

FEATURE ARTICLE

READING AND WRITING IN THE ARTS: A dance perspective

Many of the literacy strategies discussed in this article are appropriate for dance, drama, music and visual arts. The article focuses on reading and writing in dance, which means that some aspects (e.g. the process diary) are specific to this subject. Teachers of other arts forms will be able to adapt the strategies and much of the content to suit the needs of their subject and students.

In order to succeed in dance, students need to be able to acquire content and then to demonstrate that they know and understand it. How do they acquire content? By listening, reading and watching. How do they demonstrate their knowledge? By speaking, writing and dancing. Therefore literacy in relation to dance—talking, listening, reading and writing—is essential for progress in any dance course.

The capacity to read and write effectively in dance does not occur as students enter Year 11. The skills of reading and writing are best taught and developed over the full six years of secondary school. We cannot expect students to go from one word or sentences in Stage 4, to paragraphs in Stage 5, to full essays in Stage 6. Teachers need to consider carefully the gradual teaching of accumulated skills over a number of years, building up to the expectations of reading and writing in Year 12. Therefore we need to start in the junior years by looking at the expectations of the Stage 6 Syllabus and systematically working towards these year by year.

Skills that students need to develop in relation to reading and writing in dance include:

- understanding the context of the written text
- understanding the purpose of the written text

- understanding key points and concepts
- defining and understanding dance-specific and other vocabulary
- notemaking from text
- writing summaries from text.

Secondary teachers of dance know how difficult it is to resource teaching and learning for both Years 7-10 and Years 11-12. There are no textbooks specifically written with school students in mind. Providing students with appropriate texts to develop dance knowledge and literacy is an important part of teaching.

This article attempts to identify types of writing that students will encounter in their studies and to provide some strategies to help students develop reading and writing skills in relation to these texts.

Types of dance texts and their purpose

Historical source material

Students gather factual information from a range of historical source materials. These materials may include biographies and autobiographies, interviews, articles, letters, theatre programs, journals and Internet sites.

Technical texts

Students read textbooks to learn about dance technique, anatomy, safe dance practice and composition. Authors of these texts use dance-specific terminology, which students should acquire as a result of their study. Students demonstrate their understanding of technical vocabulary through writing, speaking and practical application.

Process diaries and choreographers' logs

Process diaries are personal accounts of the process of making dance works. Reading about the choreographic process aids understanding of works. Students write their own logs to develop skills in written communication, reflection and evaluation and in notating important stages in the process through words, pictures or symbols.

Reviews

Reviews are written by dance critics to assess the value of a dance work for a public audience. By reading and writing reviews, students can develop skills in describing, interpreting and evaluating.

Reading dance texts

Reading in dance provides students with an understanding of the content of dance, and also helps them to understand: how dance is written and read; how dance talks about itself; how dance expresses itself. There will be commonalities with other areas of knowledge, but there will also be things that are distinctive to the subject.

Providing focused activities for students will help them to develop skills in reading and interpreting texts. The following examples demonstrate some strategies for reading historical source material and technical texts.

EXAMPLE 1:

Questioning from text

Jazz is a sort of popular primitivism, illustrating, in its sensual moods, tempi and pulses, the desire of our sophisticated and complex culture to return to the rhythm and body movements of a less civilised society. It is the folk dance of the Twentieth Century. As with other Twentieth Century phenomena, its rapidity of development and infectious invasion of all parts of the world has been without precedent. The history of jazz covers little more than fifty years, but its influence on the present arts of dance and music is undeniably important.

Horst, L. and Russell, C. (1961)
Modern Dance Forms, p. 111

Questions*:

1. At the time of writing, how long had jazz dance existed? (*literal*)
2. What comparison does the author make between western and non-western cultures? (*inferential*)
3. Why does the author call jazz the “folk dance of the Twentieth Century”? (*inferential*)

*Questions need to include a variety of literal, inferential, critical and creative types:

- Literal: facts or ideas that can be derived directly from the text
- Inferential: generalisations from the text
- Critical: judgements about the author’s intent
- Creative: generating new ideas from the text, using the information in a new way.

