

Documenting Dance Education

By Dr. Marc Richard

We must become better at identifying what students are actually learning in dance and describing how well they are learning it... Understanding what students are actually learning not only gives us ammunition for advocacy, but it also allows us to further our own thinking about what is worth knowing in dance and why. (Stinson, 2005, p. 220)

Although dance has been a subject in the Ontario curricula for almost fourteen years, there seems to be very little creative dance taking place in elementary schools. In order to address this issue, we could look to places where dance is successfully embraced as an important site of embodied learning and find a means to animate these learning episodes for others in education. But how can we animate dance, as such an ephemeral art form? Recently, early childhood dance scholars (Sansom, 2011) and proponents of creative learning (Craft, Cremin & Burnard, 2008a) have begun to recognize the alignment between the principles and values of the Reggio schools with those of creative dance education and creative learning in general. Reggio-inspired pedagogical documentation might help animate the learning in creative dance, and as Hanna (1999, p. 59) recognizes, dance as a rich resource for embodied knowledge and transformation has been *underutilized* in our educational reforms. Making visible the many profound moments of bodily learning within a creative dance setting might help to broaden definitions of *education* and *learning*. Snowber recognizes dance as a unique site for learning about ourselves and our world: “Dance allows a relationship to develop between the outer world and our bodies...our bodies experience things first, via our physical interaction with the world; therefore, there are kinds of data that our bodies experience before our minds” (qtd. in Leavy, 2009, p. 188).

When I was introduced to the practices of the Reggio Emilia schools in a graduate course in education, I immediately recognized the incredible potential in their approach to education in order to support the way we teach and advocate for dance in Ontario Schools. The Reggio schools utilize the graphic arts as a means of representing children’s knowledge about the world. The Reggio educators see learning as an open-ended spiral where all stakeholders are encouraged to visit and revisit, observe and re-observe, consider and re-consider. As Malaguzzi (1998) warns, “Creativity becomes more visible when adults try to be more attentive to the cognitive processes of children than to the results they achieve in various fields of doing and understanding” (p. 77). Unlike end products, pedagogical documentation allows for a *re-enactment* of the creative processes and events (Nimmo, 1998, p. 307).

What is pedagogical documentation?

Pedagogical documentation, for Reggio educators (Rinaldi, 2001), is the practice of attentively studying and actively recording the process of a student's learning, which involves their knowledge, understanding, thinking, communication, and application in a given social context (with an eye to values and cultures), and animating this process of learning for others. These others might include the students themselves, other educators, parents, siblings, and the community at large. Documentation might take place in a variety of formats including note-taking, photography, audio recording, video recording, samples of students' work, as well as written reflections on the learning experience encountered. It is an interactive process, which asks a great deal of the documenter—intense awareness, openness and attentiveness within the learning situation, and active and sustained reflection afterwards.

Pedagogical documentation as a research methodology aligns well with our current Ontario Arts policy documents (Ministry of Education, 2009/2010), which offer four big ideas for arts education: creativity, communication, understanding culture, and making connections. The arts documents also place great emphasis on the creative and critical analysis process and stress the connections between the cognitive (thoughts) and the affective (feelings) through aesthetics and embodied learning, that is, using the body to learn (Ministry, 2009/2010). Dance education melds well with pedagogical documentation, because, as Rinaldi (2001) reminds us, pedagogical documentation “takes the individual out of anonymity” and makes visible and legitimate their theories about learning and life (p. 81).

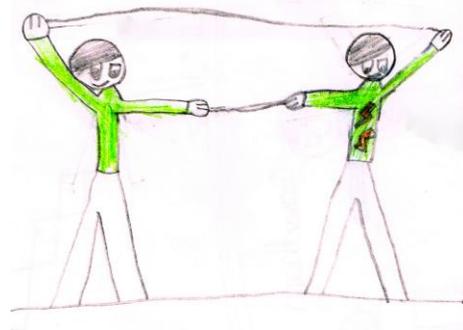
Because documentation is a tangible form (the traces of learning are present in the panels which include pictures and transcriptions of actual conversations as well as interpretive text from the pedagogue), it allows for constant revisiting and reconstruction of the original learning event—a *spiral process* “which allows for taking multiple perspectives, for looping between self-reflection and dialogue, for passing between the language of one's professional community (theories and practical wisdom) and one's personal passions, emotions, intuitions and experiences” (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 154).

This process is quite demanding for teachers, as it asks them to consider their own theories about learning. To create documentation in order to share it with others, teachers must decide on a question or focus and then generate data that speaks to this research question. The data is then analyzed in terms of both teaching and learning, and then choices are made about a design layout that communicates the research to others. Pedagogical documentation involves an intense engagement, what some have called *attentive listening*, allowing the participants' thoughts and ideas to emerge, asking questions to gain clarity and to draw forth the participants' ideas.

Although it is a time-consuming and frustrating process to learn, I believe that applying this process to creative dance education in Ontario schools will help to make visible the rich, embodied learning taking place in classrooms where creative dance is embraced as language and a way of knowing. This has the potential to contribute to the state of dance education in this province and also to the art of teaching and education as a whole.

The Tools of Documentation

- Video cameras (phones)
- Still cameras (phones)
- Recording devices (phones)
- Journals
- Panels
- Notebooks
- Student Work Samples



Questions we must ask ourselves in order to document learning:
What is learning? What do we mean by learning?
What is creativity? What do we mean by creativity?

Creative processes are rooted in imaginative thought, in envisaging new possibilities. But creativity goes further. Imagination can be an entirely private process of internal consciousness....Private imaginings have no impact in the public world at all. Creativity does....Whatever the task, creativity is not just an internal mental process: it involves action. In a sense, it is *applied imagination* [emphasis added]. (Robinson, 2001, p. 115)



Bio- Dr. Marc Richard

Marc has taught at all levels of education, worked as a private arts educational consultant and artist in Education. He has written dance curriculum and conducted many workshops for teachers. Marc has taught in the Faculty of Education and Dance Department at York University, is on faculty at Sheridan College's Music Theatre Performance Program, and Charles Sturt University's Faculty of Education. His research attempts to make the learning visible in creative dance education in Ontario schools. He is the Canadian Representative for Dance and the Child International (daCi), the dance liaison for the Council of Ontario Dance and Drama Educators (CODE) and served as the dance consultant on the Ministry's arts webcast project. He was invited to present his research at the World Alliance for Arts Education (WAAE) in Finland. Marc is a graduate of the School of Toronto Dance Theatre and holds

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