

THE DANCE NOTATION BUREAU LABANOTATION SURVEY REPORT

by

Lucy Venable

Why the survey ?

The survey was carried out to see what is happening currently with the teaching of Labanotation in the United States in Higher Education in order to help the Dance Notation Bureau (DNB) in making plans for the future.

Labanotation was first included in the dance curriculum of many universities in this country when dance departments were being newly formed or becoming independent from other departments. It was often welcomed as a subject by university review committees because there was a textbook for it, and it seemed like a solid academic subject. When you read job descriptions for positions in dance departments today you realize the diversity of subject matter being offered now. Body conditioning, somatics, movement analysis, dance technology and more have enlarged the usual offerings of technique, repertory, composition, dance history and kinesiology. Labanotation is seldom mentioned as a subject that a candidate might offer to teach as well.

If Labanotation is taught at a university, there is usually the need for only one teacher. When that teacher leaves or retires, the position is usually reconfigured in light of current needs of a department. The question is: Will Labanotation have proved to be of such value to the curriculum that it will be retained? Recently as a result of restructuring at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and Juilliard, where notation courses had been offered for many years, Labanotation was eliminated. Will this be a pattern?

The method ?

This survey was proposed at a meeting of the Education Committee at the Dance Notation Bureau on December 7, 1999 which was attended by Senta Driver, Ilene Fox, Dawn Horwitz, Muriel Topaz, Lucy Venable and Carl Wolz. The purpose was to contact people who are teaching Labanotation to find out what they are doing, what courses are being offered and what their needs for materials are.

Questions were sketched out for the survey in New York, and then were refined in Columbus with the help of Stephen T. Mockabee, Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at OSU, whose work involves designing surveys. He shaped it into an organized and workable form which was mailed to 288 people in the United States on the DNB's Certified Teachers' List in May 2000. It was also posted on the LabanTalk ListServ where some other interested people responded.

Of the 288 surveys mailed, 38 were returned either because the person no longer lived there (35) or because notation was no longer taught at the school(3). 52 were filled out.

This was a 21% return. A 20% return is considered average for a survey. Thirty nine of those responding were interviewed by phone for approximately one half hour. Each interview was recorded on tape and transcribed.

There is quantitative data which gives us figures to look at, but I think most interesting is the qualitative data, much of which was obtained through the interviews. No individuals are listed in this summary, but I do have the names of people interested in discussing curriculum and developing on-line courses should committees be formed to take on such projects or should advice be needed from them. There are quotes that could be useful in articles about the value of notation. I can put people in touch with the sources.

What we found out?

Most of the training has been on the East Coast at the DNB and Juilliard, next most in the midwest at the Ohio State University. Twenty two institutions around the country were named as places where those responding had studied. There is some link with LMA (Laban Movement Analysis) work as a number of teachers are also CMAs (Certified Movement Analysts, those certified by the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies).

Labanotation is usually offered for one or at the most two quarters or semesters in undergraduate programs. It is not always required early enough to be helpful during the four year academic program, and sometimes it is crammed into the last year leaving no time at all to make use of it. Several people recommended the second year as the ideal placement for notation study.

Separate graduate courses are rarely offered. Either graduate students take the undergraduate course(s) with additional assignments or independent study with the notation teacher.

At one university the notation courses satisfy the General Education Requirement for quantitative and logical skills for the dance majors. As a result the students do not have to take statistics.

Labanotation by Ann Hutchinson is still cited as the most used text, next is the *Elementary Labanotation: A Study Guide* by Muriel Topaz.

There is a great need for reading material from contemporary works, and there are some good suggestions for obtaining these from contemporary choreographers.

Mention is made of use of teachers' own materials. Perhaps teachers can collaborate on a collection of these materials or better still they can submit them for posting on the new website out of Southern Methodist University for the Alliance of Dance Notation Educators (www.smu.edu/dancenotation). In that way people can have immediate access to them.

The use of computers specifically for dance is only beginning to be developed at the various schools where, in general, it seems more technical support needs to be provided. New on the scene is motion capture. The University of California at Irvine has a motion capture studio in full operation now, and one is being developed at the Ohio State University.

What some people said in answer to the following questions:

What value has the study/use of Labanotation had for you ?