4. How does the author feel about jazz as a dance style? What words or phrases tell you this? (*critical*)
5. What changes would you make to this text to reflect a more contemporary view of jazz dance? (*creative*)

EXAMPLE 2:

Developing subject vocabulary

There are many strategies that can be employed to help students to define, remember and use technical vocabulary. The following strategy of matchmaking requires students to read the text and then to match definitions to specific terms.

When examining the knee joint, one must also consider the *patella*, a *sesamoid* bone that originates in the *quadriceps* extensor *tendon*. The patella protects the front of the knee and increases the *leverage* of the quadriceps muscle. Because it *articulates* only with the *femur*, a balance of pull on the patella by the quadriceps muscle is essential for smooth knee *extension* and *flexion*. A dancer who improperly performs a *turn-out* from the hip with the lower leg often distorts the muscle pull on the kneecap, causing it to *misalign*.

Arnheim, D. (1986) *Dance Injuries. Their Prevention and Care*, p. 17

Term	Definition	
A <i>patella</i>	Thigh bone	A
B <i>sesamoid</i>	Muscle of the anterior (front) thigh	
C <i>quadriceps</i>	Move out of alignment	
D <i>tendon</i>	A bending movement	
E <i>leverage</i>	Chunky, irregular bone	
F <i>articulates</i>	Kneecap	
G <i>femur</i>	Moves in connection with	
H <i>extension</i>	Stretching a limb outward	
I <i>flexion</i>	The power to lift	
J <i>turn-out</i>	Tough fibrous cord that attaches muscle to bone	
K <i>misalign</i>	Rotation outwards from a parallel position	

There are other strategies that can be used in combination with matchmaking to help students experiencing difficulty understanding new terms:

- Write terms and their definitions on cards and work in pairs or small groups to match them
- Provide annotated illustrations of the bone and muscle structure relevant to the definitions
- Once terms are defined, ask students to rewrite the paragraph in their own words.

Other strategies for developing reading skills

- Consider using a strategy such as reciprocal teaching, so that students can work in groups on understanding more complex texts.
- Ask questions before rather than after the students have read the text.
- Use scaffolds to explain concepts before students read a text so that they have a chance to attach the details to an overall picture.
- Brainstorm the area to be read and ask what students know before the reading. Build field knowledge if necessary.
- Reconstruct texts to build understandings of effective structure and also to reinforce comprehension of concepts.
- Construct cloze* passages to test knowledge (for example, of technical vocabulary). Cloze passages can also be effective in giving practice in inserting other kinds of words that cause difficulty to students e.g. effective adjectives, correct pronouns, appropriate conjunctions.

* Cloze passages: the exercise of supplying a word that has been omitted from a passage.

Writing dance texts

In writing it is not sufficient to just build up the student's knowledge of technical vocabulary. We must look more closely at the language required to:

- explain
- describe
- argue
- criticise
- evaluate.

Descriptive language is the foundation for writing responses and reviews. The modelling and joint construction of text with students should occur regularly, particularly whenever new aspects of writing are being explored or troublesome areas are being addressed.

Response writing about dance works requires students to describe and interpret the work from a personal point of view. Written **reviews** are similar to responses; however, the focus of the dance critic when writing a review is to assess the value of the work by describing and contextualising certain aspects of the work and making judgements about its worth.

EXAMPLE 3:

Modelling descriptive language

The following extract illustrates the use of descriptive language in an extract from a personal response:

The dancers enter the darkened room and move in a circular pathway around the po'teau mitan, the central vertical mast symbolising the tree of life. As they move, the garland of po'teau candles flickers, pulsing cross-rhythmically with the sound of the drums, the rattles, the bells and the responding call of the participants. A montage of matronly petticoats and bloomers in pristine white and blood-red, and festively decorated safari suits and straw hats, moves in concentric circles in a rhythmical lumbering step. The women pick up their skirts and swing them to the beat, revealing powerful legs and bare feet. As the drumbeat quickens to call and honour the spirit loa, the pelvic and shoulder isolations of the dancers become more forceful, accentuated by arm punches. One woman begins to convulse, her body and balance out of control as the loa "rides" her like a horse. The spirit that possesses her is Damballa, the serpent god, and she slithers fitfully on her belly in the maize flour designs that decorate the floor.

