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## Orientation for communication: Embodiment, and the language of dance

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### **Abstract**

In this article I explore the place of movement, particularly dance, in understanding and communication of the lived experience. I look at the *gap* between corporeal sensation and the communication of that knowledge into wider social contexts. Drawing on narratives gathered from four case studies in British schools, I look at dance as a mode of language that can offer a methodological approach to understanding the lived experience.

I take the pragmatist starting point of *embodiment* to argue that the immediacy of empirical experience is limited by the use of verbal languages alone to organize meaning-making. I suggest that ideas are three-dimensional, having aspects that are revealed by the attributes of different languages but are not limited to the language through which they are communicated. Therefore a network of languages, including movement languages, can create a web of understanding that addresses the deficits of each single language within that web. I suggest that a focus on just one mode of language to communicate ideas could result in a loss of engagement with the full potential of an idea. I suggest that different languages have a rhizomatic relationship each having equal potential to add to the quality and ‘thickness’ of communication of the multi-layered experience of embodiment.

**Keywords:** embodiment, dance, communication, sensation, perception, language

## Introduction

As a choreographer I find somatic expression—thinking and perceiving through the wordless medium of the ‘body’—crucial to communication. From the pragmatist or phenomenologist perspective of ‘embodiment’, interaction is the very catalyst for developing knowledge or ideas (Dewey, Boydston and Lavine 1989; Merleau-Ponty 2002). However, there is an apparent isolation created by the *gap* between the sensation of embodiment and the communication of experience into contexts for meaning-making beyond one’s corporeal sensations. Although corporeal sensation in environment is the galvanization of embodiment, what Dewey refers to as *immediate-empiricism* (Morgenbesser 1977) communication of experience often appears to elude verbal languages.

Dewey suggests that language takes the form of many modes of communication. Therefore it could be possible that people create narratives about their experiences that are articulated beyond the use of words. ‘The heart of language is not “expression” of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners.’<sup>1</sup>

Coming from an embodied starting point this research sought to gather the narratives that Respondents constructed about their somatic experiences. While acknowledging the tensions and contradictions the attempt to perceive beyond one’s own corporeal sensations raises, the research used ethnography (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Sparkes 2002) and the narrative turn (Riessman 2008) to collect Respondents’ stories and ideas about their embodied experiences of a specific environment, in this case school buildings.

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), p. 179.

## **A brief review of the literature**

Dewey writes extensively about how to understand and communicate the embodied experience. Key to his work (and relevant to the framing of this research) are two concepts: first, the notion of *transaction* (Dewey, Boydston and Lavine 1989), a methodological explanation of how body, reflective thought and environment are co-constructed in embodiment. The second is the notion of *situation*, which is like a container or *unifying quality* that can be used to identify events (Morgenbesser 1977). According to Dewey all the elements of a *situation*, that is, the perceived objects, emotions and people, are in a relationship of transaction. Rather than being isolated elements they affect each other; ontologically creating each other through the meaning made from their interactions, and therefore transforming each other as they interact (Dewey, Boydston and Lavine 1989; Sullivan 2001).

To perceive of a world where everything has the potential for transformation could feel disorientating but we must remember that Dewey is not in search of certainty as a qualification for what is 'real' (Dewey and Boydston 2008), nor does pragmatism see the possibility of fixed, singular 'truth' (Dewey, Boydston and Lavine 1989; James and Herman Finkelstein Collection [Library of Congress] 1907). Rather than focusing on establishing objects (and subjects) that can interact, Dewey asks us to see embodiment as the interaction itself. This means that the embodied being is not separate from its environment but instead is defined by interaction with it and likewise environment is defined also.

