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Dance as Embodied Literacy in Community Spaces

Background:

I am studying dance literacy in youth and community dance settings because I wish to understand how dancers work with music, movement vocabularies and embodied practices to make meaning, so that academic notions of literacy can be broadened from simply reading and writing. The term "literacy" traditionally means writing and grammar, which is a limited understanding of the term. Yet, literacy scholars contend that literacy is socially constructed and influenced by the societies in which it emerges. As a dancer, I knew that choreography involves interpreting text and breaking down rhythm analyzes of deciphering, memorizing formatted sequences and otherwise harnesses physical combined above the neck. These are all ways of interpreting, of using shared vocabulary and making meaning in larger literacies as well. I am personally interested in this subject because dance has been an integral part of my own life and I would like to investigate how it can be considered as a valid system of communication. Through exploring dance as literacy, rather than visual symbols alone, I am endeavouring to find my place in contemporary educational discourse that seeks to value alternative, multimodal and embodied, ways of knowing. Re-defining literacy may affect the work of an educator-teachers, particularly in innovative and performance-based settings.

Analysis:

Recent research has challenged the prevailing notion that literacy is restricted to reading and writing printed words. Andrea Fishman claims that literacy is determined by socio-cultural values and societal objectives, instead of being a set skill applicable to all humans. In her work on the Amish, she shows that literacy practices are constructed based upon what a particular group deems meaningful and relevant (Fishman). This idea is critical to my work as I believe dance communities are also creating literacy systems. Dancing shared movement vocabulary, counting systems, spatial awareness and musical interpretation enable them to work efficiently in rehearsals and on stage. As Amish literacy practices that Fishman discusses, their dance literacy is instrumental and determined by the ends of the community.

Madeline Halvey takes the concept of literacy to an even more expanded level by emphasizing embodied learning and movement based practices. She asserts that literacy can arise from observation, imitation, and cultural interaction rather than

exclusively through instruction in writing (Halvey). This concept can easily be translated to dance spaces, where they learn bio-mechanics by 'seeing' the movements and then mirroring them, incorporating correction in the form of adjustment. Learning is physical and social, it cannot be communicated by speech alone. This further supports the idea that literacy can be performed with the body.

And moreover, multimodal scholars claim that in today's society, meaning-making combines several modes such as, visual, oral, spatial and kinesthetic. Dance combines the former three while including all of them at the same time. Dancers must also interpret lyrics, which is linguistic, music and rhythm or auditory, formations and spacing on the dance floor as well as physical expression in all forms of synergy with other dancers there are learned kinesthetic. From this perspective, dance is obviously a form of complex literacy practice.

While there is growing scholarship on multimodal literacies, embodied practices like dance remain relatively marginal in first-year writing studies. The extension of Fishman's socially situated literacy and Halvey's embodied learning constructs to dance communities allows us to show in this research that dancing is more than artistic expression, but comprises a structure of communicative literacy.

Plan:

To pursue my analysis, I will be using two main research methods:

Observation: I will conduct at least one dance rehearsal observation and take detailed field notes on how the dancers communicate, respond to music and talk with each other, using terminology, and correct each other. I will then be able to observe and collect qualitative data of literacy events as they happen without any intervention.

Interviews: I will interview dancers to ask how they understand lyrics, recall choreography, comprehend movement vocabulary and learn new routines. These interviews will yield qualitative, descriptive information about their experiences in these contexts.

The information I gather is not directly quantitative. I will also need the tools, for example prepared interview questions, observation notes.

Stakeholders include dancers, teachers, literacy educators and others concerned about multimodal learning. This study could be a part of larger discussions around literacy expansion within the context of education.

Works Cited

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

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

Gee, James Paul. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*.

The New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures."

Reflection Paragraph

A difficulty I encountered working on this proposal was the selection of a topic that was interesting, and focused enough. Because dance is relevant to so many notions of communication and self, it was hard to decide which perspective to focus upon. I enjoyed linking my own experiences with formal research the most as I was able to note how academics such as Fishman and Halvey, corroborate things that I've eyeballed in dance spaces. The part I didn't like was putting the research into groups and making sure the proposal included everything that was needed. The big takeaway from this proposal was that literacy goes way beyond what I thought it did. In the process I came to see that embodied practices such as dance have intricate systems of meaning making that need to be given the status of higher education.