“ As a teacher, it has not only given me a new area of expertise, but it has also enhanced my previously established teaching skills. As a choreographer, it has given me the language to both create more diverse movement and also to communicate my ideas clearly to the dancers. As a director from score, it has enabled me to discover a new form of creative expression. I have found that restaging a work from score demands as much integrity and passion as creating my own work. Restaging the work of another choreographer allows me to feed my own intellect and artistry by fully immersing myself in a particular choreographer's style of movement expression. As a notator, notation has given me a renewed reverence for the immensity and depth of human experience that is communicated through dance. Notating allows me to simultaneously digest movement on both a kinetic and intellectual level. It provides the engine for the process of synthesis of body, mind and soul. ”

How has it enhanced your career ?

“ Notation continues to present new possibilities in many areas of my work including documentation, research, collaboration with other faculty members and in the use of technology. I firmly believe that this is a pivotal time in the dance world and I also feel that notation practitioners can and should be seminal figures in ensuring the prominent position of dance in the greater artistic experience of the present and the future. ”

“ It's got me jobs all around the world because of notation ”

“ Careerwise, every place I've been I've used it. ”

“ It informs all my teaching and writing criticism. ”

“ My research outlet: publication of books & reconstructions from score. It has enabled me to expand my research interests in ways that Carnegie Research I institutions demand ”

In what way do you make connections in your other courses with notation ? OR In what way does your knowledge of notation affect how you teach other courses ?

“ For those who participate in a reconstruction, their appreciation for their own dance heritage is increased. They tend to value those whose shoulders they are standing on with greater appreciation. These individuals are more than historic names in a book. ”

“ I cast a reconstructed dance for our faculty concert using students from the notation course. I found that their budding knowledge of notation enhanced the reconstruction process, and that, vice-versa, being involved in a reconstruction while learning about notation made the material much more accessible. I used readings from the score whenever possible in class and had the dancers look at the score during outside rehearsals. ”

“ I incorporate motif into composition to cultivate observation skills and to insure that students explore nonpreferential ways of moving; motif is also useful in pedagogy for lesson planning, inspiring invention amongst students, and providing for alternate learning styles. ”

“ In composition I use it as a more objective way of getting at movement invention. It very successfully takes students minds off of self-consciousness of creating by focusing them on action & direction symbols or timing symbols. I use that with both majors and non majors. ”

“ I use it in my pedagogy classes as just the whole aspect of literacy & symbology that translates very well to emergent reading skills for children because reading and notation are both symbology. I use the motif aspect for compositional purposes for teachers to help create a structure for movement for students without defining every little aspect of it and for their own recording purposes so they can remember. ”

“ In World Dance class, connection is from cultural dance study to notation as an indispensable documentation & analysis tool. ”

“ More often I connect our readings in Labanotation class with dance history – I give them historical background about what they’re reading. ”

“ I use the direction symbols & repeat signs when I write tap steps on the blackboard in my Tap 1 class. The concept of x & stretch has given me insight into teaching tap much more efficiently and clearly. The whole idea of place low and pulling your foot up towards your hip & relaxing your muscles as you do it. It’s a whole leg movement. I use that imagery for the class -- you pull in along the same line and use your energy a lot more efficiently. ”

“ When choreographing & working with actors, I incorporate Labanotation terms & concepts all the time! ”

“ Use to differentiate weight shifts, directions & rhythms in Ballroom & Tap. ”

“ In my beginning modern dance we teach basic modern dance history and I try to give them actual combinations that are scored like the Limón accent combination. ”

Questions to be answered when making plans to take action

Everything points to the fact that we need to examine how Labanotation and Motif Notation relate and how they fit into the education of the dancer, how to best present them and what teaching materials need to be made available.

The survey tells us that students and teachers need reading examples from contemporary works. When the DNB had to cut back on various activities in the mid 80's and closed its school, the focal activity became the notating of scores. Funds for notating works have been available more often for preserving works of choreographers who have recently died than for those who are living. Can more current works be recorded as well?

Teaching a work from score at the same time that students are having a notation theory course is mentioned as a most successful combination. Since performance fees for a work are often contingent on grants as departmental funds are not sufficient to cover them, this is not always possible. Can anything be done to improve this situation?

In this age of rapidly developing technology, multi media teaching materials are in demand. How are we keeping up with these developments?

Since very little advanced notation training is available at colleges and universities, how can the DNB attract and train teachers and notators? How much study can be done on line or through distance learning?

We must re-examine our goals, the way we train teachers & notators, and the materials we offer as we enter the 21st century.

For a copy of the survey questions and/or an 18 page summary of replies to the 22 questions which was handed out at the conference, please contact Lucy Venable at: venable.1@osu.edu

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