The intertwining of body, reflective thought and environment is central in dance since dance movement is primarily recognizable through considered shifts of muscle and bone in

space and time. Sheets-Johnstone provides an illustration of how the phenomenon of *transaction* is experienced in dance when she describes contact improvisation: ‘Movement and perception are seamlessly interwoven; there is no “mind-doing” that is separate from a “body-doing” [...] The world that I and the other dancers are together exploring is inseparable from the world we are together creating.’<sup>2</sup>

But the transaction of embodiment is not a singular mode of experiencing. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey (2005) acknowledges a difference between reflective thought and aesthetic sensation, presenting them as part of a continuum that is defined temporally (Jackson 1998). Seeing reflective thought and immediate sensation as a continuum rather than as oppositions offers a range of meaningful entry points into experiencing a *situation*. This underpins the multi-layered nature of embodiment. The complexity and variety of embodied experiences therefore raises questions about how to manage and communicate the knowledge they generate.

The somatic operates on many levels. Shusterman offers the theory of *somaesthetics* (Shusterman 2000), which is useful as a disciplinary proposal for organizing identification of experiences. He suggests three categories under the umbrella of somaesthetics. First, theoretical constructions of the body; ontological and epistemological issues of the body including sociopolitical inquiry; second, exploration into *use* of the body, from how it can be presented and represented to how it can be experientially present; and last, the practical expertise and experience of ‘doing’. Thus somaesthetics is useful to organize the many layers of acquisition of *knowing* for the embodied being. Whitehead offers a way to further explore the knowledge of the (practical) *somaesthetic* in her work on *Physical literacy* (Whitehead

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<sup>2</sup> Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The corporeal turn: An interdisciplinary reader* (Exeter, UK/Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2009), p. 32.

2010). She explores the knowledge in the use of the 'physical' body by presenting a set of physical competencies as a kind of *literacy* that involves communication of ideas and 'reading' of the physical body.

Dance can therefore be seen as a useful somaesthetic language through being a part of a physical literacy; providing sensitivity to physical communication (the reading of others' bodies) and also a language for articulation of ideas. As a site of meaning-making and communication the dancing body is explored by Sheets-Johnstone through phenomenological principles. Likewise Susan Leigh Foster, Ann Cooper Albright and Sondra Horton Fraleigh see dance as generating communicable knowledge through somatic experience (Albright 1997; Desmond 1997; Fraleigh 1987; Foster 1996). Similarly, performance artists such as Merce Cunningham, Dorothy Humphrey, Martha Graham and Twyla Tharp establish strong arguments describing what they do when they dance, as communicating through the 'language of dance' (Gottlieb 2008; Humphrey and Pollack 1979; Tharp and Reiter 2006; Graham 1991).

Language is at the heart of all communication, but language does not have to involve words. Ogden and Richards (1989) argue that even spoken language extends beyond the verbal and draws on gesture and shared history in order to give words meaning. It would seem that the intricacy of embodiment legitimizes an assumption that communication is a complex web of interactions that includes the verbal but is not limited to it (Burkitt 1999). Therefore this research started from the understanding that embodiment is a process of transaction in which there are many modes of communication and many ways to communicate the lived experience.

## **Methodology**

Data for this article was collected during a three-year period from case studies in school buildings in the United Kingdom. Respondents were in Year 9 (13–14 years old).

Respondents were selected by their schools rather than by me. In each school I worked with groups comprising between 7 and 15 Respondents. In each school we met once a week for a term (approximately two months).

Respondents' narratives were told and collected through verbal storytelling, visual illustration, sculpture and choreography (dance). Respondents were asked to take us to a location within their school building that was memorable or significant for them. At the location they told the story of why it was a special place. They were then asked to tell the story of why the location was significant through the making of miniature sculpture installations placed in the location. Finally, with the same brief, they were asked to develop site-specific dances for their location. They choreographed the dances themselves and chose how they were audienced (live or pre-recorded on film). The majority of Respondents had not danced formally before and none had choreographed before, therefore I facilitated the activity of choreography. This took the form of breaking down the choreographic process into four steps informed by theory from Merce Cunningham's and Dorothy Humphrey's techniques.

