

# RESEARCHING DANCE: METHODS AND QUESTIONS

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The process of researching a dance-related topic involves asking important questions, deciding on appropriate methods for answering these questions, and analyzing all the answers “found by the researcher and others” to produce what scholars call “new knowledge.” Researchers must conduct this exciting and exacting process in a systematic manner, that is, he or she must do each step so that other researchers can repeat the process with similar results. The way dance researchers carry out their research – the research method or methods (methodology) depends on what questions the researcher wants to answer. Scholars recognize the field of dance as interdisciplinary; thus, topics in dance relate to all the standard academic areas: arts, sciences, social sciences, and humanities. As a result of this interdisciplinarity, dance researchers may choose among many research methods for their research; this welcome richness of choices also produces confusion.

Throughout this article, examples of dance topics and methods illustrate this research process. Research starts with a broad question. Many different groups of people in and beyond the field of dance must find the “researchable” question important to answer. Researchers must word their questions to yield verifiable and complex information. Here is a sample question: During the twenty years following World War II, from 1945 to 1965, what kinds of dance did people in Porto participate in and watch and how did the dancing and watching dance relate to each other? Smaller questions lie within this broad question: What kinds of dance did citizens of Porto study, and do for fun? What kinds of dance could these citizens see as audience members in Porto during these twenty years? Where did citizens study dance, go to dance for fun, and go to see dance performed? Where and how does a researcher find attendance records for places such as studios, schools, recreation centers, nightclubs, theaters, festivals, fairs?

Researchers often have some kind of hunch about the answer to their questions. At the beginning of the process researchers need to state these ideas or hunches, and challenge them to help insure that the research will be inductive

not deductive. Why? The questions most dance researchers ask are too complex to find deductive answers which "prove" something in the way that some pure science problems can be proven deductively, such as when the combination of two chemicals will, in all probability, yield a predictable result. If a dance researcher has a hunch that, for instance, only folk dance lovers attend folk dance performances, and that only people who study ballet attend ballet performances, then this bias may lead him or her to pay attention only to findings (data) that demonstrate this predetermined conclusion. The deductive way to frame this question is: Do ballet students primarily attend ballet concerts or are audience members of ballet performances mostly former ballet students? The answer to these limited kinds of questions is a simple yes or no. The inductive way to ask this question is: What is the dance background of the attendees at ballet performances and folk dance performances? The answers to this inductive question yield complex information and can reveal unexpected results. The dance researcher does not deductively prove his or her hypothesis, but does collect information that inductively gives him or her a new and interesting understanding of the relationships among dance training, experience, and dance audience membership.

A researcher must care deeply about the question and its answers when deciding on the researchable question, the research topic, because he or she will spend a good deal of time thinking and reading, investigating and gathering data, organizing and analyzing the findings, and writing and rewriting the results of the study. Other members in the field of dance and related fields such as education, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, to name a few, should also find this new knowledge interesting and important.

As part of the preparatory stage of this research process, the researcher needs to read as widely as possible to find out what information others have already found about this question. The researcher conducts a "literature review." This search for previous research or information can be difficult because dance, as an autonomous discipline, is a relatively new member of the academic world. In previous centuries, experts in Music and Theatre have conducted research and wrote about dance topics because music usually accompanies dance and, when performed for an audience, dance occurred in theatrical settings in dramatic or operatic performances. The academic fields of Music and Theatre have received institutional support for many centuries; thus researchers in these fields have a long tradition of engaging in systematic study. Besides other formal research studies published in books or scholarly journals, novels, biographies, and even personal journals may contain incidental information about dance in other contexts. One dance history student discovered information about dance in an old law library where performers sued theatre owners for back wages and theatre owners sued managers for production expenses. The bibliographies in these initial sources can lead the researcher to other sources of information. By using the resources discovered by other dance researchers or authors, the researcher joins hands with all those who previously researched this topic. Others will follow in this chain of researchers reading and examining the new and previously written information.

This shared responsibility makes it imperative that each researcher lists his or her written resources with great exactness and care.