Description from video *Divine Drumbeats—Katherine Dunham and her People*

Strategies:

- Identify adjectives and their value in describing the dance e.g. *cross-rhythmically, lumbering, fitfully*.
- Identify sentences that incorporate a number of ideas e.g. *As they move, the garland of po'teau candles flickers, pulsing cross-rhythmically with the sound of the drums, the rattles, the bells and the responding calls of the participants*. This sentence describes aspects of the setting, mood and accompaniment in a succinct way.
- Watch the video segment and brainstorm other words to describe the dance.
- In small groups, construct a sentence that describes several aspects of the dance, using describing words from brainstorm lists.
- Select good examples from the groups and publish on a chart for display in the room. Add to this chart from other texts written in class or at home.

Other strategies for developing writing skills for responses and reviews

- Look at specific elements of writing which can be built up over time, for example, how to describe a dance sequence using technical vocabulary.
- Talk about how description is not merely using adjectives but the effective building of the noun group so that information can be packed into the sentence.
- Demonstrate how to quote examples effectively. Use examples from students' texts and from reviews.
- Display descriptive vocabulary lists for reference when students are writing.

of the new Stage 6 course. These materials will be helpful for teachers of Years 7-10 as well, in giving guidance to students learning to use a journal to document their learning. These materials are available on the New HSC web site at <http://www.newhsc.schools.nsw.edu.au>

In the example here, we will deal specifically with writing in composition.

In composition, students document the planning and process of their work. Students should be encouraged to record this process in an individual way, and should be provided with the purpose for such documentation, and ideas and methods for recording.

In documenting their composition process, students will use visual and written texts. The examples below show ways in which students might write about or illustrate their composition process. These examples show how students can record their ideas through words, descriptions, evaluations, symbols, images, notation and maps.

Process diaries

Students keep process diaries to document their learning in dance. The writing in process diaries serves a number of purposes. The handouts for last year's New HSC dance workshops included a comprehensive section on using process diaries for all components

EXAMPLE 4:

Documenting the process of composition

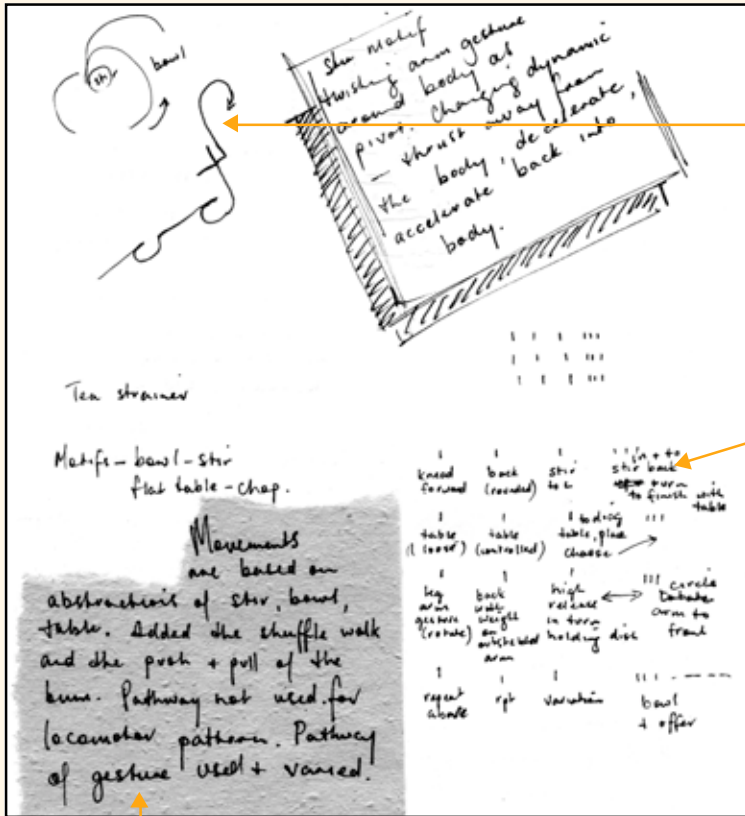
The following excerpts from a composition process reveal a great deal about the work in progress. Introducing students to a variety of ways to document their work prevents them from writing reams of text "after the event".