The narratives generated were collected through my own ethnographic notes; documentation of informal conversations and interactions; interviews with Respondents; and photos and film documentation that Respondents took and gave permission for me to keep. In order for the research to be presented in a formal academic document the narrative data (including the narratives told through the visual and kinaesthetic modes of installation and dance) was translated into verbal form by the Respondents themselves. This was done

through verbal commentary that was then transcribed. Who translated the narratives was important since by the nature of the principles of *transaction*, the act of translation would inevitably also interpret the data somewhat. Temple and Young warn that translators are an active part of the construction of accounts (Temple and Young 2004). After completing the project activity Respondents were asked to comment and give verbal meanings to their installations and dance-based narratives. This was done at the completion of the activity because it was important that during the process Respondents were not asked to translate across the modes of languages because this could have affected the use of the non-verbal languages by anchoring them to verbal explanations. Riessman (2008) suggests that translation across languages is useful for exposing ambiguities and assumptions that are hidden in shared language use. Therefore the process and difficulties of Respondents' translations were collected as data along with the translations themselves.

In order to acknowledge the multidimensional nature of the fieldwork activities triangulation of data was particularly poignant. Respondents' comments on their experiences and work; the documentation of their work; and my own experience of being present during the process, learning the dances and experiencing the locations, were triangulated during analysis. Overarching the analytical process was the framework established by Dewey's pragmatist principle of embodiment. Therefore, the goal of this study was not to look for justification of the use of dance or to prove that we are embodied beings, rather the analyses sought to understand the experience of these principles from the perspective of the Respondents and myself as we interacted with the data collection activity.

Three themes appeared to emerge as coordinates for how embodiment manifested in Respondents' narratives: coordination for orientation for communication, relationships of



orientation that transform the 'real', and coordination for power relationships. These seemed to be examples of how Respondents organized for, or developed understanding of, themselves as embodied beings (Burkitt 1999; Dreyfus, Rabinow and Foucault 1983; Elias and Schröter 1991). Although the themes are woven together through embodiment, for this article I am focusing on the theme of *orientation for communication*.

### **Initial observations: Communication of the lived experience**

The pragmatist stance that *experience* is at the heart of understanding, assumes that there is no divide between epistemological and ontological definitions: what we perceive and understand temporally defines 'reality'. But it appeared that how well the Respondents found expression for that perception and understanding affected how well they could engage with the knowledge it generated. It seemed that the quality of communication of lived experience had an impact on the level of awareness of embodiment in a situation. By 'awareness of embodiment' I refer to sensitivity to transaction as a continuum of fulfilling and constructive engagement with the lived-experience matrix of body, reflective thought, and environment (Dewey and Boydston 2008). That is the process or flow of what Dewey identifies as 'transaction', which is how we learn about the world and ourselves (Dewey, Boydston and Lavine 1989). Dewey suggests that through communication the 'local and accidental contexts' of sensation can become 'infinitely combined' within the continuity of our transactions, our lives (Dewey, *Experience and nature*, p. 166). The multilayer nature of experience appeared to become more tangible for Respondents as they found a variety of language modes for its communication.

Data and literature suggested that the language used for communication and documentation of an event affected translation from the immediate and empirical to the continuum of one's transactions. For Respondents the use of new non-verbal languages, particularly dance, to describe embodied experience seemed to dissolve or challenge the 'reality' of dualist constructions present in the verbal language that they regularly used. The calculated use of movement as a language seemed to dilute notions of the body as being a container for the mind and encourage the use of the body both as a site to read other peoples' meaning and to express ones own (Burkitt 1999; Synnott 1993; Whitehead 2010). Data analysis seemed to indicate a shift from a sense that meaning was constructed *for* the body to a sense that meaning was constructed *within* it.

### **Dance language**

The act of translation between danced movement and verbal textual English underlined the fact that each form was a language of its own, rather than a replacement for the other (Riessman 2008). Respondents' attempts at translation demonstrated that dance did not deal with the leftovers of worded communication (implicated in phenomenological hermeneutics) but instead dance seemed to communicate meaning that was unique to the use of that medium (as Dewey suggests communication as a form of cooperation [Dewey 1958]). Where the translation encountered discrepancies or ambiguities, for example an idea communicated in movement could not be directly translated into words and vice versa, it seemed that the different languages, of dance and words, expressed different parts of the larger original idea generated from Respondents' embodied experience of their chosen location:

*'We had a lot of meaning for the moves (dance) [...] That move [points to video of the choreography] 'the Fall' was our biggest idea, it's kind of about friendship, it's trust in a friendship'*—Respondent Fran.

