

Researching Choreography: In Search of Stories of the Making

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For the past 25 years my artistic and research interests, as well as my teaching interests, have centered on choreography - the process of creating dances. While much of my time over the years has been occupied working as a choreographer and dancer, I have always been deeply interested in understanding what it means to make a dance, although I did not think of it thus until relatively recently. The movie *the Wizard of Oz*, an icon of deep cultural meaning to Americans, and I expect maybe to others around the world, ends with Dorothy saying, "There's no place like home." This is a story about leaving home and coming home.

Leaving and Returning:

Dancing/Researching/Writing

My early journey as a researcher fashioned inquiry as a kind of grand philosophical enterprise in which I sought to reason my way in and around, and eventually through, some of the big questions about the nature of art making in dance. I was a maker of dances and contemplator of the making. I was sometimes in the center of the making enterprise as a creator, and at others, on the periphery as a detached, objective observer.

During these early years, and truthfully until relatively recently, dancing was dancing and writing was writing. While I was never worried that too much thinking and talking about choreographing would diminish the vitality of my creative process in the studio, I seldom with any sense of earnestness connected the creative process of choreographing to the creative process of researching and writing. When I entered the landscape of choreographing, as a researcher, I receded into the background and observed from afar. By doing this, I traveled away from the familiar territory of my own experiences as a choreographer. I read my early writings and see the distant voice of someone trying to figure things out, and indeed, there was much that I did discover.

Today I find myself traveling deep into familiar territory. What I have come to realize is that my worldview, or perspective, always was, and continues to be, that of a *dance maker*. What I know best are my ways of working as an artist, not that they were or are always successful, but they are who I am - how I see the world and how I make sense of it. Elliot Eisner (1982) writing about the importance of perspective wrote: "the kinds of nets we know how to weave determine the kinds of nets we cast. These nets, in turn, determine the kinds of fish we catch" (p. 49). What I have come to understand is that what I know as a choreographer, is what I need to know as a researcher. *I had begun my journey home.*

This paper explores some of the methodological issues that I have encountered along the way as I have sought to get closer to understanding the process of creating a dance. As a researcher this was, and in fact continues to be, an unfolding story of *coming home*. It is a story of re-discovering what I knew all along.

Rediscovering Home:

Seeing in a New Way

When I returned to the familiar place of my dancing, I was able to see more clearly how to re-map the territory of my research. It was clear that whether in the studio dancing or at my desk writing, *I am my dancer-self*. I see the world through a movement lens, speak of ideas of all kinds using movement images, and I come to know most often through physicalizing ideas. What I know about dancing - *I know through my dancer's body*. I access this information by reflecting and making sense of my experiences as I dance - as I create - using movement to express what I am unable to express in other ways.

As I try to understand what it is to create a dance the same holds true. I realize what I know about choreographing, I know *through* my experiences of making dances. Thus, I began paying attention to what

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phenomenologists call the "intentionality of consciousness" which holds that to be conscious is always to be conscious of something (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). As I considered more deeply this notion of both having *and* knowing experiences in the context of researching choreography, gradually it became clear to me that the question was not "What is choreographing?" but rather, What does it mean *to be* a choreographer? This is clearly a place of inquiry that resides at the intersection of doing and reflecting.

The 'choreographer-at-work' is a concept that I now use to frame and name the lived experience of the dance maker. *Lived experience*, as it is used in phenomenological studies, emphasizes the importance of individual experiences of people as conscious human beings and the meanings these experiences have for the individual. The concept 'choreographer-at-work' frames an experiential world in which an individual (the choreographer) is engaged (at work) in an active and intentional endeavor (choreographing a dance work). This brings our attention to such phenomena as creative engagement, ways of working, and personal agency. It creates a focus for inquiry that shifts our attention from the dance work to the *experiences of making a dance work*. This particular research perspective, or worldview, allows us to create a frame for research in which the choreographer, the creative process, and the dance work no longer exist as separate entities, but rather as interrelated, interdependent, and mutually-defining parts of the whole experience that I refer to as dancemaking.

