

Dancing a Curriculum of Hope Cultivating Passion as an Embodied Inquiry

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We are bodies

We are bodies
in the embrace
of humility and humus
hands and thighs, hips and bellies
creatures of gestural language
from a postural praise
to the contraction of lament

the belly knows
the heart of longing
loss as a sliver in the vein
and joy through the expansive chest

what is hidden
is revealed in the body's tone
threaded in every culture
a dance inhabiting
limbs and torsos

ears of the soul
eyes of the feet
the body's knowledge
is the gift
a curriculum of hope
where we are revealed
in the mystery

and the story
of being human
(self)

I have often wondered if the gift of the body's knowledge is the best kept secret. We are bodies, we do not just have bodies. They are a place of deep learning, and both bodily knowledge and bodily wisdom are always available to us. The body continues to speak; if we slow down enough to listen, or inhabit them, descending into the belly, palms, chest, necks as if they are the greatest love. Too often, there is a bullying of the body – they are not the right shape, size, or injury occurs, and we do not romance them back to a place of care. My work over the last two decades in teaching post-secondary, and my writing has been dedicated to bringing embodied ways of being, writing, teaching and learning into the forefront of all I do. As the years have passed, I have noticed a thread, which has been sewn throughout. In bringing the body to the classroom, either through dance or movement education, or in my class I teach on “Embodiment and Curriculum Inquiry, or with my student teachers, there is always a return to voice and passion. Inhabiting our bodies allows for a deep authentic voice within to emerge. This traverses across language, gender, cultural, or even philosophical differences. The lived curriculum is within our bodies.

Fundamental to human expression is the language of the body – a language of physicality, which in turn has the capacity to connect to the terrain of the inner life. As a dancer/poet/scholar my dedication in curriculum studies has resulted in theorizing methodological insights and academic practices that recognize the connection between the artistic process, inquiry and scholarship. I build on my extensive work around embodied knowing (2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2012b) and the work in poetic inquiry (Leggo, 2004, Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009) and performative inquiry (Fels and Belliveau, 2008) support the articulation of my work. This article is not a long apologetic for including arts-based research, or dance within the process of inquiry, (this has been done already in my previous work and elsewhere) but a celebration of one of the most alive by-products of integrating movement or dance, or particularly nurturing a playful relationship with the body.

The wise and profound 14th c. Persian poet Hafiz says,

Dear ones, let's anoint this earth with dance!
(Hafiz in Ladinsky, 2010, p. 65)

Dance provides an entrance to humanity – essentially the lived curriculum. Whether one is questioning and inquiring, lamenting or exalting, asking and receiving, stomping and stopping, or contracting and releasing dance is a container to express the depths. Long ago, dance historian, Curt Sachs, said there are “few danceless peoples” (1937, p. 11). Yet it has been my experience in so many contexts, that we have forgotten how to dance, or dance is relegated to drinking or a wedding, or a taking a dance class in one form of another. As children we organically knew how to skip, jump, wrestle, and express with the body. Of course years of schooling, and “minding attention” taught that attentiveness was connected with stillness. But this wasn't stillness, but frozenness. So even now, as there are numerous arts in the classrooms, and all kinds of innovative programs, the majority of people do not just get up in move and dance in a Faculty meeting, conference or graduate class. I do think we would really think better, and they would be way more engaging!

One of the central principles in my pedagogy of teaching dance is for students to cultivate a connection to the inner life through the art of moving, which includes various forms of expression in the body: modern dance, creative dance, improvisation, the practice of Interplay, ethnic forms of dance and writing from the body. It is within the process of finding movement, improvising, and choreographing that dance can become a site for embodied inquiry. Here the mover literally thinks with the body allowing the improvisational process to be a discovery of what we do not know. The body knows where our mind may not be able to lead us. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999) has said, “thinking in movement is foundational to being a body” (p. 494). The choreographer and performer have long known that the creative process is one of questioning and sifting, forming and unforming, making and remaking and always a place of discovery (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003; Snowber, 2002, 2012b). As a class, we dance our questions together, allowing the problematizing of the curriculum to be enveloped and expressed through the body. And here a new place opens.

What would it mean to attend to the impulse of calling the body back to one’s voice and passion, whether one is an educator, scholar, researcher, dancer, or seeker? The practice of moving and dancing is a container for the depths to be drawn out, where the relationship between the known and unknown take form. When I say depths, it is not always definable, for as human beings, there is so much information coming across our desks and lives, it is difficult to listen to the rumblings within. It is not uncommon for undergraduate students, in particular, to be on a trajectory for their careers, and yet not connect to what really is life-giving. I often ask students the first day of class, what they are majoring in, and what their passion is, and few have connected to what the passion within them is. In fact their focus of study, is seldom related to what animates them inside. And I dare to say, schooling or even cultural expectations on many students and people for that matter, does not honor first and foremost cultivating how passion connects to their vocational and personal lives.

