Merging Dance with Poetry through Collaborative Learning: Exploring Classroom Practices Studying Improvisation as a Tool for Choreography

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Abstract: Collaborative learning is an instructional method in which students group collectively on an assignment (Diaz, 2010, p. 1). Successful collaborative groups demonstrate the ability to support each other toward reaching their shared goals. Interactive and student-centered, these practices promote the exchange of ideas. In this setting, the vehicle for collaborative learning is framed around the use of metaphor as found in Haiku, a short form of Japanese poetry, and how that metaphor can be translated into movement and dance-making. Japanese Haiku provides a way of looking at the physical world as seeing a brief, spontaneous moment of life. The work of the groups is to collectively find the metaphoric connections from the Haiku, and then translate that into a short dance. A lesson plan is provided to show the progression of this work. The conclusion of any lesson should include time for reflections which allow learners to recall, process, analyze and understand knowledge acquired. Reflections can also occur in group form with brainstorming questions addressing how they worked and what issues arose with resulting resolutions.

This work, structured in five sections, is useful for the dance student and teacher because it provides experiences used in a “team approach” for learning. Learning outcomes demonstrate group-building skills, listening skills, underscoring that creative and collaborative work can be a powerful tool for learning and understanding life, in this case, through merging dance with poetry. Section 1 introduces the work and extends a discussion on collaborative learning, what it is and the significance of working in groups in the 21st century. Section 2 focuses on metaphor in poetry with specific attention to Japanese Haiku. Section 3 looks at how metaphor can translate into movement. Section 4 concerns strategies for “assembling” the final work together. Within this section we identify how the group finds and identifies a Haiku metaphor, how students collaborate to capture that essence in a dance, how the process extends meaning and relevance to these students, and how they tap into creative group problem solving. Two student groups reveal their process and outcomes. Section 5 focuses on reflections, which allow learners to recall, process, analyze and understand knowledge acquired, and can be in the form of the group brainstorming reflection questions addressing how they worked in a group, addressing issues that arose, and their resolutions. Final thoughts conclude with findings and future work.

Key words: dance making, collaboration, poetry, Haiku, dance education
1. Introduction

This article discusses in-class experiences that extend our notions of what dance can mean, and how learning about dance can deepen through group collaborations in creative problem solving through dance-making. Action research informs the findings with respect to its cyclic nature, allowing me to plan, observe the process, and inquire about the nature of the process inclusive of the learning outcomes. It also requires reflection so that I might approach the work again with new insights. I have included a mapping of the work to provide a visual layout of a progressive strategy that delineates an integrated and collaborative learning environment that merges dance-making with Japanese Haiku. This work comes out of a 5-year study of working with sophomore and junior dance majors in higher education. I collected data from student interviews, self-assessments, videotaping of movement studies, and performances. The collaborative focus is on landscape images, poetry, metaphor integrated with dance-making. This work is useful for dance students and teachers because they find and participate in a variety of “team approaches” in learning. Based on structured improvisational inquiry in both brainstorming and movement sessions, students learn group building skills, listening skills, and the significance of why it is important to know how to work together.

Figure 1  Improvisations on push and pull (Photo: Babcock, 2013)

The purpose of this study is to share on-going classroom practices from the framework of what Connelly and Clandinin defined as personal practical knowledge, a term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons (1988, p. 25). Following what Dyer offers in educational practices, this work “frames the purpose of teaching and learning experiences in the possibility that we might share perspectives and experiences that could be meaningful to others and suggest the opportunities available to dance educators through processes of collaborative inquiry and action research (2014, p. 45).

