CHOREOGRAPHY AS A MODE OF INQUIRY: A CASE STUDY

Jan Van Dyke, EdD
University of North Carolina. at Greensboro, NC Department of Dance
Professora visitante (Fullbright) FMH

Abstract

This paper is a personal case study of the choreographic process, a subjective investigation of the creative process and the work produced. In addition, an attempt is made to relate the creative work of choreography to qualitative research, likening the art's struggle for acceptance within the academic system and the effort by researchers to legitimize interpretive and other more qualitative modes of inquiry. In this effort, the author explores such issues as the essence of knowledge, the purpose of art, and how the two relate.

Before accepting an academic job in 1989, I spent nearly 20 years as a freelance choreographer, for awhile working as a solo artist, and then, for a long time, directing a company. Throughout those years, I made many dances, motivated largely by a need to express my ideas, develop new skills, and learn about time and space and the ways in which design communicates meaning. At the end of this long period, I entered graduate school, where I began writing. As I worked toward a doctorate, I found myself drawn to interpretive kinds of research. Qualitative or interpretive research—I will use these terms interchangeably—can be defined, for the purposes of this paper, as those methodologies that study persons and the lived experience and which acknowledge the multiplicity of reality. Perhaps I was attracted because I found many of the values and skills I had acquired as an artist helpful in this sort of work. I was especially drawn to the idea that instead of trying to fit into a preconceived form, in qualitative research the investigator's task is to create a form that fits the research problem. My sense of individuality is affirmed by this work, as is my belief that perception is inextricably linked to interpretation.

Historically, interpretive inquiry has not been readily accepted within the academic world. Today, the situation is beginning to change, though slowly, within certain disciplines. From the vantage of my present position as a professor, I can

1 Impulse, 1996, 4,318-325
meaningful (O'Dwyer & Weist, 1994, p. 23).)

meanwhile, the interplay of voices are those for whom the work is most vivid and
intellectual and emotional present in the research context and who themselves
members of a live audience are those most deeply involved and affected. Similarly,
commonly accepted, and those who experience the first-hand see what is
On another level, the two forms can be compared in terms of impact. It is
her individually while developing them in the movement material.
her individuality while developing them in the movement material.
This would be where the examination and analysis of data comes in: here
material that has been developed and defining its presentation in a live audience,
the study in the same way a choreographer might perform in her own dance —
not the researcher becomes part of classroom life. (For instance, the
in the study, the researcher might participate in her interpretive
multiple levels. For instance, the researcher might participate in her interpretive
using my own creative experiences as examples.
emerging between these areas, specifically choreography and interpretive inquiry.
self-awareness and understanding. Viewed this way, qualitative inquiry and
and including the metaphors to sharpen our vision should also be goals, because knowledge
knowledge is a goal of all research. It
be for personal meaning as a guide to understanding culture or for a venue to
The first definition clearly supports the idea of open-ended search, whether it
(Webster's New Revised Dictionary, 1980)
of the new or revised theoretics. 2) A careful or different search; a study of
In Webster's, the word research is defined this way:

in academia, historically has concerned research and inquiry in the academic world, which
where acceptance is a legitimate mode of inquiry in the academic world, which
academic belief and history to the level of prejudice; both embrace the idea that all knowledge
the academic system; both accept the modernist concept of the subjective nature
now see that it is shared values and processes which, at least in part, account for

1) careful or different search; 2) studies of inquiry or examination; esp.

In research, the word acceptance is defined this way:

is somewhat esoteric.
But it is in the kind of knowledge produced that I think the two realms are most notably comparable: Both deal in truth or meaning that emerges from a specific perspective and is thus subjective. In other words, both acknowledge the validity of more than one perception of truth.

In all my work, I am guided by the belief that meaning is primarily personal, and that despite commonalities, each of us has a point of view uniquely our own. With its plurality of techniques and philosophies, modern dance lends itself especially well to this belief system. It tends to be an adaptive form, shaped, as is qualitative inquiry, by the participants and the audience.

