

‘Just’ Dance

Hope and Happenstance¹ in ‘Reading’ Curriculum, Aesthetics, and Ethics with Donald Blumenfeld- Jones

MOLLY QUINN
Louisiana State University

MEMORY: *I am five years old. It is delightful and delicious to secretly slip on my shiny black tap shoes to wear to school. I will amaze my teacher and friends at La Premiere École with my spectacular dancing. Mrs. DeLaune disapproves of the songs and sounds my magic shoes make. Tearing them from my feet and pushing my toes into her big fluffy blue slippers, my tap shoes suddenly lose their charm and never see my feet again.*

Memory: I am twenty-five years old. It is delightful and delicious to study curriculum theory, if not difficult, too. Learning about and seeking curricular understanding, I find magic in the notion of expanding horizons, dialogic encounters, and the play of truth via Gadamer (1975) and Ricoeur’s (1970) hermeneutics of suspicion., though that of restoration, a deeply felt need. In my autobiographical analysis, this memory from kindergarten returns with echoes of Dorothy’s red shoes, having heart and brain, journeying, and longing for home—the Wizard of Oz ever a special, resonant, story for me.

Memory: I am twenty-five plus years by now. I am teaching one of my first university classes, lost in the sharing of some compelling movement of thought, I can only imagine is for students also most generative and stimulating. One young woman raises her hand, interrupting. Anticipating some incisive query for deepening our study, I hear her ask: “Are you a dancer? You have the body of a dancer.” Taken aback, I try not to miss a beat, though, and respond with a “No,” as I attempt some graceful movement series—plié, releve, arabesque, jete, chasse; bend, kick, leap, frolic, twirl—and swiftly write some signifier with chalk on the

board, of ‘intellectual substance,’ meant to evoke a return to the exploration of ideas at hand.

Memory: I am thirty-something-five or more years old. I have received a beautiful care package from my mom. In it is a CD of the pop hit song I Hope You Dance. As I read my mom’s letter, and listen to this song, over and over, again and again, for some reason, I cry and cry, and cry even more. It is the kind of weeping that comes from the depths of one’s being, requiring full participation, my whole frame and form quivering and shaking. My body aches for his, for him, even though he has broken me. At work, too, as it is, I can’t breathe, I feel nauseous a lot, and throw up too. I ache to escape, overcome my body, disheartened as I am forced to remember a perpetual history of chronic illness. Try as I might, my body, eventually, always makes me listen, or tries. Or maybe I ache for my body, having learned too well to dismiss it and set it aside, until...

Memory: Fast-forward ten or more years. I have left off recounting my age. I spend a lot of time back home, with my mom, who has now lost nearly all movement and speech. One day, though, she tells me that she dances every night in her dreams. I can see it deliciously and delightfully in my mind, and remember vividly the time in fifth grade when she threw me a dance party, and to the sweet sounds of Fats Domino—or was it Chubby Checker?—taught me and all my friends how to do “The Twist.”

On the cover of Donald Blumenfeld-Jones’ (2012) stirring text *Curriculum and The Aesthetic Life*, there is a striking photograph of a grand old tree marked with a “twist.” Trunk, branches, leaves, earth, and sky are all captured in a swirl, as if in motion. Immediately, I think of my great Live Oaks, christened in Spanish moss, so dear to me, and from childhood—life in Louisiana and Gulf Coast region thick with their presence, such that I have claimed them too as my kin. Yet, their allure, and beauty and comfort for me is most aptly described in the recognition of the silent, solid vigil they seem to perpetually keep, testifying ever to eternal fortitude and perseverance I know not of. Often, I found myself retreating beneath the Oaks for protection, shelter, and reassurance amid such immutability. I think in awe: *Neither hurricane nor history, nothing is moving this strong, ancient, immoveable one.*

As I read his collection of works, *Hermeneutics, Body, Democracy, and Ethics in Curriculum Theory and Practice*, some twenty years on, I am greatly moved, and thinking and wondering about and remembering movement and meaning among much beside, yet in this felt and experiential way in which the rooted tree vigils and reaching tree swirls both and together have their place, anew within me, and my work. I have begun here, with myself, my own reading, and a few body-memories of ‘dance’—dance, Blumenfeld-Jones’ art form, in which all of his work is grounded—recalled therein, seeking to cultivate here for my audience something of the feeling of that reading—and perhaps its movement. Blumenfeld-Jones’ dance form is oriented toward expressionist rather than representational presentation of the essence of ideas in dance“...the truth is in the feeling” (Hirschman, 1978, p. 179).

Blumenfeld-Jones’ work (2012) offers “an experience through which thought might be stimulated” (p. 293)², and in an enhanced and embodied way—the invitation to inhabit our own sense-making, liminal spaces of unfolding understanding, lived curricular events, moving us

beyond who we are, what we know, how we work, presently. Suggesting that his story moves the story of (t)his work (p. 3), which he offers as “one version of an academic life” he hopes we can leverage to inform our own (p. 392), he asks us to “read outward” (p. 223), in relation to our own experiences and understandings; in such, too, working through “the weight of the unseen world working through us” (p. 5), reading as displacement of self, sought into new horizons (p. 5).

