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AUTHOR Green, Jill
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and discusses the interactive movement forum and the process of working on it as data itself. The paper revisits the theme of the creative process from a postmodern perspective, particularly considering creativity in relationship to women's bodies and detailing the problematic aspects of working with students in an artistic pursuit within a pedagogical context. In the study described in this paper, somatic practice was used as a tool to investigate the body perceptions and experiences of undergraduate dance-education majors. Five female students took part in a somatics/creativity project within a university-level instructional setting at a state university in the south. The students kept journals and wrote body stories based on their previous experiences in dance and what they were learning during the project. The paper details and analyzes what happened during the course and illustrates with students' statements. It concludes that the body could be a source for creative exploration in this pedagogical context--as a tool for feminist work and change. (Contains 12 references.)
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Data Dance: An Interactive Movement Forum

Jill Green, Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Department of Dance
220E HHP Bldg.
Greensboro, NC 27214

jillgreen@uncg.edu

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Before I begin, I'd like to note that I am basically changing the thrust of this roundtable presentation. Initially, I had intended to present my research in the form of a dance performance. I was interested in displaying parts of a final class performance project along with parts of my interpretation of the data from the class and study. I envisioned moving back and forth from my own artistic expression and verbal interpretation of the data, to the video of the participants' involvement in, what came to be, a final interactive movement performance. This artistic representation would display the multiple voices of the participants as well as the teacher/researcher during a final creative project which would express the experiences of the participants (in the form of a video) as well as a later choreographic effort by the teacher/researcher. Further, I was interested in moving and speaking in front of the video, at times creating montages and juxtapositions of voices and movement, creating a live and videotaped array of viewpoints, forms, and interpretations of the data.

Unfortunately, I was informed that this new and exciting SIG had only one slot for a regular presentation session. Of course, I did not expect to take up such a valued slot with one dance performance. However, this situation may demonstrate some of the needs, problems and hindrances of presenting work in this type of innovative format. I believe that a mere description of the interactive movement forum would not do justice to my initial intention. Words alone cannot adequately express the artistic representation of the event and the experiences of the participants. Since a roundtable session is not ideally conducive to this expressive idea, instead I will attempt to present another arts based aspect of the research. I will discuss the actual process of creating the data by the participants in the study and movement forum. In this way I hope to interweave the movement forum with the research data, without losing its artistic value. I will refer to the interactive movement forum as a creative culmination of the class and study. And I

will specifically detail the problematic aspects of working with students in an artistic pursuit within a pedagogical context. In other words, instead of performing a representation of the data through a dance form, I will describe and discuss the interactive movement forum and the process of working on it as data itself.

Background

In a previous article published in *Impulse*, titled, “Choreographing a Postmodern Turn: The Creative Process and Somatics,” I addressed a reconceptualization of the creative process in light of a former investigation into the relationship between somatic practice and creativity. The article explores an analysis of creativity from a posthumanistic lens; from this position, somatic and creative pedagogical work may be tools for personal change, but are also inseparable from sociopolitical change (Green, 1996). Findings from the study resonated with Lee Quinby’s model (1991) for a reformulation of creativity in the context of a changing self, rather than the stable actualized self of the humanists, and within a constantly moving social world. In this sense, creativity is conceptualized as “a changing artistic activity of self and society, an activity made up of disruptive energies.” (p. 12)

In this paper, I’d like to revisit the theme of the creative process from a postmodern perspective. However, I am particularly interested in discussing creativity in relationship to women’s bodies and as part of my recent study which investigated the theme of gendered bodies in dance education. And as an interpretation of artistic voices, I am interested in viewing the findings in regard to the culminating creative endeavor.

The Study

The more specific purpose of this project was to investigate how the bodies of participant student teachers in dance are socially constructed in relationship to gender. In this study, somatic practice was used as a tool to investigate the body perceptions and experiences of undergraduate dance education majors. The five women took part in a somatics/creativity project within a university level instructional setting at a state university in the south. This teaching and research project explored how these body perceptions have been influenced by society and the dance world. For example, the participants were asked questions about previous experiences in dance, and how they have learned to perceive their bodies in reference to a specific weight and body ideal. Class movement explorations, somatic exercises (body-mind and body awareness practices) and discussion were used as tools to explore social influences on the body.