1.1 Collaborative Learning

Barr describes collaborative learning as “…dancers collectively co-create through a give and take; the emergent dance is not separate from its individual community members, but rather created in concert between them and the concerns of the specific community (Barr, 2013 in 2015). She adds that the “outcome is not and/or, but many, one that honors the essence of relationships, including its tensions, that live within the collaborative process” (2015, p. 58). Collaborative learning can occur in many types of courses. I find it is most effective in my choreography courses that utilizes improvisation as a tool for choreography. Every assignment with 2 or more students involves collaboration. It should be noted that students have had several units on using improvisation as a tool for choreography leading up to this assignment. Subsequently, they understand the collaborative nature of
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small group work. Merging dance with poetry through collaborative learning provides a deeper, richer understanding of the process.

I have found that successful collaborative groups demonstrate the ability to work together and show support. The outcomes of the work reveal that collaborative learning stems from ongoing accountability of group members through their decisions about working on assignments, and that through this process of working, the practice of promoting an exchange of ideas occurs. Further, the long-term effects of working collaboratively in class give students first hand experiences in working with partners that will strengthen dancers’ abilities to meet the challenges to advance dance education in schools and the communities they serve.

1.2 Is It Collaborative or Cooperative?

Collaborative learning is the synthesis of information that creates a new product through the combination of different perspectives, talents, and ideas together. Collaboration implies direct interaction.

Cooperative learning is where each person is responsible for a portion of the problem solving which requires bringing each person’s results to the table. Cooperation can be achieved if all participants do their assigned parts separately, then bring their results to the table. Collaboration, in contrast, implies direct interaction among individuals to produce a product and involves negotiations, discussions, and accommodating, or willingness to trying out others’ perspectives.

Kaye believes that the single most important criterion for collaboration is the synthesis of information — that is, creating a new product through the combination of different perspectives, talents, and ideas, which is quite different from what each of the participants could have created on his or her own. An indispensable element of collaboration is that all those involved in a collaborative task must contribute more or less equally (Kozar, 2010, p. 17). Taking time to nurture these experiences are relevant, as collaborations don’t always happen easily. There are, what I call, transitional phases. At the beginning of a collaborative project, time is given for each group to identify their goals. Explorative movement sessions follow, which are then supported by group reflections and discussions. In Barton and Baguley’s article, *Learning through story: a collaborative, multimodal arts approach*, stages of the process are identified. “As students start to put aside their own needs and desires and begin to work towards a common goal, they move through various stages of working in groups” (2014, p. 96).

The following questions provide a working template for inquiry into what makes collaboration successful.

• Do students negotiate varied perspectives?
• Is there equal contribution, but perhaps in varied ways?

2. Investigating Metaphor in Poetry

2.1 Poetry is an Echo, Asking A Shadow to Dance

2.1.1 Carl Sandburg

Introduction to poetry begins with posing the following questions. Have you ever written a poem? Do you have a favorite poem? If so, how does it speak to you? Nationally acclaimed poet, Glenis Redmond states, “In a way, poetry is saying the unsayable. It is compressed language full of rhythm, feeling, and imagery” (2012). Poetry is beautiful in that it makes pictures in our mind and heart, tapping directly into imagination. Carine (2011) explains there are poems that provide excellent vehicles for transferring actions, ideas, shapes, spatial concepts, effort concepts and patterns into movement possibilities (p. 66). Japanese Haiku is an excellent source for this work.
Part of what makes poetry so special is that it is full of metaphor. “Metaphor is known for usage in literature, especially in poetry, where with few words, emotions and associations from one context are associated with objects and entities in a different context” (UTA, 2012). Metaphor is a direct comparison as found in this statement. I am the wind. Simile is an indirect comparison: I am like the wind. In this essay, we are exploring the use of Japanese Haiku because it is rich in metaphor, and it is full of possibilities that easily transfer into movement.

2.1.2 Japanese Haiku

Haiku has a simple structure: the traditional form is three lines containing 17 syllables that don’t rhyme. The first line is five syllables; the second line is 7; and the third line is five syllables.