As an artist, my inspirations tend to come from an image or from music. When starting a new dance, often I do not have a clear idea. Normally, I spend hours alone in the studio considering the concept, working out movement and listening to the music. Quite soon, however, often before I know where the dance is going, I have to begin rehearsals. Seeing my movement on dancers helps to flesh out the ideas and shape the phrases into coherent structures. For me, choreography is like a dialogue, a process of bringing ideas to the dancers who can make them visible. Their work then gives me new ideas that I try to integrate into the concept, and so the work progresses.

In the summer of 1994 I created a dance called “Night Between Two Days.” As I worked, I kept a journal, hoping to bring aspects of my process into consciousness. I have made use of the journal entries for this paper, mining them for data on the creative process, reflecting on them much as I would the writing of any choreographer. In a real sense, this paper is an illustration of just how related the process of interpretive research is to the creative process. Here, my own words have become a resource for my research on creativity. As I write this paper, comparing the creative process to interpretive inquiry, I am also using the creative process as a research tool.

The journal entry after the first rehearsal illustrates my uncertainty and lack of direction at the beginning of the process:

*July 11-After 5-6 sessions in the studio by myself last week, and endless replays of the music, I was glad to finally see the movement, to be able to watch how it blends and flows, to check the rhythmic interplay, and see how each dancer works with the phrases, who is able to give it style and nuance so I can see where I might be going.*

*I’ve chosen the music and composed three phrases: one for arms, one for legs, and one for full body. I have a vague sort of costume idea but no clear direction yet-a warm, inclusive mood, active yet open, rhythmic, perhaps ritualistic-but no sense of the form is visible yet.*

To my way of thinking, the ambiguity present at the beginning of much creative work seems directly related to the mind-set necessary to effective qualitative inquiry. Principles or deep structures of choreography guide the unfolding of the dance, allowing the artist freedom to apply ideas based on individual circumstance. In the
Qualitative research considers vocabulary and constructivism in much the same way. However, understanding the richness of propositional, the value of interpretive world, and the importance of interpretive communication of what may be an unmediated interpretation of the text and ideas within it, is crucial in qualitative research. My goal is to find the metaphor, how it functions in the text, when constrained in a similar context rather than interpreted as a need to express the view of the world I hold today. I work to find original ways of representing my thoughts and experiences, trying to express the view of my current work and research. Each shape of experience and the need to communicate different kinds of ideas, involves vocabulary and qualitative modes of research.

Another similarity between choreography and qualitative research involves vocabulary. In my view, art is not concerned with absolutes but with trying new directions to bring out and clarify the ideas I am working with.

In my choreographic process, early rehearsals are spent trying out movements in varying speeds or sizes of configurations, and I begin to understand the movement of ideas/experiences with uses of space, I watch the dance work with the ideas, expressing and organizing them into a meaningful form. I then use this process to guide the outcome, ideas and goals evolve according to the mix of cultural and intellectual influences and newly acquired information. From the process itself, I guide the outcome, ideas and goals evolve according to the same way, facility, accepted epistemological procedures inform the qualitative research process.
studied. Working with the actual words of subjects can illuminate and guide interpretation. In hopes of revealing unique and personal perspectives, researchers often make use of long, in-depth interviews to allow for reflection on the issues. Just as with movement and structural ideas, language itself is neither true nor false, but it has the capacity to influence perception, to affect what is seen and how it is regarded. To allow expansion of vocabulary is to allow expansion of vision, and perhaps to allow communication of unfamiliar ideas. According to a study I participated in with Sue Stinson and Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, this is especially helpful in understanding the construction of meaning:

To alter our language is to bring into view new perspectives on a situation, thing, or experience. Thus, different investigations will develop different languages, all of which can account for differing experiences in the world and enhance the possibility of understanding the stories and experiences of others. (Stinson et al., 1990, p. 15)

In other words, just as with art, this kind of restructuring can help us expand the cognitive patterns that filter our perceptions of the world. An expanded vocabulary may allow us to see and comprehend a different universe.