The class was designed so that during the first part of each session, participants would be exposed to various somatic practices and during the second part of each session participants would immerse themselves in the creative process and work towards a group creative project. I intended to minimally use discussion as a vehicle for students to communicate feelings and raise issues with the work and in order to collect data for the study. In actuality however, the participants became so engaged in discussion about body issues that it became a major focus of the project and an opening activity for most class sessions. (Due to time constraints, I will not discuss methodology today but will be happy to talk to anyone about specifics after the presentation).

I initially thought of the culminating creative project as a peripheral part of the study. I wanted to give the students an outlet for the creative energies they were developing throughout

the class and project. And I thought the creative project might contribute to the research in an appropriate way (as data for the study). Interestingly though, this aspect of the project became the center for struggle and anxiety during the study because the student/participants became aware that they needed to find an alternative way to present what they had learned during the project. The somatic process and the discussion they were involved in during the project were not conducive to a formal or traditional choreographic approach. The participants themselves adopted a different performance format in order to meet the needs of the topic and processes in which they were involved.

In the end, this theme regarding a reformulation of the creative process in the context of women's bodies in dance provided some of the richest data. I learned much from the struggle both about the these five participants' experiences with the creative process and about the use of creativity and somatic practice as a pedagogical tool.

Somatic Struggle with Form and Process

At the start of the class, I asked the participants to keep journals and write body stories based on their previous experiences in dance, and what they were learning during the project. Towards the end of each session we began to work toward the creative culminating project. I envisioned this as a rather open ended project; I had some ideas in mind such as using the body stories (data) as themes and generating some sort of dance material to manipulate into some format but I was purposively unclear in order to provide opportunities to suit the preferences of the participants. As I had learned in previous teaching and research situations, my attempt was to be as unauthoritarian as possible. However, the students began to select themes, develop phrases and work with each other to vary the material choreographically in a rather conventional way for

dance. They were focused on craft and design. Yet throughout these choreographic sessions, the participants seemed to struggle with the idea of creating what they perceived as a choreographic project. I suggested that they did not have to perform a formal dance for an audience and we could see where the process took us, that we were looking for a way to express what the research project had meant to the participants and that the project would involve a creative interpretation and representation of the issues. Instead, they seemed to be set in a choreographic mode; they were more concerned with using learned artistic skills to present a “dance” than with wrestling with the issues and expressing what they had learned from the study.

The students had many ideas but they never seemed to develop or congeal into a whole or complete choreographic thought. For example, one student, Kathy, initially envisioned the creative project as a type of women’s folk dance, suggesting a community of women dancing to the music of various women’s chants with sections of the dance breaking out into the body stories of the participants. Other participants picked up on this theme and decided to have the folk dance as a group effort with individuals breaking off to tell their stories through words and movement. Later, the participants worked as a group with themes from their journals such as oppression, media, and sexuality to develop material.

At first it appeared that we were working towards some project that the students found interesting. However, as I remembered in my journal, the students preferred to spend time practicing somatic work and discussing the issues of gendered bodies in dance education rather than working on the creative project. I noted that the project always seemed to be a chore.

A breakthrough occurred during one point in the study, when I used an exercise from Kinetic Awareness (a somatic practice) to attempt to get the participants in touch with their

bodies during the choreographic process. I took them through an exercise where I asked them to sense their bodies and then begin to move and stretch by listening to how their bodies needed to move and how they could take their somatic sensitivity into performance. I then asked them to begin talking while they were moving, bringing in journal entries and their body issues and then beginning a discussion regarding the issues. This stopped them from planning their movement. Their movement appeared much more clearly focused to me. I videotaped a second attempt to move with awareness and with attention to the body and the issues raised in class. When they viewed the tape they were quite impressed by the improvisational responses and continued to talk about this in class.

Other than including this particular exercise, we continued to work on the creative project as usual except that after this exercise one student, Missy, suggested we begin to work on a structured improvisation in order to relieve the pressure to create a dance, which was mounting at this point. Then, one day when left alone, the students apparently discussed the final project without me. They came to me appearing afraid to tell me that they wished to change the format of the creative project; they felt that a formal choreographic project was not consistent with what they were learning in class. They were learning to recognize how their bodies were products of social patterns and had been habitually manipulated and abused during prior dance classes. They wanted to express how they needed to take ownership of their bodies and include discussion about the issues they were addressing in the study. They said that they wanted to have a looser and more open format for addressing the significance of their somatic experiences and awareness of their bodies as a social construct.