Haiku was developed for the Japanese language not English, but it is fun to assemble your ideas creatively in this form. McDonald states, “Haikus offer space for the reader’s own thoughts, interpretations, and designs. The imagery from these poems reaches the senses of imagination, feelings, possibilities, and memories. Within the traditional form, 3 lines usually are framed within a season, or setting, a moment in which delicate thoughts of action and reflection are offered. Typically, the action of the haiku seems to be unending or unresolved, leaving you to wonder about an outcome” (2005, p. 1).

2.2 Metaphor in Poetry: Finding the Power of a Haiku

Many times there are poems that we have a hard time understanding. By providing two entry points “I notice” and “I connect,” help students to find personal meaning. Ask, what did you notice, or what connections did you make? Read the following Haiku by Yosa Buson. Close your eyes and see if you can see, feel or imagine this happening.

In the icy moonlight-pin-point pattering pebbles-crunching underfoot.

What did you notice? What connections did you make? Write down your responses.

2.3 Finding Moving Prompts

Using the above entry points to a poem, I have found that finding a movement prompt is the next invaluable step in transferring the idea into movement. Let’s work with poetry that is a Haiku poem I wrote.

I am the strong sun
Feel the heat of my rays surge
Across the sky, they move me

Find and identify two prompts. With a neighbor share the possibilities you imagined. Did you find or connect to possibilities for shapes, for actions, for stillness?

Close your eyes to notice yourself as the strong sun; feel the heat of your rays and they move you as you send them out. What connections did you make? What did you notice? When I asked myself these questions I found the prompts were “send” and “receive”. I began a movement exploration that involved sending and receiving. I explored these prompts for shapes, actions, and stillness. Because this work is progressive in structure, students are then engaged in movement explorations about finding the essence of a movement.
3. Metaphor Translates into Movement

Metaphor translates into movement through activities I call “capturing the essence”. These activities take students immediately into abstracting ideas instead of trying to “be” or to “show” an idea. The concept of capturing the essence can occur in a variety of ways. The most immediate and successful results begin when I improvise a movement sequence across the floor. One at a time, students capture the idea of that sequence through their own traveling/moving through the space. The idea is not to copy the movement, but to capture the essence of what they notice or connect to within the sequence. Smith states, “The students improvise the responses. Through imaginative movement explorations they can experience self kinesthetically, emotionally, and intuitively…We are giving and receiving of each other through lived movement experiences” (2002, p. 136).

4. Strategies for Assembling the Work: A Lesson Plan

Select a Haiku

Identifying a Haiku metaphor and the prompts.

Based on possibilities of actions identified by the group, share what you notice or connect to in the poem. There are identification points to help map the process. See Figure 3.

Find the prompts/Capture the Essence. Improvise these prompts with shapes, actions, and feelings. Be in the process to get to experience how they feel in your body and with others.

Look at the spatial concepts, the actions/efforts concepts.

Identify the relationship concepts.

Creative group problem solving involves discussions, moving, and then sharing what works, what did not work, and moving again. It is a constructing and re-constructing process.

The found movement prompts from the Haiku begins the process of dance-making. Next, groups decide on a structure such as AB or ABA. They discuss an overarching dance concept that could support the prompts for each section. Given the movement prompts, sending and receiving, from the Haiku I wrote, an example is found in the following ABA structure.

Section A captures the essence through shapes. The group chose still shapes. The shapes capture the essence of send or receive.
Section B identifies actions that the group felt transported “the essence” through space. Section A returns back to the shapes.

This strategy includes time to be spent on exploring the prompts, to get to know how they are experiencing the actions individually and as a group. There is movement exploration and verbal sharing. After time has been spent on this process, the forming and shaping of the sections begin. If we were to graph it out, it might look like the following map:

![Mapping the Process (Babcock)](image)

These identification points become areas to be explored so that each student will eventually find a way of expressing the idea in his/her own way. Then, through improvisations, negotiations, and sharing both verbally and physically, the process becomes infused within the group. The students negotiate and accommodate to varied perspectives. Contributions are considered, explored, and then resolved in the final product.

