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ENC 1102

Literate Activity in Dance

Introduction

Literacy is often defined simply as the ability to read and write words, but it also includes being able to understand information no matter how it is communicated. Indeed, as Andrea Fishman argues, literacy evolves through communal practices, reflecting sociocultural settings, and the larger society dictates its norms. Literacy, Fishman reminds us, is shaped by “the social activities and contexts in which it is used,” that individuals learn to communicate through a kind of daily participation with others. Similarly, Madeline Halvey contends that dance and movement also constitute forms of literacy because dancers need to learn how to 'read' rhythm, timing, space and movement. Learning in dance, Halvey explains, takes place through “observation, practice and embodied engagement” rather than solely from written instructions. These notions also resonate with NCTE’s definition of literacy by accepting multiple meaning-making processes. This literate activity report describes one dance rehearsal as a site for demonstrating literacy beyond reading and writing.

Methods

To make this observation, I spent two hours observing a dance rehearsal in a relatively well-known dance community. The observation occurred in a dance studio and on rehearsal videos that the dancers shared in a group messaging app. I searched for instances of reading, writing and communicating in the rehearsal, centering my attention on the rhetorical situation as it manifests within this space, text, communicator, audience, purpose. During and after the observation, I made notes on patterns and examples. The subjects consisted of four dancers, known as Daphne, Ava, Emily and Brooklyn. I saw how they worked with music, gestures, spoken commands and abbreviated written instructions in their learning and practicing of choreography.

Results

The rehearsal of the dance took place against a rhetorical backdrop that went beyond simple communication. The primary modalities used for instruction were music, oral instructions, movement modeling, and brief written notes. Alex played the role of the primary informant, teaching and showing the choreography. The audience was made up of the other dancers, who watched closely, listened and practiced the movements. The idea of the communication was that everyone learnt the routine and did it together in a bid to help everyone get it right.

There were plenty of real examples of reading and writing at the rehearsal. The dancers were trained to listen to the music searching for how many counts, time signature changes and cues.

They frequently kept count aloud, using familiar phrases like “five, six, seven, eight” to hit the beat. Daphne worked from notes on a phone with mentoring tips like “pause on 8” and “sharp arms.” The dancers also follow each other’s movement through watching spacing, timing and levels to not get out of sync.

Shared dance vocabulary was also a crucial component to the literate activity. Terms like “marking,” “full out” and “hit the accent” were employed frequently and comprehended universally. This terminology assisted the dancers in understanding how to execute the move without resorting to lengthy tutorials. By the time Ava said, “Let’s mark it,” everyone understood to step lightly and conserve energy. That’s how common language becomes a type of literacy in the dance community.

This sense of the message was accomplished by the end of the rehearsal. The dancers worked together more closely and required fewer corrections. I could tell because they stopped just as frequently, made almost as many mistakes, and finished the routine without a hitch. Their progress was evidence that the literate activity had been effective.

Discussion

One important implication of this observation is that literacy can be active and physical, rather than written. Meanings were conveyed through the dancer’s movement, music and a common language. They copied by watching each other, listening for cues and practicing together. This indicates that a lot of literacy is group dependent. Rehearsal is a great example of how people make meaning without the statutory contents of written culture.

These results are related to the concepts of Fishman and Halvey. Literacy, he says, is developed in interaction with others, and that is what was happening as the dancers were learning to work together toward their shared dancing goals. Halvey’s claim that dance is a kind of literacy is demonstrated in the manner that dancers read rhythm, movement and space. Though the vernacular in the dance community made it clear that literacy is context-dependent, both authors point out.

Observation Notes

Where: Dance studio and group messaging app

Duration: Approximately 2 hours total

Participants: Daphne, Ava, Emily, Brooklyn

Texts we saw: Music tracks, Choreography demonstrations, Verbal cues Written phone notes

Core tasks: Tracking beats, notating choreography, fixing spacing, employing dance vocabulary

Evidence of literacy: Rhythmic interpretation, reading cues from motion, common vocabulary

Reflection

This insight also taught me that literacy takes many forms and can be found outside school. Prior to completing this assignment, my perception of what constitutes literacy was largely limited and consisted of reading books or writing essays. Observing dance rehearsals taught me that they, too, read music, movement and visual cues. I discovered that communities come up with their own forms of communication, which make perfect sense to the people they include. This assignment shifted my understanding of literacy in the real world.

Works Cited

Fishman, Andrea. "Becoming Literate: A Lesson from the Amish."

Halvey, Madeline. "Simple Forms of Dance and Movement Literacy."