The systematic way of collecting data is called research methodology. Often a dance researcher can choose from among many different methods to study and gather data about his or her topic. All methods have advantages, disadvantages, and limitations. To return to the sample topic: How does a researcher collect the information about the dance background of audience membership at dance concerts? Audience surveys and personal interviews can produce valuable data to answer this research question. If the theater administration and the dance company give permission, then the researcher can produce a simple survey to be included in the program of a dance performance. Some researchers offer audience members a small reward, such as a piece of candy or ballpoint pen, to induce them to complete the survey and turn it in at the end of the performance. The theater staff could cooperate by handing out pencils and helping to collect the forms at the end. If insufficient audience members fill out and return the survey, then the research findings may not be reliable. For the data to be considered statistically reliable, the number of responses must represent enough members of the audience to be generalizable to the entire audience. The audience members at each performance should fill out the surveys to enable the researcher to collect as much information as possible. The researcher should hand out these surveys at several different ballet and folk company engagements during an entire season. The limit of collecting information with a survey is that only cooperative audience members are likely to complete it. In writing up the study, the researcher states this limit, citing what percentage of the audience members responded, and then analyzes the data collected.

Since it is unusual for theatre managers and company directors to agree to the distribution and collection of a survey, the researcher, with helpers, can informally talk with audience members, (only after gaining permission from the theatre manager,) as they enter and exit the theatre and perhaps during intermission. Unless many questioners help out, this method has even more limitations than the written survey because the researcher will collect fewer responses; some audience members may not want to talk to researchers. Though studies of audience background have these built in constraints, researchers may locate educational or small dance venues where everyone involved will benefit from collecting this information. In these venues managers may cooperate more readily than in larger settings. Though audience surveys might reveal who is attending concerts today, these methods will not provide dance background information about audiences attending dance concerts during the years 1945 to 1965 in Porto.

To discover the background of dance audiences in the past, researchers can utilize the archives of major theaters and examine theatre records of subscribers (where dance schools might have regularly bought a number of tickets), group sales, special benefit performances for schools; newspaper reviews where audience members may be described, and publicity releases focused on special groups of attendees. Photographs in magazines and newspapers and their captions may

give some clues. These and other publicity sources of information reveal the companies and performers who performed at these dance venues. Thus far, this discussion of sources of information centers on the theaters and dance venues where dance companies performed. Other sources exist.

>Other less obvious written sources can help answer this question about the relationship between what kinds of dance people studied and what dance performances they attended. If the city of Porto had telephone books between 1945 and 1965 (this study is directly after the end of World War II), then the researcher can study the listings of dance schools and studios to learn what kinds of dance people could study in the city. Daily newspapers and weekly local magazines that advertised dance classes and performances will also provide rich material to study about this twenty-year period. If dance studios still exist that were listed in the phonebooks between 1945 and 1965, then the researcher can visit them, meet the contemporary owners, teachers, and students to study their history, current interests, concert attendance, and their connections to the past students, teachers, managers. The current owners/teachers may have informal archives in the form of scrapbooks or files of newspaper clippings that can provide more information. The research methods that the researcher uses here include historical study of primary sources such as programs, attendance lists, and reviews. Interviewing the current owner/teacher uses interview methods as well as oral history techniques. The historical records of one studio can serve as an example, a case study, that might suggest a pattern if other researchers study and write case study reports of other studio histories.

Researchers can interview or survey current students and their parents about what kinds of dance performances they prefer and actually attend. As part of the interview or survey, the researcher might ask if these people know others who studied at this studio during the years 1945-1965. When the researcher contacts the older people from these leads, then he or she can use interviews, surveys, or oral history methods to collect data. These former dance students may also describe dance instruction, beyond private dance studios, in public or parochial schools or in after-school programs in recreation centers or clubs.

To insure that the information from the surveys is useful, accurate, and complete, the researcher formulates the survey questions, lists them in a logical order, and then gives the survey to a few trusted colleagues to "pilot" the "instrument," the survey, to see if he or she has worded the questions to elicit useful information. If the researcher uses an interview for collecting information from audience members, then he or she must pilot the interview and ask all respondents the same questions in the same order each time for the study to be systematic. The interview questions may be succinct versions of the survey ones, thus the data from the oral responses can be tabulated and analyzed to correlate with the written ones.

The research methods just described include quantitative and qualitative ones. Researchers will tabulate the ideas in the survey responses that can be conveyed in quantitative terms and use simple statistical formulae to describe the

results. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is useful when tabulating the interviews of studio owners, teachers, and former students. Once the researcher transcribes the interviews to paper from the tape recorder, he or she identifies and lists each response within each question. Often a single response will contain two or three different ideas and these all qualify as separate responses. For instance, in answer to "what kinds of dance did you study?" the respondent might write, "ballet, folkloric, and ballroom." The researcher must list each kind of dance and can note how many respondents studied one, two, three, or more kinds of dance as a separate observation, but he or she counts all the kinds of dance listed in each response.