What is the thing I call Home?:

Reality as Constructed by the Researcher

The assumption I am making as a researcher of the choreographer-at-work is that there are multiple realities to study, multiple voices to be heard, and multiple perspectives to be interpreted. These include the perspectives of the choreographer as well as her or his dancers who are intimately involved in the working process. The dance as it emerges in the making process and becomes a part of its own making, is yet another reality. And, my own interpretations figure prominently. For as an observer of what is going on in rehearsal, my personal history as a choreographer and dancer situates me as both inside and outside of the reality that is being created while I am attempting to study it. As a researcher, I accept the dynamic complexity of this situation, understand that the participants will have different, and possibility competing perspectives, and that the discovery of an all encompassing unified concept of Truth, is neither possible nor desirable.

Max Van Manen (1990) makes clear the methodological implications of such a perspective when he writes: "to *know* the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching -questioning, theorizing -- is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become fully part of it, or better, to *become* the world" (p.5). This places the researcher in a close relationship with the thing that she or he is studying. What people say and do, the experiences they have, and how they talk about these experiences, become the focus of study. Furthermore, as an observer and participant I am drawing on my own experiences and understandings as a choreographer, and researcher, as I enter the world of the choreographer-at-work. While I try to see *as if seeing for the first time* without preconceived notions of what I expect to happen, I know that I am seeing through a lens that is of my own making.

The choreography-at-work is part of what ethnographers call a "culture-sharing group" (Creswell, p.245) in which behaviors, language, movement, and the emerging dance are observed, described, and interpreted in their natural setting of the rehearsal. Observing choreographers working, and listening to their reflections on their working processes, allows me to make sense of what is going on in terms of the meanings that they bring to them. As a choreographer myself, this is a culture I know. This place is familiar to me. *It is home.*

Understanding Home:

Knowing in a Familiar Place

Being clear about the framework of knowing that conceptualizes one's research process is largely a philosophical questioning process. I arrived at my concept of the 'choreographer-at-work' by figuring out how I wanted to look - really *what* I wanted look at and *how I would pay attention*. But what does it mean to 'pay attention' and to *what* am I paying attention? And, to follow through here, *what is there to know* from this 'paying attention'? This, of course, begs the epistemological question: What counts as data in the context of the assumptions I am making about the nature of the thing I am studying?

When I turn my attention to trying to understand what it means to be a choreographer-at-work, I know that I cannot distance myself from the work of the choreographer and expect to gain an understanding of the actual

experience of *working*. *Working* is an event that unfolds overtime, in a context that is created by individuals who are themselves contextualized, and, as an activity of doing, *working* is responsive to changes that emerge in the process and therefore, by nature, is ambiguous, unpredictable, and indeterminate.

Like most qualitative researchers, I work with particulars or details before I am able to see patterns, structures, or theoretical concepts. As I am describing the details of what goes on in a rehearsal, I am questioning, analyzing, interpreting, and revising. Knowledge is taking shape and evolving. Which brings us back to the original question: To *what* am I paying attention?

While data in qualitative research takes several forms, the data stream that I find most interesting and insightful is what I have come to call 'shop-talk.' "Shop-talk" is an American colloquialism that refers to talk or conversation about one's business or occupation. The 'shop-talk' of choreographers-at-work provide vivid and potent descriptions of the dance making process. *These are the stories of the making.*

Introspective accounts of choreographers, the stories they tell about their experiences creating dances, become the pool of data. As this pool of data becomes wider and deeper, by this I mean more individuals talking about similar experiences, patterns in the form of theoretical insights begin to emerge. For example, I may see that, in part, the shape of a dance has resulted from a choreographer's process of revisiting or reconsidering actions that she had already taken and I notice that this is also true for several other choreographers I am studying. As I look across all of this data, I also see that while the ways choreographers go about returning and revisiting may be unique to their own ways of working, they all are engaged in a process of negotiating and responding to change in the context of the emerging dance -- *they are both shaping, and being shaped, by the thing they are creating.* Through my own process of revisiting and reconsidering the data, a pattern of theoretical insights has begun to take shape.