Respondents' convincing use of verbal, fine art and dance narratives indicated that their ideas were multidimensional. As they told the story of their experience of the building using different modalities the Respondents did not repeat the same story. It seemed the different modes of language allowed them to explore different aspects of the original embodied sensation of the building (situation) that had initiated responses. From this observation I derived the term a *3D idea* to describe the knowledge (that is, the idea) that fed what was being communicated by the different languages being used. This is the notion that an idea generated by the nucleus of embodied experience is multifaceted, having aspects of it that are well communicated in words, but also aspects of it that are better communicated physically as well as experientially and representationally. Indeed there seemed to be as many aspects to be communicated as languages to be imagined. These various languages did not replace each other but rather added layers of depth to the communication of the idea the original embodied sensation had generated. Verbal descriptions of physical movement were hard to express for Respondents (as the quote above demonstrates). This seemed to be evidence for the notion that verbal language was not a translation for physical language. Communication of experience mediated by one language generated different insights than communication of experience mediated by another.

We wanted to show about the happy places around the school not the horrible ones. Like the places where there are colours and nice smells. Places that make you *feel* nice. Our dance was about linking things together. Then we started to notice those places more ourselves.—Respondent Brice

As ideas were expressed across the nodes of language they created complex webs of meaning and communication that included aspects that were verbal, non-verbal and sensory. The ability to communicate ideas appeared to make them more tangible and nourished their place in more general discourses in the community of the building.

### **Different languages have a rhizomatic relationship**

The project raised questions about the relationship between language and thought. Dewey argues that thought is more influenced by language than language is by thought (Dewey 1958; Ogden and Richards 1989). Thought is more pliable whereas the defining attributes of a language give it a rigidity. For the Respondents who were most familiar with using verbal English language, the ability to use the different language of dance to communicate appeared to enrich Respondents' engagement with ideas.

I think dance is like being able to kinda express your feelings without using words you kinda use movements to show what you're feeling at the time. Sometimes you're not that confident to be speaking [...] so sometimes you might want to do it in a different method.—Respondent Fran

The Respondents' usual language vessel was verbal English language. Using alternative language vessels, particularly dance, offered different forms for their thoughts. So as Respondents engaged with different languages to express their narratives about places in the case study sites, they appeared to reveal a deeper quality of understanding of the embodied experience that initiated the idea.

Respondents' comments and audiencing of their work further attracted me to the notion that ideas could be seen as being multi-layered, which I am calling 3D ideas. Regardless of Respondents' physical competency in non-verbal languages, Respondents were able to recognize them in each other and engage them as forms of communication. All Respondents created dances that they took ownership for, and ascribed meaning to. I did not feel that Respondents merely did what they were told, in a way that meant they produced what I instructed them to produce rather than engage with the mediums they used. First, because the work they created was highly personal and I could not have known enough about them or the places to direct it. Second, Respondents were very confident in challenging my ability, authority and concept of what was 'real'. They were not willing to waste their own time engaging in something if they thought it was futile, outside their 'reality'. The avoidance of boredom was an ongoing quest for Respondents across each of the four case-study school sites. Hammersley describes this element of ethnography well: '[which] is a testing out of the researcher to see whether he or she is genuine and can be trusted, and perhaps also whether being researched will be interesting or boring.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in practice*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 46.

Therefore the activity and artwork Respondents produced was highly individualized and contextualized by social references I was not always familiar with. Respondents also developed responses to each others' meaning within the medium of the language used to express their notions. For instance as they started to choreograph the dances they collaborated together using movement to explain suggestions and communicate adaptations to moves that they felt better expressed their meaning. They had arguments about the nuances of the movements they were devising, they read each others' movements and recognized movements in each other as part of an ongoing exploration of an idea.