Thus far, the researcher has collected many kinds of data from several sources. To analyze these findings, the researcher must analyze all the data from each source not just summarize it. In an analysis, the researcher finds patterns or recurring clusters of information. When analyzing the information from the telephone books, for instance, the researcher can count and categorize the kinds of dance studios that existed between 1945 and 1965 looking for stability, growth, variety, and even location in various neighborhoods. These numbers can be compared to the number of dance performances in the dance venues advertised in newspapers and weekly magazines. Then the researcher compares this information to findings from studio owners and former students and teachers. The researcher must thoroughly analyze each source of data separately. Then he or she compares and contrasts the patterns arising from each source of data to see if and how the data clusters relate to each other. For instance, the number of ballet studios may grow slightly over these twenty years while studios teaching modern dance and ballroom dance may have increased a lot compared to the ballet studios. The number of ballet performances may also be quite consistent during the period "the same number each year" whereas the number of modern dance performances may increase for a while and then level off.

The researchable question: During the twenty years following World War II, from 1945 to 1965, what kinds of dance did people in Porto participate in and watch and how did the dancing and watching dance relate to each other? is too complex for a Master's Degree study. Answering one part of it, what students studied or what audiences saw, will require a lot of time, work, and luck (in finding information). The entire project fits the profile of a doctorate level project. Undergraduate students could study the history of one studio, one teacher, or one theatre and learn valuable research skills while contributing new knowledge in dance.

The process of conducting the review of literature will open many avenues for researchers. The study of one dance critic and his or her preferences during this twenty-year period will provide students with a basic understanding of the taste, terminology, range, and sensitivity of this person. Historians often base their understanding of history on the ideas of dance critics. A comparative study of two or three dance critics who wrote about dance during this twenty-year period will lay the groundwork for a complex understanding of dance performances in Porto after

World War II and perhaps clarify what, if anything, dance historians have actually written.

When writing the study in its final form, researchers follow a standard structure that includes the following sections: 1) the introduction includes what the question is, why the researcher is conducting it and why it is important; 2) the scope of the study "the limits beyond which it does not extend" and the methodology by which the researcher collected data; 3) the review of the literature; 4) the findings of all parts of the study; and 5) the concluding observations, the final analysis of the data, the limitations of the study, and questions for further study. Each section contains recognizable features. The introduction contains the rationale for the study, the reason others will be interested in it and often ends with a formal statement of the researchable question. The scope delineates which groups, time periods, venues, etc., the study encompasses. When describing the methodology the researcher lists all the methods for collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing the findings.

The review of literature begins with a description of the kinds of sources used, such as: books, magazines, interview transcriptions, print and pictorial publicity material, etc. When writing this section the researcher synthesizes the previous material into clusters of ideas. He or she does not summarize the detail of every source. The literature review section ends with the material that comes closest to the information the researcher is seeking. In this paragraph the researcher includes enough detail to refer to at the end of the study to compare with his or her findings.

The findings section or chapter contains the most material since this is where researcher presents his or her research findings. The researcher lists the findings in clusters such as: the surveys, the audience interviews, the phonebook study, the theatre data, the newspaper and magazine listings and reviews, etc. After each cluster the researcher reflects on the most important facts in each cluster from each source.

In the final section the researcher interrelates all the data from all the above sources and then relates it to previous findings from other written sources. This final synthesis reiterates the rationale for the study, the information from previous studies and shows how the present study develops, contradicts, or clarifies ideas and information in previous ones. In this section of the study the researcher interprets his or her findings in relation to other theories about the subject. A theory, in scientific parlance, describes notions about reality that cannot be disproved. It also explains reality that clarifies and develops it. When dance researchers use ideas or theories, meaning conjectures from other fields, to guide or interpret their findings, their research focus moves away from developing new dance knowledge. Other fields employ their own terminology, ideas, and underlying assumptions that most often bear little relationship to the physical dance experience. Researchers in dance need to build their own understanding of dance reality using ideas and knowledge that emerge from painstakingly careful research.

Researchers can use many informative books about research methods. Sondra Horton Fraleigh and Penelope Hanstein in 1999 edited one specifically for

dance: *Researching Dance: Evolving Modes of Inquiry*, University of Pittsburgh Press. Jossey-Bass Inc, Publishers, San Francisco, Washington, and London, put out uniformly well-written and helpful books about research methods that can guide any researcher at any level. With teachers, researchers, and expert authors as guides, the first-time researcher will embark on an adventure as exciting as any mystery story and will need the skills of the best private investigator to meet the challenges of the research process. Each research project will bring its own rewards, not the least of which is new dance knowledge.