The reading of which Blumenfeld-Jones speaks, and to which he urges us, is of course so much more, even other, than that which schools and curricula, with their standards or assessments, would generally have us attend; in fact, much of his work ‘reads against’ such renderings in education writ large, especially concerning their instrumentalism, which serve to distance us from the authentic, aesthetic, intrinsic and ethical value of reading. I am reminded of Anne Rorty’s work (1997) here in which she asserts that “all we do involves reading,” and like all else we do, “reading reveals the self...” (p. 85): unbeknownst perhaps to us, it affects who we become, as we are also changed by what we read. She worries that as newcomers into a long and sophisticated tradition of readers and interpreters, we run the risk of neither anymore understanding, nor sustaining its craft. She writes:

and that herein—articulating also that central to reading—the stakes are high: The difficult art of balancing fairness with self-protection, attentive respect with severity of judgment, seriousness with playfulness is the essence of an enlightened ethical life. It is a condition for a just and decent society. Learning to read well is on the way to learning to live well. (p. 89)

Blumenfeld-Jones’ work (2012) reminds us of us such—moves us to read well, and this profoundly in relation to living well too—our life, our labor, our curriculum field. And, yes, of the *art* of and in such that is required—difficult, and yet also delightful and delicious, celebrating the freedom each of us have in encountering the texts of our lives (p. 157). Enriching us through the hermeneutic tradition, following Heidegger (1927/1962), Blumenfeld-Jones—involving the art of interpretation for understanding, wherein the world, including the social world, ever calls for our reading as a text; he affirms “the foundational practice of being itself” (p. 33). Further, Blumenfeld-Jones asks us to attend to this (our) very being, and to our experience of this practice of being (in our world and work), and in a particular way—via the aesthetic, as a humanizing “counternarrative to ‘usefulness’” (p. 17); “a way of being in the world which brings enhancement to all we do” (p. 28). Experience involves: a “special” kind of magic-making (from Dissanyake, 1995, as cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, 2012, p. 19), intrinsic to human life and understanding, involving our capacity for creativity and connection.

“Living aesthetically,” as Blumenfeld-Jones explains, “is an active participation in the world through one’s senses, the outcome of such engagement being unknowable beforehand...but having a profound effect on one’s sense of place and value in the world” (2012, p. 30). It is “...connected to living life in relation to others such that...we come to a realization of our responsibility for others, not through learning that we have responsibilities but through actively sensing the other as needing us” (p. 21). Additionally, our inability to connect in this way impairs our work for justice. Speaking of attention and critique, seriousness and playfulness, his work takes us thus to the essence of an enlightened ethical life, and education for such—in this enhanced and embodied way. He worries about the ongoing renewal of our craft in curriculum studies, about solidified acceptance of certain truths, couch-potato comfort with its and our own ideas and actions. Blumenfeld-Jones (2012) bids us arise; engage this balancing;

inhabit the tension, the twist, the twirl—bids us to our stories, our readings, our bodies, ourselves; to the play of dance. He states:

Play is a betwixt-between state, a liminality that is fruitful in its non-reality... if my story means anything, it means that we, each, are living in liminal spaces even if we are unaware of them. Rather than the light touch of play, *we anchor ourselves* to positions, to ideas, to buildings, to comforts, not recognizing... (p. 397, emphasis mine)

Blumenfeld-Jones gets us moving, and recognizing, re-cognizing. Speaking from and through his experience, art, and life as a dancer, from dance as an art form, he gets us thinking with and in our bodies. The profundity of this move cannot be overestimated. His work in this way viscerally strikes at the heart of a fundamental dualism in our culture and curriculum, a split privileging the mind over, against, and at the expense of the body. Such has compelled the devaluation of emotion, the domination of the feminine/female, and the degradation of the earth, and those cultures, peoples, and beyond, deemed outside or beneath the rationalized, objectified, hierarchized world this dualism has created (pp. 248-251). Denigrated is knowledge and experience engaged and gained via the senses—the aesthetic thus dismissed too. Radically undermined are experiences of wholeness and meaning. From Blumenfeld-Jones, herein, we are asked to consider that understanding itself is not only epistemological, but ontological (p. 29) and axiological as well.

In the context of a “nonbody culture,” in our work in curriculum—while the pursuit, experience, and understanding of understanding is central, we suffer still from this absence of and abnegation of the body therein. We fail to attend to the meanings costumed and choreographed through, in and by the body; the body as text, too, to be read: even as motion and movement take place in and at the site of the body, something of the source and summit of meaningful action, that “opens up a world which it bears within itself” (Ricoeur, 1981, as cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, 2012, p. 299). By such, thus, is opened up and born also the very possibility of human agency (Arendt, 1958; Bowen-Moore, 1989). Yet, the project of education fundamentally concerns agency and advancement. In mainstream understandings, the Curriculum assists progress—even empowers—in expeditiously moving students from one place to another, generally to a place of greater mastery and knowledge. Etymologically, the word “curriculum” itself bears strongly these aspirations of power, movement, and progress—from a chariot for racing, and a course for running, to a course of study to be taken to obtain an advanced degree.