![Landscape Image and Haiku (author unknown)](image)

**Figure 3** Mapping the Process (Babcock)

**Figure 4** Landscape Image and Haiku (author unknown)
4.1 Two Student Groups Reflect on the Process from a Landscape Photo

In the following excerpt students collaboratively reflect on the outcome of their process. You can observe in their reflective writing, that together, they found a potent life metaphor from the landscape photo. The Haiku supported their work.

Group one described the process this way:

We took what we found in the photo by asking ourselves what actions we saw, and what those meant. We looked for what shapes we saw, and what those meant, and anything else that stood out to us that had meaning and take those ideas and put them in our bodies [Capturing the essence]. Our prompts became together and apart.

As we worked, we remembered this picture of a tree whose leaves were changing colors. Some were falling to the ground. Within the picture we saw shapes in the branches we could put in our bodies. We saw warm colors that gave us an idea of possible struggle. We chose this haiku, as maybe the end of one period of the tree’s life, and the beginning of a new season. From these ideas, we started to create a theme for our duet that framed the prompts together and apart.

My partner and I started playing with the shapes of the branches and the idea of falling like the leaves of a tree. We also started to play with the idea of struggle like the warm colors in the picture suggested. We started improvising using all of these ideas, then morphing those ideas into more developed work. The photo/Haiku supported our feelings and ideas.

We would find a shape we liked that reflected our photo/Haiku and then we would use our prompts to get in and out of that shape and move on to our next idea. The transitions were tough at first, but we eventually smoothed it all out so that it flowed from one thing to the next. Once we set the choreography, we started to dig deeper into the meaning of what we had just created.

We did not add the music until after the choreography was finished. This allowed us to stay on track with our ideas and not let the music start influencing our work. The piece of music we ended up using fit well with our choreographic intent and added another layer to the entire work.

Our duet became a piece about a man and a woman struggling to stay together, but things kept pulling them apart, then back together just to be separated again. We related this back to the Haiku in a sense that seasons change just as people do and the leaves you might have now might not be the right leaves for you in the future causing you to release them. In life, sometimes you have to let go of things that aren’t good for you and start fresh. The harsh reality of having to leave a person in your life can be very difficult, but in the end, you realize what is better for the both of you. When a tree sheds its leaves, it creates more room for new beautiful leaves that bring the tree back to life. Some people need to let go of something or someone that is not good for them to allow new and better things to happen in their life.

Our music is almost alarming giving us an idea that life is short, and you can’t waste time with things or people that you don’t need. Use your time here wisely and move on to better things that make you happy. Throughout our piece you can see the struggle people go through and how it is hard to finally let go. This is how we took a haiku and blended it into a dance. We titled it “And what remained”. This signifies the idea that when you dispose of something old and negative, whatever you have left is your foundation to start over and gain the things you want and deserve. Just as a bare tree is the foundation for the new leaves and blossoms to come about, which makes the tree come alive again (Student Interview/reflection paper, 2014).

This group described what the found prompts were in the photo/Haiku, and how these prompts translated into a dance. They also discussed the choreographic intent and how they captured the essence of that in that dance, inclusive of the working metaphor that underscored life’s meaning.
4.2 Group Two

This group worked directly with Haiku. They wrote their own Haiku. In the description of their process, you can see they had to negotiate meaning.

Moonlight is dimming
Darkness grows all around
The end is approaching

Initially, we did not agree on much. We ended up having to sit down, peel back all the layers, and figure out what goals we did have in common and go from there. Through that process, we decided writing our own haiku was a good way to go for our group. That decision also made finding and then moving our prompts a lot easier. It also gave us indicators as scoring the dance. Our prompts became dimming and growing. We made connections to life by noticing relationships framing three ideas: How contagious someone’s attitude may be, fighting temptation, and feelings that society gets in the way of individuality (Student interviews, 2015).