What they didn't realize is that I was unexpectedly happy that they discovered the initial

process was not working; I wanted them to take ownership of their bodies from the start and be involved with the process of expressing this significance for them. I had no preconceived idea of a creative process or product.

After discussing creative possibilities, the participants came up with the idea of an interactive movement forum whereby students would dance and discuss the issues, while allowing the audience to be involved in the movement and discussion. They came up with a list of issues to address, decided to start with the Kinetic Awareness improvisation, gradually including words, phrases and discussion which would eventually involve the audience, and end with audience participation of the movement. They wanted a small audience, and decided to invite particular people who might be receptive to the idea and support their efforts without judging the work by formal choreographic standards. They were clear that this project was not about choreography per se but an attempt to express themselves through movement and discussion. This is why formal choreographic work was inappropriate for this research context. For this reason, the only publicity involved included a small flyer announcing the event. The title, "Body Herstory: An Interactive Movement Forum," was unanimously selected because it addressed both the content and method of the project. Media clippings and pictures from Dance Magazine and other dance materials which were collected during the project were taped onto a mirror in a collage. The mirror became a powerful theme for the external image of dancer bodies recognized during the study. So the image of the mirror became an appropriate metaphor for them. This collage provided another representation of the multifaceted perspectives and juxtaposed images invoked during the project. The video of the interactive movement forum opened with a shot of the mirror.

Describing their experiences with the creative process, the participants expressed the problematic nature of attempting to impose a rigid structure around their experiences. They claimed that their original choreographic themes were too “dancey” to fit this project, that through the discussion and somatic work they were making meaning of their experiences in a non-linear way. For example, when approaching me after their discussion Tess referred to the problem of forcing the project to be a creative product. She said,

When we started the semester we didn't know that it was going to be performance oriented and that it now felt like we were working for a finished product instead of through a process. We wanted to work through more issues; we weren't really in the mind set of a performance...It didn't feel natural because we kept repeating the same issues over and over and it wasn't authentic anymore; it became rehearsed. Missy said, “What about a lecture/demo.” And that we would call it that: a lecture demo on somatics. But we decided that maybe having the beginning like we had it with that sort of slow stretching and then having it turn into a conversation amongst us about the issues, making that more improv in terms of what would come up [would work]. And then we would come around and start asking questions of the audience...and then have it turn into audience participation... [Before this point] it was so manufactured, so false...I think the main point for me is I don't want to fall into a set improv where things feel like they're not real. [After all] We're teaching ourselves how to be true to our bodies.

Other participants also offered similar sentiments. In her final interview, Kathy addressed the problem of attempting to work within a confined linear structure. This was a political problem for her:

If you decide to do things in an authoritative, linear way you're going to run into problems....People are going to be less giving of themselves and they're not going to contribute ideas when you might need them to contribute ideas.

Jasmine referred to the problem of attempting to form ideas into a creative performance externally geared to the audience. During her final interview she spoke about the creative work when she said,

I enjoyed [working on the dance choreographically] but I also think it took away from the project. We weren't going towards helping us or helping our students in the future deal with these different [body] problems. We were going towards what will the audience want to hear? What would the audience like to see?...It came to be a creative product...which was really hard because we had to get into that product mode....We said, "Lets work toward a performance. [But] we should not say performance [but] some type of interactive forum...We turned the process all of a sudden into a product....a lot of people had a lot of different outside things to do; it got more stressful. And I think we should have used more somatic work to help us deal with it. To help us bring into that mind set of process. You know some of that relaxation stuff that you have tons and tons of. I wanted more of it.

Later Jasmine suggested that when we did use more somatic practice as a tie in to performance it helped her with work on the interactive movement forum.

This leads to the issue of the use of the body as a tool for facilitating the creative process in this unauthoritarian way. A number of participants referred to the body as a source for creative contact and somatic authority. Tess spoke about the Kinetic Awareness stretch exercise we often

did, when the participants were asked to listen to their bodies and allow the body to tell them when to move, stretch, and dance (Traditionally, dance students are often told exactly how to move.). She said,

One thing that I always feel whenever we do this, is I feel like, a number of feelings come up. First of all, I feel almost like I shouldn't be allowed to move this way. That it feels very sensual and sometimes that gets mixed up with sexual and sometimes that brings up feelings for me. To allow the body to move like that. Indulging in your movement.