Via the method of *currere*—recalling curriculum as a verb, “to run”—William Pinar (2012) reminds us to attend to the experience of the “student,” ourselves, running such a course; of the import of subjectivity in understanding. Blumenfeld-Jones, as he reminds us to explore subjectivity—of the import of “experiencing in which experiencing and making sense of experiencing are fused” (p. 35); he moves us deeper, positing: “...we must [sink] into subjectivity until it hits bottom” (Jacoby, 1975, as cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, 2012, p. 273). Yet we sink, not to settle; but to return home (p. 248) to the body, as a location for thinking, and discovering the world—the curricular message, medium, and method that is ourselves; we enter into movement, so central to human experience (p. 158), and our (e)“motional response” in and to that experience. Like the work of the process artist, Richard Serra³, and his massive metal structures—described as if steel has been made to float—that evoke the ideas they enact;

Blumenfeld-Jones brings us to dance, our own subjectivity-in-the-making, and as liberatory educational practice.

Dance—“the art of motion, more, the art of *attending* to motion as meaning in and of itself, not outside itself” (p. 296)—teaches us about the “itinerary of [our] movement”, how we move and something of the quality of that movement; “feeling from the inside state of affairs that become manifest in the body in unpredictable ways” (p. 23). With heightened understanding, we attune ourselves to new and possible ways to respond, how we may more fully, freely and meaningfully move (p. 223). I am reminded here of Hannah Arendt’s (1954/1993) assertion that the essence of education is *natality*, the fact that new beings ever come into the world, requiring our response. She locates the ontological root of action, and ground of freedom, in this fact, ever announcing through the bodily arrival of the new in our midst an original historical event, a new movement initiated—a plot unpredictable and unprecedented; a bio-graphy unfolds, heretofore unwritten, as yet unread. Possessed of the principle of beginning, this embodied advent also bears witness to an unmatched human capacity—the power to begin, again and again, and this in love to the world, and for the renewal of the world we share (Bowen-Moore, 1989). Arendt (1954/1993) calls such the miracle that saves the world; us, each, as we live and move and have our being: miracles in motion manifesting.

Twirling and twisting and tapping our shoes—whether sparkling red or shiny black; and whether taking yellow brick roads for home or non-roads to who knows where, whether broken-hearted, body-bruised, or twinkled-toed; Blumenfeld-Jones (2012) encourages us to no longer “write ourselves out of the stories of our bodies” (p. 25), but rather to embrace that which can “move us out into new ways of encountering what we have been doing and will do” (p. 392). Herein, too, we find a new, renewed, relationship to ourselves, and own capacities and potentials, and who we might become (p. 70). *I hope you dance*. I hope I dance. I hope we dance—each, all, and together; in our lives, through our curriculum labors too, and always, whatever our stories, ever in our dreams as well.

Notes

¹ “I came upon this field by happenstance,” says Blumenfeld-Jones (2012, p. 1) of his work in curriculum theory. I use this term in the title because it is so apt for his work in affirming the body, motion and uncertainty: happenstance, defined as a *twist* of fate, inclusive of stances—body positions, and happen-ings—events moving one in unbeknownst directions, yet the felt source of emergent meaning and unfolding understanding.

² While Blumenfeld-Jones articulates this purpose specifically in relation to the inclusion of a script from a performed dance, I argue that something of the essence of his work broadly lies in ever offering, valuing, and calling our attention to such experience.

³ While a fan of Serra’s work myself, I owe a great deal to Heather Pinedo-Burns here for inviting me into deeper study of his work.

References

- Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
 Arendt, H. (1993). *Between past and future* (D. Lindley, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin Books. (Original work published in 1954)
 Blumenfeld-Jones, D. (2012). *Curriculum and the aesthetic life: Hermeneutics, body, democracy, and ethics in curriculum theory and practice*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- Bowen-Moore, P. (1989). *Hannah Arendt's philosophy of natality*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Dissanyake, E. (1995). *Homo aestheticus: Where art comes from and why*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1975). *Truth and method*. New York, NY: Crossroad.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row. (Original work published in 1927)
- Hirschman, A. (1978). The search for paradigms as a hindrance to understanding. In P. Robeson & W. Sullivan (Eds.), *Interpretive social science: A reader* (pp. 163-179). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Jacoby, R. (1975). *Social amnesia: A critique of conformist psychology from Adler to Laing*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Pinar, W. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ricoeur, P. (1970). *Freud and philosophy: An essay on interpretation* (Trans. D. Savage). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981). The model of text: Meaningful action considered as a text. In J. B. Thompson (Ed.), *Hermeneutics and the human sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation* (pp. 197-221). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, A. (1997). The ethics of reading: A traveler's guide. *Educational Theory*, (47)1, 85-89.
- Smith, D. (1994). The hermeneutic imagination and the pedagogic text. In D. Smith (Ed.), *Pedagon: Meditations on pedagogy and culture*. Bragg Creek, AB: Makyo Press.