More often than not, I begin new work without a clear idea of the dance I am starting to make. Although I trust my own process and know that I will come to understand what needs to be done as I work, there is always the moment of doubt that says I should already know. I try not to countenance these feelings. Although working blindly can be torturous, it is also what draws me to create. Overall, I prefer the not knowing, and I relish the interaction with the material, trusting that the trial and error will lead me to a place I have not known. The best times are when I have a new structural idea and the accompanying questions about what it communicates. With or without the idea, however, for me the choreographic process is always a search for clarity of meaning as much as anything else – a search for the form that satisfies both emotion and intellect and offers up a key to its own significance. The analogy with qualitative research is apparent in the following passage from the study by Stinson et al.:

It should be understood that form and content are related in interpretive research similarly to the way they are related in choreography. In both situations, form and content evolve together. There are no pre-existing rules which determine this relationship. (Stinson et al., 1990, p. 14)

I find this aspect of the creative process particularly agonizing. My journal goes on:

July 22-End of second week. I finished the first section, though part of it still looks too much like my last dance. I've tried to just get something out there so I can have material to work with or work from. Today, alone in the studio, I mapped
Even for the seasoned choreographer, this can be an uncomfortable process:

Improved ways (Oldham & West, 1994, p. 24).

Improvisatory ways (Oldham & West, 1994, p. 24).

finding none, may be quite uncomfortable until they develop an intuitive sense of

inherent in their experience and, I return to the question of improvisations and, and

freedom, and so it requires a research essay with a balance between process

freedom, and so it requires a research essay with a balance between process

Lyle or qualitative research empedes both deep structures and creative

By the conditions of the contract is it a new dance? I’m about finding things. One, (Lyle

desired, but the luxury of using an interview with two

decided in the making. At some point in the piece, I begin to feel which movements

I have the desire to do it, and that gets me through. A whole lot of things get

commercial work. Within a new dance, she said.

and clear the “not knowing” as a crucial difference between her artistic and

the conversation, lye describes the process with which the choreography

This process of discovery is. Working on that section...
To me, this process feels a bit like groping, the trial and error, postulation and refutation, trying to find my way, seeking the thread of meaning. As I said earlier, I view the process as a dialogue between myself and the dance, where I try to grasp what is being said, to see clearly what is there and understand where it wants to go, what the natural, inevitable outcome will be if I can allow the thus-far intuitive process to complete itself. This process seems analogous to the process in interpretive research, recently described by Stinson as "facing a large number of puzzle pieces, trying to figure out how the puzzle fits together even before we know what picture we are making" (1995). To make dances in this way, I have to trust that once begun, the dance knows what needs to happen. At this point, then, my job is merely to be sensitive to the work's direction and enable it to unfold without forcing any particular conclusion. More from my journal:

August 2-I spent an hour with the video on Saturday, watching and re-thinking the first section. I took out the symmetry, which seemed too formal for the sensuality of the movement, and constructed some group pathways and partnering that seems to work. Yesterday and today in rehearsal I found myself really pleased with the first section. It's as though my process involves a necessary growth. The first ideas I come up with sometimes are those most recently successful in previous choreography, and I have to try them out, realize they do not work, and go beyond them into something new.

Today we began with changes to Section 2 and still it felt kind of hokey- not an idea that Paul Taylor would ever have gone ahead with. So I went back and sat in the theater with my music after rehearsal and tried to image the whole section. I realized the group should not rise by themselves but need the one to get them up again. Then I found ways to repeat the thematic material, and I came up with an idea for the end.

What a great feeling now, to know the ending is right, that it makes the dance okay after all, that the third section now has a reason for being. The piece turns out to be about transformation instead of a nightmare. ...

That feeling of Aha! is one of the major rewards of any discovery, and when it comes, I know the dance has determined its course and found a completion that satisfies the structural problem set up at the beginning of the process. Here, the "Aha!" is an intuitive knowing, a sense of completion and satisfaction, and a revelation of meaning within the dance. As Tharp said, "Art is about finding things out" (1995). The process leads to a "knowledge," that is both subjective and true: a view of reality expressed through choreography, a metaphor that offers an interpretation of the familiar. As subjective truth, the goal of art is to influence perception, illuminate and reveal complex issues, and expand vision.

Just like science, interpretive inquiry and art both hold innovation and originality as key values. All of these forms develop through an expansion of knowledge, increasing understanding among those involved. However, unlike hard science, both qualitative research and art emphasize the role of subjectivity and
References

The world we live in.

...