As the students investigated the essence of metaphor, they were challenged to find how to negotiate and accommodate one another’s perspectives. This process opened up the space for shared contributions and varied perspectives. At the end of this study, groups worked together to reflect and discuss answers to the following inquiries.

Description – Describe the work including what you find as the intent of the work.
Connections – Relate what you see in the work to the explorations we have done in class or to other works you have viewed or performed.
Conclusion – Find parallels about the work to life experiences, and include any found metaphor.

5. Reflections

When we share our insights with others, such as our experiences, feelings, and ideas on ordering, we begin to observe and relate to the project in a group consciousness. This group thinking and working enhances positive interactions, and can heighten choreographic connections regarding space and timing as well as emotional connectedness. In this case not only did the dance-making group-consciousness strengthen, but so did the idea of building classroom community because of the group sharing.

Reflections allow learners to recall, process, analyze, and understand knowledge acquired through recapturing experiences, and can be in the form of group-brainstorming reflection questions that address how they worked in a group, what issues arose, and how they worked through them. Outcomes are numerous, but one of the most significant is learners actively participate. There are also outcomes that involve the teachers. Teachers become learners at times, and learners sometimes teach. Respect is given to every member. Projects and questions interest and challenge students. Diversity becomes inclusive. It is welcomed. Students learn skills for resolving conflicts when they arise. Members draw upon their experience and knowledge.

Collaborations can take many forms that ultimately create many choices. In the long run new perspectives, ideas, and solutions are created. This is a significant role of education. Barr states, “Yet however an investigation takes form, the excitement from engaging with others, experiencing other perspectives and ways of thinking beyond one’s own ideas are real” (2015, p. 62). “Such diverse collaborative relationships reveal how dance makers, like scholarly dance researchers, continually engage in problem solving as they construct, shape, and curate material – data – to find meaning and understanding in the world they inhabit (2015, p. 57). Barr’s
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statement refers to professionals in the field; I find the same parallel in observing the collaborative inquiries among students as they continually engage in problem solving. I also find Kozar’s statement exemplifies collaboration. “True collaboration is simply too valuable not to take advantage of. It is valuable because of three basic factors; Students learn from one another. They learn to negotiate meaning, and in the process social skills are developed” (2010, p. 16). Students become more invested in their own learning. As stated by Leonard, Hellenbrand, and McShane-Hellenbrand, “the 21st century skill of collaboration has been cited in the last decade and a half as a crucial component of dance leadership frameworks” (2014, p. 90).

Figure 5   Choreography with Haiku projects, 2014 (photos: Babcock)

6. Final Thoughts

This paper is about sharing in-class experiences grounded in the inquiry about collaborative learning and action research that extend notions of what dance can mean. The outcomes of these experiences were that students found how learning about dance can deepen through group collaborations in creative problem solving through dance-making. They learned how metaphor, as found in poetry, can connect them to movement and relevant life experiences. As a dance educator, in keeping with the spiral nature of action research, moving forward with this work is to investigate those areas of group processing that were the hardest for the students. These areas were primarily in the early stages of the projects, when the students were brainstorming ideas. Not all students were eager to put their ideas forward. They were more comfortable residing in the periphery of discussions. When these situations occurred, I found that I slipped into my more traditional ways of teaching, which ultimately was teacher-directed. The silent observers ended up participating. However, it took time. Just as beginners learn that dance improvisation develops from self-discovery, and that knowledge is limitless. It takes time for them to trust the process. Because of this acute awareness, and in keeping with the collaborative learning theme of this paper, my inquiry moves from student learning toward improving pedagogical methods. Dyer so artfully states, “…we should begin to view best practices to also necessarily involve the creation of communal scaffolds, or professional development communities that support, educate, and encourage teachers in the goals of bettering their practices and contributing relevant and timely knowledge to the field” (2014, p. 50). In the process, we, as educators, are given space to share our stories, and to improve our best practices that continue to develop collaborative skills so vital in the 21st century.
References
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