The parallel here between choreographing and researching is difficult to ignore. Like the choreographer and the emerging work, there is a reciprocal or collaborative relationship between researcher and participant when one is engaged in a research endeavor that brings the researcher into a close relationship with those she or he is studying.

The theoretical insights of the researcher, that begin as descriptions and become interpretive explanations of what is going on, are webs of knowledge that are constructed by the particular ways that data are analyzed and interpreted. In this kind of research, there is no pretense that the researcher assumes an objective stance. What I see, how I make sense of my observations, and the way I write, are all products of my own interpretive processes which are deeply influenced by the reflections of those I am studying. This is clearly a research landscape that is value-laden.

Coming to Terms with Being Home:

Who is the Researcher?

To study the experiences of choreographers making dances means entering their particular working worlds and striving to see the world through their eyes. As I investigate the experiences of dancemaking as a choreographer lives it, I know that I am investigating these experiences *as I see them*. I begin with my own experiences as they help me frame my interactions with those I am studying but I also know that I must set these preconceived experiences aside. Sondra Fraleigh speaks of the researcher engaged in phenomenological inquiry as having a "beginner's mind" and at the same time, we know that our experiences may be the same as others and other's experiences may be the same as ours.

As I seek to construct meaningful interpretations from what I see choreographers doing and from what they tell me about their working process, I am also constructing meaning from my own experiences as a choreographer. "The extent to which I am aware that *my* experience could be *our* experiences" (Van Manen, 1990, p.57) is the extent to which I recognize that the thematic structures emerging from particular choreographers-at-work may 'ring true' to other choreographers. In this way, what flows from individual experiences (theirs and mine) guides me to create a descriptive world of dancemaking - a world that others might enter through reading what I write and say, "this feels true," or "this is like what I experience." However, I also know that some may read what I write about the dancemaking process and say, "this is very different from what I experience" and by doing this, they may come to understand something of their own working processes.

To study human experience as experienced, is to acknowledge that the research is contingent upon and contextualized by the interpretations of those studied as well as the assumptions and biases of the individual conducting the research. In this sense, the research is always partial, selective, and located in particular contexts. The significance of qualitative research is that it is grounded in the ways that individuals find meaning in their lived experiences, and therefore, has an authenticity and integrity that can only result from deep personal engagement.

We know that personal engagement is always value-laden and in our daily interactions with others we accept this as part of our individual uniqueness as humans. However, in a research context, accounting for personal perspective is an important methodological concern. It is my responsibility as a researcher to address openly the values, assumptions, and biases that I bring to the research and how they have shaped the design of the research process. This includes being clear about the contexts in which the research was conducted, what philosophical or theoretical frameworks informed the ways that I approached the study, and the nature of my interactions with the choreographers and their working worlds. For me, it is also important to be clear how I am both the researcher and the storyteller.

Describing Home:

The Researcher as Storyteller

As John Creswell (1998) argues when he says all research writing is guided by a particular "rhetorical assumption" (p. 77) - writing qualitative research is never just a recounting of the facts. There is always a story to be told that tells us something about the personal voices and interpretations of both the researcher and the participants. Those of us who do this kind of research always face the challenge of figuring out what sort of literary narrative will do justice to the integrity and authenticity of the experiences of those involved.

Once again I return to what I know as a choreographer to figure out what I need to know as a writer. I experience dancemaking as a dynamic process that is improvisational, collaborative and conversational. This gives me a way to think about writing as a kind of complex conversation - an intersection of many voices, a layering of ideas, and the possibility of new voices entering the dialogue. In the same way I choreograph dances, I seek to create conversations on choreographing.