The Respondents' activities made me consider the notion that 3D ideas conformed to the language vessel used to express them. A language appeared to be like a vessel that carried an 'idea' across the gap of inner isolation of immediate empiricism of embodiment, to a communicative expression. As the language vessel carried the idea from an immediate empirical sensation it could temporarily curb the idea to conform to the attributes of that language. The multidimensional nature of an idea (which of course is generated from the multifaceted experience of embodiment) meant that placed in a different language vessel the idea exhibits the particular features of the new vessel. Where an idea is communicated by a number of language vessels it becomes a better representative of the pre-communicable knowledge of embodiment that engendered it.

Blair's first narrative was to take us to a place under the stairs on the West side. There a story was told about going there to cry, when feeling frustrated or sad. Blair's installation was positioned on the lockers in the under-the-stairs area, it was small rubbish bins placed by existing bits of rubbish. Blaire's choreography looked at the

levels of the stairs having different movements inspired by the different levels. It was audienced through film that was taken from many different angles. At the end of the activities Blair summarized that it was all about ‘there is a right place for everything’. Although Blair did not explicitly explain the narratives or revise the wording of the initial verbal story to this overarching idea I could see how each of the stories told contributed to a communication of a part of it.—Akinleye (reflective notes, School One)

Development of communication of the narratives across the project was not hierarchical, building vertically on an initial statement and better articulated over time. Respondents did not seem to be able to articulate their verbal narrative more clearly at the end of the project than at the beginning. What Respondents did was use other languages, particularly dance to communicate (and clarify) *more* of the idea.

[I]n dance you don’t have to say it, its just there. Instead of just saying ‘yeh, we’re great friends’ you can actually, like, produce something from it. I enjoyed doing that because it was like we were coming together closer as friends trying to like, signify what was us.—Respondent Lee

Respondents did not get better and better at the same initial verbal description but instead added to the density and power of description through the different modes of language the visual and movement activities offered. This meant they formed multi-layered narratives describing ideas that in turn became more meaningful through their thick description.

Rejecting hierarchical constructs as a product of dualist organization, I turn to the rhizome as a structure to envisage the process to describe Respondents' use of modalities of language. A rhizome is a structure that does not have a central core from which things branch out but has an extended network of shoots, each of which has the same potential, for instance the structure of ivy. Deleuze and Guattari promote the concept of the rhizome—a plant like structure—as a philosophical concept. The rhizome as a concept offers a structure that is not centrally based around a single core but has multiple, equally significant shoots supporting each other (Deleuze and Guattari 1984; Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Different languages could be said to have a rhizomatic relationship, like shoots of ivy or of grass each independently legitimate as a mode of growth but adding to the thickness and overall strength of the 3D idea. A rhizomatic relationship between languages implies that the more strands or modes of communication are accessed the richer and stronger the understanding of the idea, and the more engagement points for reflective action.

One should not be seduced into seeing meaning as being *in* the language rather than in the experience, but it is important to recognize that while it is incommunicable meaning is hard to manage. Language is important to embodied beings because language mediates meaning and therefore also perception. From the pragmatist position perception is the creation of the 'real'. Although it is important to note that 'reality' is not fixed but more like the current of a tide affecting the dynamic of flow of transaction (Dewey 1958).

Respondents' experiences of the places they showed me took on networks of narratives that linked to memories, relationships with each other and constructions of Self. The enormity of an idea being three-dimensional could be likened to understanding an enormous mountain. Understanding of the mountain terrain could be mapped through a range



of vessels—a road taken from the north side of the mountain, a road taken from the east, by foot, by car, an aerial view—each offer a different description of the terrain. It seemed that like different vessels to map the mountain, the languages the Respondents used were unique and not repetitions of each other. Just as various language vessels each communicate a part of the 3D idea, the more vessels used to describe the mountain/idea the better the understanding of the mountain/idea terrain. When dance language was introduced to participants it appeared as foreign in the construction of understanding as introducing an aerial view of the mountain to people who had only ever described the mountain by footpath. But Respondents swiftly adjusted to this new perspective for communication: using dance language as a further form of interaction with the partnership of communication; seeing it as another way to describe. Dance language was decipherable and ‘useful’ for Respondents because ultimately it was being used to describe the familiarity of their own sensations.

