

## DANCE NOTATION - A TEACHING TOOL

by

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As a dance notation system has to be based on a logical analysis of the movements of the body in order to be able to communicate, it has in it a teaching potential well worth considering. So far dance notation has mostly been used for the preservation of dance, but the interest to use it as a teaching tool is increasing. In my studies at the Department of Education at Stockholm University I took the opportunity to take a closer look at how it can, could be used in teaching dance.

Apart from a study of literature the main part of my study was based on a questionnaire. The questionnaire was published in the ICKL proceedings from Hong Kong 1997. I also went to London to watch classes, both notation classes and dance classes for children.

### Summary of the questionnaire

I got all together 33 answers and together they represented 13 countries, most of the answers coming the USA and Great Britain.

The majority of the answers came from Laban teachers working with LN/KIN, LMA and Motife Writing. As I wanted to focus on dance notation in general I also contacted persons working with Benesh and the Beauchamps-Feuillet notation (table 1).

Notation system	LN	LN/Motife	LN/LMA	LN/LMA/Motife	LMA/Motife	LN/Benesh
Number of persons	10	10	2	1	1	2

Notation system	LN/Benesh	Benesh	Feuillet	Philippine system
Number of persons	2	2	4	1

*Table 1.*

My informants teach at various levels and also have students from different age groups. Not all of them use the dance notation in a dance class (5 persons) (table 2).

Level \ Age	All Ages	Children	Teenagers	Young adults adults	College students Professional dance students
All levels	7	1	2	2	5
Beginners	1	7	1		6
Intermediate level		1			4
Advanced level				2	1
Tertiary level			1	1	3

*Table 2.*

Most teachers didn't demand any previous knowledge of notation. The students learn the notation and the dance at the same time. One teacher specially pointed out that for her the prerequisite is "A willingness to learn through the mind as well as through the body, (although both of course are involved").

Most teachers also emphasise the importance of dancing being the main part of the dance lessons. Emphasis is "not being trained as a notator" but notation being integrated to different aspects of dance content like creating, performing, observing, and reflecting.

The majority of the informants agree that most concepts of dance notation can be used: Directions, levels, floor patterns, the relationship between dancers, turns, flexion-extension and specially time/rhythm.

"Student's knowledge of the basic notation helps them to make, share, observe and remember their dances".

Dance notation is used in all sorts of classes: technique classes, repertoire, improvisation, composition and dance history.

The advantages in using notation in a dance class are many. The dance notation helps to clarify different aspects and details of the dance. The students acquire a deeper understanding of the "how, when and why" when performing dance movements. "Dance becomes a series of conscious choices instead of ritualization or habitual movements".

"It is a more impersonal way to communicate. Students can often relate symbols on the board to his own movement more readily than take a personal correction in his own body".

The dance notation offers a more varied way to learn dance, it is for instance a great help for visual learners and can help pupils that are not non-kinetically oriented to connect to dance.

Many teachers point out that the use of dance notation makes the students more independent in learning dance. They have a tool that helps them to memorise and practise by themselves and also to work on their own interpretation of the dance as the notation gives the students the source material first hand without someone else's interpretation.

It helps pupils to become aware of their own movements and one teacher specially said "children love this secret language"!

Some point out that words are ambiguous but notation more exact. It is a fast way of defining movement and quality of movement. Notation is also international but languages are not. When teaching in a foreign country and you have problems communicating with the language, dance notation can do wonders.

The biggest disadvantage is clearly that the notation might take over and slow down the class. There is the danger that notation discussions will become too pedantic and the momentum of the class will be lost.