Sometimes it's really hard.

Jasmine addressed body practice as a better way of getting at what we needed to for this creative endeavor. She claimed,

[The formal choreographic work] was being more phony and getting into that performance mode with like what the choreographer wants from you. [We're trained] that way. And this class trained me in another way--in using somatics to get to the creative process in choreographing stuff.

Kathy addressed body experience as well as the body as the content of the creative project:

Ideas that come up with the somatic movement can easily be transferred into the creative process. I mean, the one movement phrase that we each made, I guess it was about our body stories. I did something about high heels and arched backs which was something that we talked about as far as blocking energy in your body or alignment in your body. I think also the hands-on somatic work, like when we were hands-on with one another, that's something that's really important in both performance and teaching and the creative process is really easily transferred into contact improvisation, you know, just having that

contact with people. Sometimes people are really intimidated about that.

The participants were aware of a relationship between creativity and socio-political issues, particularly in reference to the idea of creativity as a type of subversive bodily force which may bring up feelings deemed taboo. The somatic process, through the Kinetic Awareness exercise particularly, allowed the issues we were discussing to emerge as the participants worked on the interactive movement forum. For example, Jasmine said that the creative process, as done in this way, made her freer to explore what is important to her and helped her to be less dependent on a choreographer.. She said ,

[The process] made me more aware of problems that society told me I'd have to deal with.....And I've gotten so accustomed to living with so much stuff. And I'll just take what they say; that's fine; they're the boss. But now I'm realizing that some of the things, some issues inside me that I have kept contained have come out....Personally, I feel that as a female and also, in society we're told to be dependent [and not listen to the inner messages of the body]..

In her final interview, Tess suggested that the body work allowed for a supportive environment whereby the participant's took responsibility for their project. In the following exchange she suggested that for her the creative process was tied to feminist issues:

T: [What happened with the creative process] was really important for all of us. We had to tell you what we really needed.

J: Did you think I would be unhappy with that?

T: Yeah, we were all just really scared that it wasn't going to be what you wanted.

J: Oh, but you see, I didn't really have anything specific that I wanted.

T: But that was in our minds. You know what we do to ourselves. We create these stories...

J: Matter of fact, I liked the way it turned out better.

T: Oh yeah, I do too. But you know, we were scared that it wasn't--well, first we weren't talking about how all of us were feeling, that this was just pressure and it wasn't flowing like it was before. No one was talking. They were just griping.

J: Do you think that has anything to do with our educational system. Like, let's see what the teacher wants and give that to her, and feed the teacher, when really that wasn't what I was looking for at all.

T: We're scared. You know we've got to do the right thing. And as women. We're not taught, we are not supposed to have different opinions. We are just supposed to listen and do, listen and do not question.

J: See I was really asking you to take authority on the issue.

T: And we did. And it was amazing. Cause all of a sudden we were like bitch, bitch, bitch. And we were like well let's go ahead and write this down and give it to her. And we were all like, this means we'd actually have to own up to what we were saying. You know, but we wrote down the stuff, took it up and talked to you.

J: How did everyone feel afterward?

T: It was very empowering, I think. To be able to tell a teacher, this is not flowing. Saying it's not working.

To most of the women, this method of working was feminist and subversive. However, the participants did not always talk about working this way as a panacea for the world's problems.

They often discussed the difficulties associated with working this way. For example, Kathy struggled with her former training. She claimed,

It's easier to fall back on things that we already know. When you have a whole world that's supporting a linear, patriarchal mode of doing things and you're trying to start up this other way, which is hard, I mean, it takes effort; it takes cooperation. It's very strenuous.

But she also added how valuable it was:

I think it was valuable because some people had different ideas about stuff, to hear. You know sometimes you get stuck in your own mind set, even though you're thinking diversity... You come from a perspective that's more diverse than someone else's, so you feel good about that, but then you hear where other people are and you respect their idea. That was very valuable to me.

Discussion

A significant theme emerged from this analysis. I was becoming aware of how the body could be a source for creative exploration in this pedagogical context, as a tool for feminist work and change. The participants were using the creative body to connect to the issues they were discussing and somatically exploring as part of the project, and they found that this was a different way for them to work. They were taking ownership of the creative project as they were claiming ownership of their bodies. Many feminist and postmodern theorists have called for such a bodily pedagogical approach (Haugg, Andresen, Bunz-Elfferding, et. al., 1987; Grosz, 1994; hooks, 1994; Johnson, 1992).