What lies beneath

the color of skin
 did not matter
 where we are not on a page
 but our feet on the floor
 moving, shaking, turning
 our arms reaching
 shoulders curving – bodies swaying
 a class in movement education
 for undergraduate students
 but the learning is from the inside out
 where the wisdom of the body
 invites each one
 back to ancient knowing
 the wonder of being a child

where skipping and extending limbs
 and the utterance of voice

is the main meal
there is no room
for the self-conscious body
in the land of play
here we enter on equal ground
the ground where being held
by gravity becomes levity

These are the movements
one knew as a child
a bold familiarity
the fertile imagination
where freedom blooms
within our bodyminds
and anything is possible

a return to dance
and passion
calls one home
to what lies beneath
(self)

Over and over again, I continue to find that passion has become an endangered species, and yet its location is often hidden in the terrain of the body. To become in touch with all of who we are: cognitive or intuitive, kinesthetic or visual, intellectual or spiritual bears on how much we can access the integration of the totality of being human. This article is not the place to justify these connections, and my own work has sought to do this in other forms for decades, as noted above. Here, I call on a celebration of what I observe and know in my bones over the many decades of teaching. The body and thus movement/dance is a place of knowing and both embodied knowledge and bodily wisdom is available to us. Many times I have said that it is like having a GPS system within, and yet not using it. The muscles of creativity connected to the body need encouragement and a pedagogy of openness in order to be integrated into life. There is an old proverb in the Old Testament that “hope deferred makes the heart sick.” The gift of bodily knowledge and bodily wisdom becomes dormant if not embraced, utilized and integrated, and even say not danced. But it takes great acceptance, of all we are in both our limitations and wonder, and go past cultural constraints to find a place where dance can be a place of play and discovery.

HOW DID THE ROSE?

How
did the rose
ever open its heart
and give to this world all its beauty?
It felt the encouragement of light against its being,

otherwise we all remain too
frightened.
Hafiz in Ladinsky (2002, p. 161.)

I have often thought of this poem by Hafiz, in conjunction with bringing the body to bear on the curriculum and integrating dance education within the classroom.

There is a need to befriend the body back to ourselves. This cannot be done with huge criticism, but in an atmosphere, of what I speak of as “loving attention.” Even as my students, who are from various ethnicities, share their dance pieces, or any pieces of movement, even small movement sentences, I invite them to witness each other in a mindful loving attentiveness. This takes intention, time, and vulnerability. And in the soil, of encouragement, women and men, flower.

Tagore, a favorite Indian poet and philosopher of mine says, “The first flower that blossomed on this earth was an invitation to the unborn song” (p. 58). There is an unborn song within all of us, waiting to be born. Isn’t this what good teaching does, to bring out, draw out in the true sense of the word education? Perhaps hope is not as far flung as one would imagine, but resides within. Could hope reside in the belly? Or could unfiltered joy be in the tissues or skin? What lies beneath the words, deadlines, and pressures that prevent from living life to the full? I have a tradition of writing, “Bodypsalm,” which I write, or I would say they write me as a way to remind and rebody myself back to what matters (Snowber, 2012a). I write them with my students as well, but there is one that is particularly relevant here .

Bodypsalm for tasting life to the full

What will happen
when the end of your world comes?
Will you say you breathed
enough air into your deep
lungs, expanding your chest
from the outside in and
peeled back enough layers
skins of roses and eggplant
squash and succulents
and tasted life to the full?

No one will remember
that you didn’t get the project done
or you didn’t meet the deadline
or there was a stain on your pants,
shirt, or flesh for that matter.

It is not just the roses
you were invited to smell
but every scent alive
sniffing out wonder in the rain

when day turns to dusk
and you know all too well that your pores
cry out for moisture
in so many ways beyond
washing your face

and the apples in the backyards of your childhood
have long been replaced
by concrete from another era
on that day when life comes to a close
where will your heart be
and will you have tasted
the unquestionable delight
of just being human?

Here on this lush planet
you are beckoned to respond
to the ingredients of creation
an ongoing meal

Come. Play. Dance. See.
Touch the wide sky and
notice the smallest bud
unravel your cares
and do the only thing you can.

O P E N.
(self)

I am more interested in what I don't know than what I know. I already know what I know, but how can I be surprised by being fully awake as Maxine Greene (1995) has spoken of so beautifully for many years. The body's embrace is an invitation to be fully awake, whether that is through dance or movement, kayaking or stretching, yoga or making love, or sitting in our bellies with full attention. Perhaps there is something one does not even know about the body, which could teach a worn-torn world. It is easy to dissect cultural and ideological differences, but what is it that unites? How is it that human beings were created that has deep commonalities? We feel, cry, laugh and have both aches, longings, and ecstasies through our bodies. What can the body teach us in rediscovering a curriculum of hope?

I don't know the answers to these questions, but I do ask them. And the thread of seeing students connect to their deep passions and voices continue to give me a kind of hope that runs through my blood. I am reawakened to why I am doing what I am doing in the first place. And I have to ask, what if?

What would happen

if we all got up out of our seats
pulled our bodies away from our laptops
and connected to the earth
with the soles of our feet
and extended our palms to the sky

took deep breaths
sighs in the middle of meetings
stopped bullying our bodies
into working for our mind
and let them hang out together

what do our bodies say
about the connection
between our mind and heart
belly and longing
throat and compassion
knees and justice

what if we asked our bodies
to nourish the questions
that ache to be asked
and listened with
a wide awakesness
which filled the hills of our lives
and brought a new understanding
one where earth and flesh
hope and heart
art and poetry
met
the limits and breath
of our longings

What if the body
was not relegated
to the third world
but became the place
where imagination
took shape?

What if?
(self)

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