

A question of (dance) style

Students who study dance in school elective courses often train in private studios as well. In these studios they attend classes that are named after dance styles and perform in eisteddfods in style categories. Like most people in the wider community, they often understand dance only in terms of the style in which it is performed.

The current HSC review has raised questions about the study of dance styles in the 2 Unit Dance Syllabus. This article aims to contextualise the study of styles in the Years 7-12 dance curriculum.

What is style?

Style in the arts is defined by individuals, groups, cultures and nations. Factors affecting the development of style include the physical nature of the world, the physicality and spirituality of people, language and symbols, ideology and customs, politics and power, technology and media, time, and patterns of human behaviour. It may be said, then, that dance styles are the configurations of movement that are influenced by these conditions, and are formalised as languages.

A dance style is a language that manifests itself in a dance work.

A dance style is a pattern, an amalgam of movement ideas that recur in dance works.

A dance style is a label that allows critics to distinguish dance works without labouring to describe every formal detail.

Unfortunately, many dance students have a limited understanding of these languages or patterns, and recognise only a few labels, which impedes their aesthetic development.

Classifying dance styles

The classification of dance styles can facilitate the comprehension of dance. However, certain designations, such as *modern*, *ballet* and *jazz*, do not adequately delineate the range of historical and contemporary works within these styles. Cohen (1982, p. 118) uses the word **genre** to describe the performance styles of ballet and modern dance. In this sense, "genre" can be used as a broader category to encompass a range of different styles.

For example, the genre of *modern* dance encompasses works that have been created over the past 100 years. It is inappropriate to limit thousands of diverse works to a simple definition or a list of characteristics. In their study of modern dance, students must investigate the personal and choreographic styles of individual artists, and become familiar with the varied codified techniques or training regimes that are associated with the genre. Refining the classification further enables students to discriminate different characteristics of



style related to context. In the example below, the characteristics of style are described in three time frames: early modern, late modern and postmodern eras:

Early modern:

... percussive, angular and often distorted movements... contraction and release involving the torso... dance takes place in an arc of unbalance (Morrison Brown, 1979, pp. 43-44)

Late modern:

[exploration of] the possibilities for dance movement that did not spring from literal or musical domination... personal gesture, free-flowing movement... contrasts in phrasing and dynamics, kinetic images, improvisations in movement itself (Ellfeldt, 1976 p. 122)

Postmodern:

1. Analytic: [experimentation] with non-technical movement, non dancers, no fixed repertory (Morrison Brown, 1979, p. 177)
2. Expressive: a swing back to formality, technique, ideational content, expressiveness and costumes (Morrison Brown, 1979, p. 177)

Note: *These characteristics have been sourced from only two references. Research and reading of other source material will broaden understanding of the development of styles within the modern genre.*

Individual style

When describing or defining dance style, we identify the movement characteristics observed in the performance of that style. Style can also be defined by referring to the way an individual dancer performs or the way a choreographer devises movement content and structures a work. Blom and Chaplin (1986) make specific reference to three definitions of individual style: personal style, choreographic style and codified technique.

personal movement style—an individual's movement personality, his movement signature; choreographic style—the composite of personal and artistic preferences that characterises the mode, manner and content of one's choreography; codified technique—a personal style that becomes refined and classified to the point where movement vocabulary builds up around it... (Blom and Chaplin, 1986, p. 136).

Teaching style in context

Our aim, as teachers of dance, is to equip students with a broad understanding of the art form of dance, the skills to interpret dance, and to communicate through dance in a complex and innovative way.

Understanding style within the narrow framework of performance does not allow this broad understanding.

Through the integration of syllabus components it is possible to study style in a more personalised manner. For example, studying the historical context of a style should assist students in the performance of that style. Similarly, providing students with examples of choreographed works that explore similar movement content, approaches to forming or thematic intent as their own compositions, will stimulate and aid the development of an individual choreographic style.

Strategies to broaden student understanding of style

- Read and discuss references to style in current dance literature.
- Examine and compare choreographic and individual performance styles within a specific genre.
- Read and discuss choreographers' writings about philosophy and style.
- Keep process journals to help identify personal style.
- Video composition work over a period of time to identify students' choreographic style and observe changes in, or consolidation of, that style.
- Participate in performance classes in a range of styles within a genre.

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References

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