However, as in much postpositivist research, I feel a need to also problematize these

findings and point out some tensions apparent with any claim that this way of working will further social change and action. I want to caution the audience/reader that many postmodernists and feminists are suspicious of the use of working through the body as a “critical project.” For example Michele Foucault, a well known postmodern thinker, was not fond of the idea of body experience. Although he viewed the body as a site of political manipulation and control and studied it as an effect of the culture in which we live, his writing suggests a suspicion of typical somatic conceptualizations such as bodily experience and practice (1979, 1980). As Arthur Frank points out (1990), “What Foucault contributes to the study of the body--beyond his studies as a site of political violence--is an enhanced self-reflectiveness about the project of the body itself” (p. 132).

In other words, Foucault does not claim that the body can provide us with a grounded truth or that education through the body can free people from oppressive social policies and authoritarian regimes. His writing offers an approach rooted in a critique of institutions through discourses created by the dominant culture. He would be cautious about somatic practices because of his claim that experience is based on how we have been socially constructed. Many critical theorists and feminists also believe that a focus on experience gets in way of critical work (See Simon & Dippo, 1986, McLaren, 1989).

However, a number of theorists are not willing to throw out the the importance of bodily experience but at the same time caution us not to use body work as an isolated panacea. They look at the socio-political factors that help inscribe bodies, while embracing the value of referring to bodily experience as a socially subversive act. For example, in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz refers to the need for both a socio-political lens and

attention to the body in its creative fluidity. Although she does not directly address creativity, she speaks about postmodern approaches to body as a type of unimpeded flow and discusses postmodern opposition to the traditional idea of the structure or organization of bodies, the body as stratified, regulated, ordered, and functional. She examines body process as valuable while acknowledging the claim that the body “can be regarded as a cultural and historic product (p. 187).

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), bell hooks also addresses the importance of the body in actualizing social action through pedagogy and the creative process. She refers to the type of pedagogical creative process I have addressed when she discusses the value of student engagement and educational subversion. For example, she encourages educators to return to the body as a source of information necessary for social change:

The arrangement of the body we are talking about de-emphasizes the reality that professors are in the classroom to offer something of our selves to the students. The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies. Significantly, those of us who are trying to critique biases in the classroom have been compelled to return to the body to speak about ourselves as subjects in history. We must return to ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others. By recognizing subjectivity and the limits of identity, we disrupt the objectification that is so

necessary in a culture of domination.

hooks refers to creativity when she discusses the problems of the censoring process in education and the need for a subversive passion to flow in the classroom. As the participants in this study sometimes felt that what they were engaging in was subversive, hooks affirms the need to include bodily experience as a transgressive teaching strategy. She recalls that she learned that

there was a place for passion in the curriculum, that eros and the erotic did not need to be denied for learning to take place. One of the tenets of feminist critical pedagogy has been the insistence on not engaging the mind/body split. This is one of the underlying beliefs that has made Women's Studies a subversive location in the academy. While women's studies over the years has had to fight to be taken seriously by academics in traditional disciplines, those of us who have been intimately engaged as students or teachers with feminist thinking have always recognized the legitimacy of a pedagogy that dares to subvert the mind/body split and allow us to be whole in the classroom, and as a consequence, wholehearted.

Further it may be recognized that although Foucault rejected bodily practice and experience in his early career, towards the later part of his career he came to, "refute the autonomy of discourse," (McNay, 1992, p. 27) and refer to the corporeal aspect of living. He recognized that "the discursive and material are linked together in a symbiotic relationship" (p. 27).

The issue is complicated and involved. Perhaps we need to recognize bodily impulses and somatic authority during the creative process without according them "truth" and by not separating them from more global issues. Perhaps we can view this interactive movement forum

as a subversive bodily dance with passion for feminist concerns.

One final note--I am not suggesting that dance educators should change how methods of choreographing for stage or as an art form. I am not claiming that movement educators should eliminate dance composition classes. What I am saying is that dance educators and researchers can use the creative process through the body as a pedagogical tool. In this sense, the creative process cannot be separable from the socio-political world in which we live.

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