of 3–4 to share movement and writing.
- Discuss purpose within both the writing and movement.
- Identify points of connection and divergence of how purpose in each performance (written and danced) functioned based upon the responses from the audience (their peers).

This activity could be shifted from dance improvisation to acting/miming movement as well depending on the purpose of the project it is supporting. In this shift, students may recognize the practice as a game of charades, which could heighten their own comfort level with the activity because that could be more familiar. This familiarity is an important aspect to consider for learners.

4 The minor assignment originated as an activity for middle schoolers attending summer creative writing workshops I offered with my local National Writing Project site.

*Major Assignment—Performance Beyond Critique.*⁵ This major project engages the embodied writing process through rhetorical analysis of a performance. The duration of time for this assignment is approximately 4–6 weeks and yields a written essay of 1,000–1,500 words, depending on course and student population. First, students select a performance to attend locally or watch as a recording. Then students analyze the performance by attending to purpose/function, audience, integration of elements: ambience, bodies, lighting, costuming, music, and types of movement. Once the performance has been viewed, students assemble a list of the elements integrated, a purpose executed by the performance, and a description of the audience for which it was intended. The following questions are thinking questions to support the writing process:

- What is the title of the performance? How does that communicate purpose? How does it affect your perception of the performance? Does that align with the way the performance functioned for you as a member of the audience? Why?
- What did you notice about the bodies on stage? How did they interact with one another, the space and the other elements?
- What elements were used within the performance? How were they assembled? How did they inform design? How did they impact navigation on stage? Did the organization of them impact the effectiveness of the purpose?
- How would you define the audience of the performance? Did the performance affect your body as an audience member?
- How did the bodies on stage create cohesion and execute delivery? How did they articulate emotion and/or elicit emotion from the audience? What did you notice about the way the bodies functioned on stage?

Conclusions

Enacting an (explicitly) embodied process has the potential to give writers a better understanding of performance and visual arts as they write about them. As J. Michael Rifenburg and Lindsey Allgood (2015) remind us, “pedagogically, this reshaping allows for the mindful intersections of the body and writing” (p. 3) Writing is composing through bodies, and Debra Hawhee (2004) establishes that ancient athletics and rhetoric were practiced in the same space; this resulted in a “crossover in pedagogical practices and learning styles, a crossover that contributed to the development of rhetoric as a *bodily art*: an art learned, practiced and performed

5 The analysis, although specific to a college setting, is transferable into other educational settings with tweaks in word count and alignment with grade-specific writing outcomes.

by and with the body as well as the mind” (p. 144). This crossover between processes in writing and choreography reminds us that they are both bodily arts and the mind-body is an integrated pair. Actively incorporating improvisational dance inside a writing classroom, through an activity such as this chapter suggests, invites students to express ideas through movement and provides a different stimulus to aid in written invention—especially when the larger project focuses upon performance or visual arts, which aligns with arguments to include dance within education curricula (Bergmann, 1995). Purposefully integrating embodied action inside the writing classroom expands our understanding of writing pedagogy as well as what it means to compose, and, in turn, applying this method within visual arts is valuable because it deepens students’ connection to their embodied experience.

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