The image shows handwritten notes for two dance pieces. The first piece, 'Grosse Femme', includes notes like '3 graces - intro', 'Cooki virtues: serving others, love, Peacemakers, kindness/courtesy, generosity + sharing'. The second piece, '5 Graces', includes 'Kindness/courtesy', 'Aglaxia, Euphrosyne, Thalia', 'presente at banquet a must'. There is a section with musical notation and a note: 'Introductory music is wacky - no rhyme notation identified (signposts for movement between lengthy sections)'. At the bottom, there are rhythmic patterns like '1-4', '2-4', '3-4', '4-4' and a list of words: 'Servitude', 'Stir', 'Mix', 'Pour', 'Fold', 'Blend', 'smile', 'chop', 'whip', 'kiss', 'kick', 'this', 'canoe', 'separate'. There are also words like 'HAP MEG', 'sing?', 'inde.', 'spill', 'wipe', 'kiss', 'seal'.

Some early ideas showing research into a theme

The student has selected 2 pieces of music and has documented the structure of each: one using graphic notation, the other using counts in phrases.

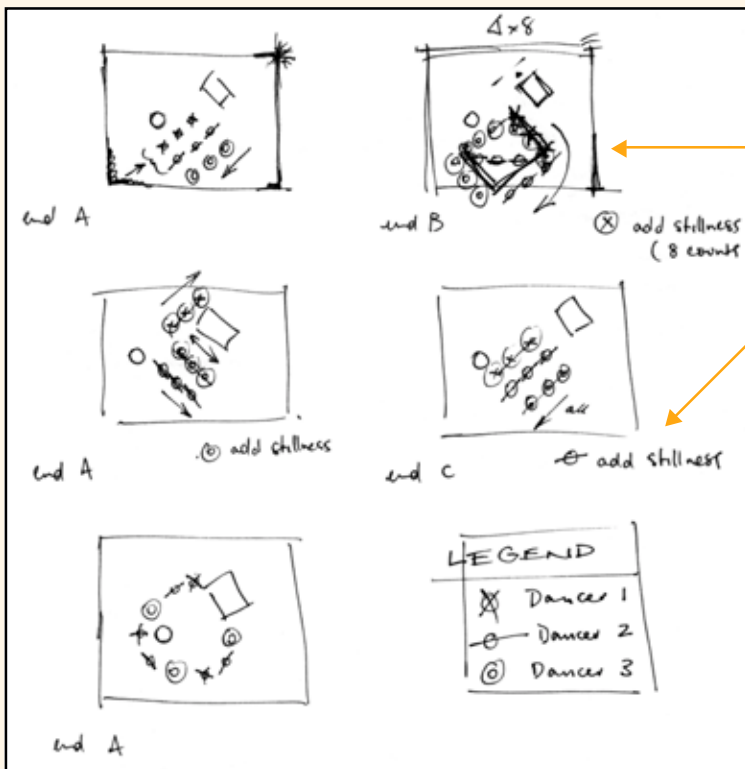
Here, words have been used as a beginning stimulus. Those circled were used for improvisation leading to the establishment of motifs.



The first drawing illustrates a motif, a visual description of the aerial pathway of a gesture. The second drawing shows a pathway that reiterates the curving shape of the gestural motif.

Here, the student describes the motif in a phrase and a variation of the phrase. The description is structured according to the phrasing of the music.

An evaluative comment about the progress of the work, including additions and variations to the motif phrase.



A series of positions in the stage space show early thoughts about one aspect of forming. Included are references to elements of time, sections of the work and use of stillness.

Expectations

Make your expectations clearly known to the students. Remember, the time available to you to address reading and writing in dance is limited, but no-one else will address these issues for the students. You are the only one who can show them how to read and write in dance.

Encourage students to write drafts and submit them ahead of time to a “critical friend” to check for

- punctuation
- spelling
- appropriate paragraphs
- presentation.

(Remember that different expectations apply to process diaries.)

This will save you time attending to the basics of reading and writing and perhaps allow for time on

- the more crucial issues, such as how to write a review. Then, where students have genuine difficulties, you can consult with other teachers and support staff to provide consistent teaching strategies across the KLAs.

- Think about your own capacity to write in the way you want the students to write. Be prepared to demonstrate this and to articulate the decisions you make as a writer.

- Allocate time during the teaching and learning cycle to develop content knowledge. Demonstrate the skills required to express that content, and support students in practising those skills that lead to effective reading and writing.

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