[T]he dance was useful you don’t always have to use ways of explaining it verbally. The strength in your arm [lifts arm as talking] could show you have more power or something and things like that. I found that was quite different really.—Respondent Devon

### **The transformation of the ‘gap’**

Embodiment reveals a ‘gap’ between immediate sensation and the communication of that experience. As discussed earlier pragmatism sees the *transaction* of the lived experience as elements of a *situation* that ontologically define each other. Dewey offers the example of ‘the hunter’ and ‘the prey’ to explain how the transformative quality of transaction also defines the

interactors (Dewey, Boydston and Lavine 1989). Following Dewey's argument, just as language communicates like a 'bridge' across the 'gap' between sensation and communication, we must also consider that the 'gap' is conceived of by the 'bridge'. The transformative nature of *transaction* means 'bridge' and 'gap' constitute each other. Therefore by engaging with a range of language bridges one is also engaging with a variety of perceived gaps in communication of sensation. This shifts the separation between immediate empiricism and continuity of experiences from being 'fixed' to one of having a mobility created by the different language bridges used to span it.

In this research the use of dance language as a bridge created a different gap between immediacy and communication, than that found in verbal language. It could be argued that Respondents' problems of translation between movement and verbal languages were examples of how the language bridge itself had changed the nature of the gap, across which it attempted to communicate. In other words dance language could express elements of experience that a verbal language does not express and in so doing the deficits of communication in each language do not match because they attempt to bridge different gaps.

### **Conclusion: A network of communication that includes movement**

It appeared that the Respondents' ideas were *experienced* somaesthetically, in accordance with Shusterman's definition for three branches of somaesthetics (Shusterman 2000). This reiterates the pragmatic premise within which the research was carried out but the statement means to emphasize that the practical manifestation of embodiment-as-understanding was a web of complex coordinates. Respondents' ideas were shared and understood but not limited to one mode of communication. The sharing of experience appeared to need more than one

mode of articulation. A rhizomatic construction for the communication of embodied experience and the ideas generated by it provided equal possibilities of meaning-making. Respondents appeared to value the use of a range of modes of expression and gave equal importance to all subsequent languages arising from their initial lived experience.

The conclusion that 'gap' and language co-create each other and therefore multiple languages offer better understanding of the lived experience (the communicable and the incommunicable) is a proposition for multiplicity. This also indicates an argument for the necessity of further work in this area. This research has laid some groundwork for further inquiry into this, using a methodological framework attentive to the somatic.

This article does not claim that in adhering to the notion that ideas are three-dimensional the use of multiple languages will diminish the incommunicable. Rather it is the suggestion that the incommunicable is not absolute or fixed. This is because the lived experience offers no finalities of meaning. Each language used to communicate it creates its own incommunicable gap just as each gap indicates a kind of language bridge. The gap between the immediacy of experience, which from the pragmatist perspective is the source of knowing, and the naming of sensations in order to organize for communication, is due to the multi-layered nature of the lived experience. However, the use of kinaesthetic and visual modes of language offered communication that reached across a gap created by verbal English. It challenged both Respondents and myself to be sensitive to the role of translation in our own meaning-making process. This sensitivity seemed to nourish 'communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners' (Dewey, *Experience and nature*, p.179), particularly across the relationships developed amongst Respondents as they worked together.

A variety of language bridges (particularly those that include visual and movement languages) not only offers us a range of ways to communicate the lived experience but also a range of ways to *perceive* the lived experience. This means that the potential isolation within the immediacy of embodiment is no longer created as a fixed immobile 'gap'. Rather embodiment can be experienced as having multiple possibilities of interaction, communication, healing and generation of meaning in transaction. Dance as a language offered unique properties to lift the isolation of sensation.

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