Telling Stories and Creating Conversations:

Reflections on Beginning

As writers, storytellers, conversationalists and dancemakers, we must always begin somewhere. But this is not as easy as it might appear. Because our understandings are always situated in the landscape of where we have traveled, where we discover ourselves to be at any particular moment, and our musings about where we might want to travel next, our beginnings are always *somewhere* in the context of *everywhere*. And as such, the place to begin is not always apparent.

When I think of myself -- the dancemaker, the writer -- as being somewhere in the midst of everywhere, I realize that being *situated* (by this I mean, located) is neither a point in space nor a place defined by physical boundaries. And yet, it is a moment (a thought, a word, an action, a movement, an encounter) that I can identify, possibly even name, recall, and reflect upon. This moment is part of the landscape of my experience -- of my *everywhere*. It is a kind of personal geography that merges where I am with who I am - it is my *space* and my *place*. While we can say that we are able to define a space -- by its periphery, its center, its portals, its doorways -- the physical dimensions of it are never enough to capture what it means to be in that space. To occupy it, to live in it, to identify it as ours, to call it *home*.

Everything is about location; about being situated. When I speak of my point of view, the stance I take, or my perspective in relation to your perspective, I understand that being 'located' is really an intersection of the highways and byways of my experience. Once again, a point in space. And yet, it is much more. This metaphorical point in space that I am speaking of, is a coming together of the entire complex of accumulated knowledge and evolving understandings of my personal life experiences and my research experiences. And yet, although I am able to name and frame this point, I do not want it to be understood as static - as the only point of departure or the final destination. For I am certain that we all come to understand the world of dancemaking from the many ways we know it -- from *somewhere* located in a shifting, evolving, changing landscape in which knowing and understanding are always in process.

I realize in the most potent way that I am writing about people, myself included, who are always in the process of becoming. As I move in and through the landscape of these ideas about what it means to make a dance and how to tell these stories, I am writing, in a sense dancing, out ahead of myself. I am negotiating past and present while creating something that I know will have a life of its own in the future. I am moving forwards and backwards, and at the same time, certain that there is more than only forwards and backwards.

But the subject here is *beginnings*. If, as a writer, I am somewhere in the context of everywhere, then where do

I begin this conversation - the telling of these stories of the making? If we know anything about stories we know that they are always tales of embellished parts and simplified wholes that are, at once, true and not true. Depending on our understanding of space and place, by this I mean the vantage point from where we view and survey the landscape, these stories of the making can tell us something, everything, and/or they can tell us nothing.

This notwithstanding, I believe the truthfulness and evocative power of these conversations, wherever I begin and however I weave them together, will reside in paying close attention to the ways that they work together. How they amplify each other; how some stories exaggerate aspects while other stories ignore those aspects altogether; how they contradict each other; and how they confirm one another - and all the while, tell us something about searching for personally meaningful ways of working.

To this story of *coming home*, I have no end. I have only my own reflections on where to begin, and since you and I share experiences of being dancers and writers, maybe my reflections are in some ways like yours:

I am standing, moving really, in the studio and my mind is occupied with knowing that tomorrow evening is the beginning -- a beginning I will share with dancers, movement makers/storytellers of a sort. The name we have given to this moment is 'first rehearsal' -- a moment in the making of a dance, a time filled with expectation, anticipation, pregnant with possibility. They look to me for what to do and I look to them for where to begin. But I am clearly on my way; I have already begun but am still beginning this dance; this conversation about making dances.

I find comfort in the expanse of the studio -- plenty of space to move through my thinking; to think through my moving. A place, like the blank page upon which I write, intimidating in its urgency to be filled. Expecting me to figure it out, knowing that I've been figuring it out (thinking/moving) these many hours, days, maybe even months, years -- moments in the making of a dance; reflections on the making of dances. And still the public beginning looms -- first rehearsal, first page. I must begin somewhere. A beginning. I will choose one among many. And it will make a difference.

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