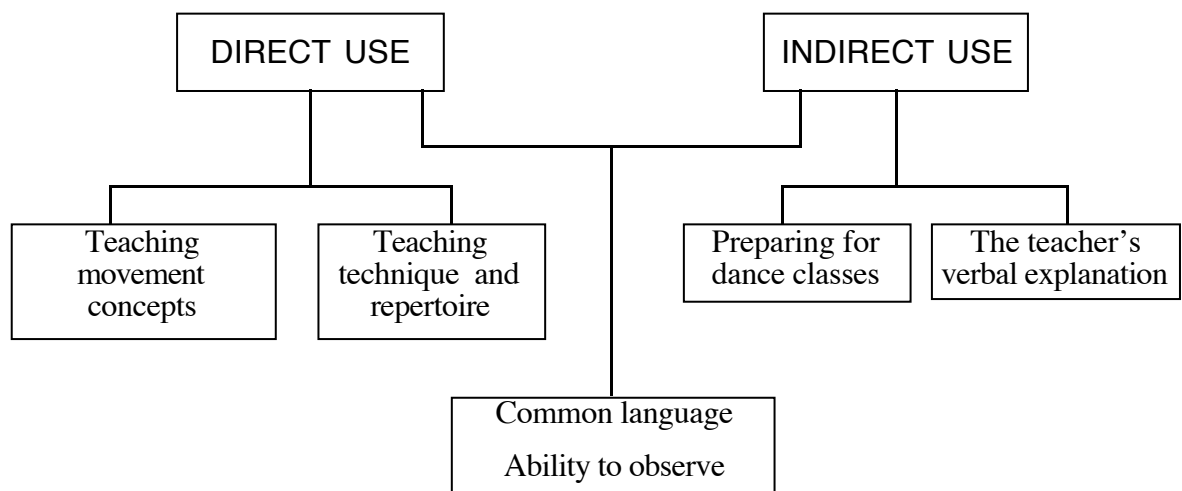
Another disadvantage, for advanced dance students can be the discrepancy between their dance knowledge and notation knowledge when they are not comfortable with notation. To learn notation then, is to learn the signs for a language they already speak well and it can be very frustrating if knowledge of the notation system is not on par with their dance knowledge.

The notation is taught as integrated part of the lesson as an integrated part of movement exploration and for creativity. This specially applies to improvisation based on Motife Writing where it becomes a tool for making and recording dances “it is a non threatening way to learn dance for the first time because students are engaged on creative, intellectual and emotional level”. Or for repertoire when a score is the base for learning and analysing choreography and style.

The notation can also be used to help correcting the students in technique classes. “It gives a clear statement of what you are aiming for”

The notation also influences our way of thinking about, and expressing ourselves verbally about dance and movement. Some teachers pointed out that the dance notation helps them to analyse and explain the dance movements better and also improve their observation skill.

I analysed the answers according to following model:



The “Direct use” is when notation is used in the dance class. Motife Writing is a common tool for teaching movement concepts both for children and adults. It is used for improvisation and composition and helps the students to learn and understand the elements of dance.

It is also used in technique classes where the notation helps to clarify the performing of movements, both the physical and the musical aspects.

In repertoire class the dance score gives the student a chance to work on her own interpretation of the dance. When I teach baroque dances I prefer to use the Beauchamps-Feuillet notation rather than just demonstrating the choreography myself. It makes it more exiting as we sometimes end up with a slightly different dance than I thought we would.

The students may come up with other solutions of interpretation than mine. The alternate versions have to be tested, evaluated and we choose what we think is the most appropriate. Also it helps the students to avoid *my* mistakes in dancing if they rely on the notation instead of just imitating me.

The “indirect use” is when a teacher uses the notation in preparing classes. Again the advantage of analysis becomes apparent. In notating exercises or movement themes the teacher becomes more conscious of the structure of the movements, both physically and musically.

The notation influences our way of expressing ourselves verbally so that we can be clear and accurate in our instructions.

In many dance styles there is a common terminology that refers to steps and positions, but not to the way of executing them. The notation provides a language for describing the movements verbally

The notation training sharpens the observation skills and that is an advantage when correcting and coaching the students.

I said previously that some of my informants don't use notation in a dance class, but most of them actually referred to this indirect use. “I don't actually use it in class but my notation training helps me to be clear”.

Some quotations from the questionnaire are worth considering a bit further.

### **Notation gives concrete relevans to an abstract concept**

This does not just apply to dance notation, but to all kinds of notation. With the help of notation we catch something fugitive and make it permanent by putting it on paper. The same applies for dance, music, speech or our thoughts. In our western world signs and symbols surround us and we are quite used to getting written information rather than oral. To some students it can be a help to use notation in learning dance as it is their normal way of learning things - through written signs. Similarly for schoolteachers the dance notation can be of great advantage as it represents a more common way of dealing with information. Also they don't need to teach by demonstrating the movements fully, but can use the notation signs instead.

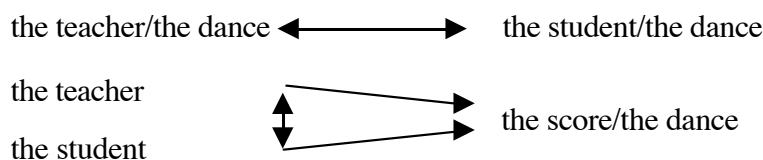
I asked one teacher why she uses notation when teaching children to dance and she answered that “it gives the children a sense of ownership to their dance. Symbols makes the abstract concrete and they can be inspiring”.

To give concrete relevans to abstract concepts is only possible through analysis. In “Orality and Literacy” Walter Ong (1991) writes about how the ability to write has affected our intellect and way of using the language. Writing made it possible to take our speech and thoughts “out of our bodies” and put them on paper, and as a result it became possible to organise our thoughts in a different way and possible to analyse. Dance notation forces one to analyse both in the notating and the interpreting process. In my own studies in Spanish dance I often used notation as a learning tool. After class I would go to my hotel room and notate what I had learnt. Sometimes I even had the opportunity to notate in class. When I went over my notation I could see more clearly the structure in the

dance, how the steps should be performed, the gaps, that is what I had forgotten or not understood, and what I needed to ask about in the next lesson. The notating process seemed to “confirm” the dance in my body. Notating dance is a slower process than performing a dance and the consciousness that is needed to be able to analyse and notate encourages reflection and independent learning.

### **An impersonal way to communicate**

In the traditional way of teaching dance, one could say that the teacher is the teacher and at the same time the teacher in demonstrating with her body, is the teaching material. This situation closely resembles the situation in an oral society. According to Ong learning and knowing means that one has a very close identification with the knowledge. The person and knowledge is an entity. In writing one separates the knowledge from the body, in notating dance one separates the dance from the body, it becomes objective in the sense of being distanced from a person. In a regular dance class the teacher’s way of explaining, both verbally and physically, is the main, perhaps the only, source of information. Using notation is a more “objective” tool in teaching the dance as the information is outside both the teacher’s and the student’s body. It creates a different situation for discussing and analysing the dance together



Through the notation the student gets a chance to learn the movement from “inside -out”. One of my colleagues in Stockholm expressed it like this: “Many dancers think about movement looks from the out-side rather than experiencing the movement from the inside”

### **Great for visual learners !!**

In every day life one talks about different ways of learning, the most common ones being the auditory memory and the visual memory. Many teachers in the questionnaire point out that the notation is a help for visual learners. The notation gives the information in a static visual way different from the moving dance. I would also like to emphasise that the use of notation activates several senses. “It consolidates movement on different cognitive learners”. “Apart from the previously mentioned auditory and visual senses, we engage the kinetic and tactile when learning dance through reading and writing notation” (Bucek 1998).

**To sum up** I would like to point out that the key words in my study turned out to be “analysis” “consciousness”, “awareness” “reflecting” and “independence”. In teaching dance there are many ways of analysing movement, to make students conscious of their own dance and to encourage them to apply their dance knowledge in an independent way, but using dance notation as a teaching tool is certainly one excellent way of working towards that goal.