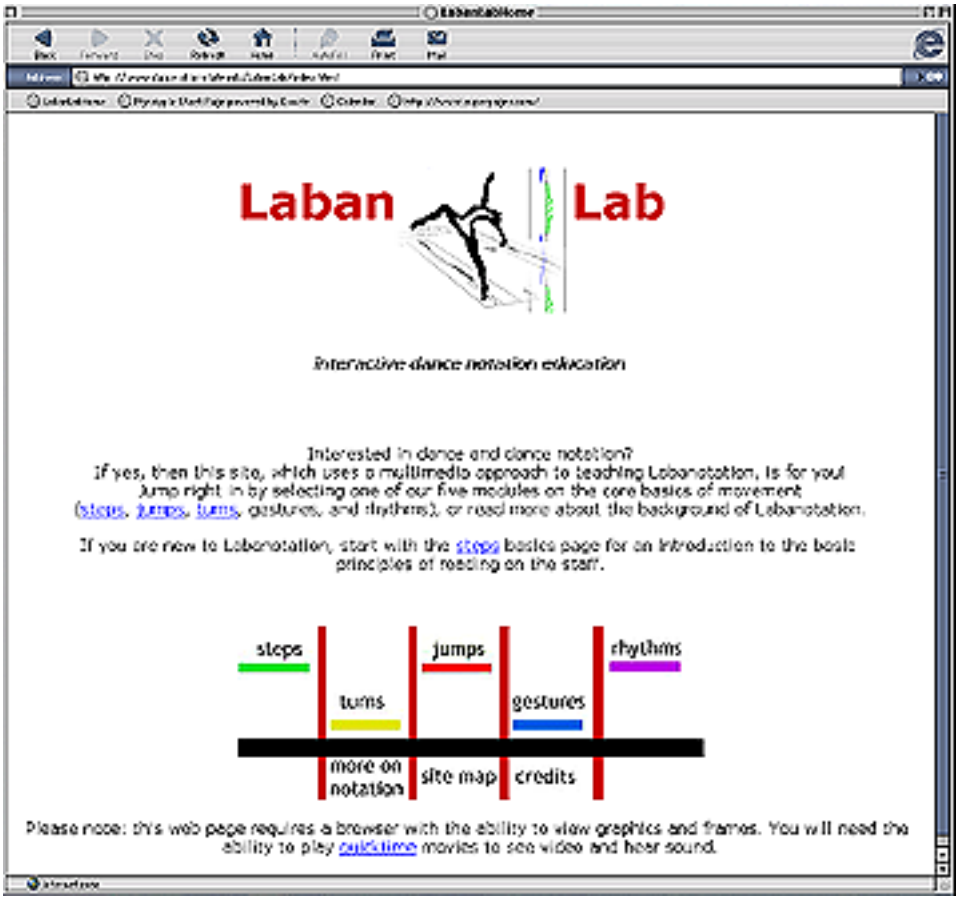
LABANLAB
http://www.dance.ohio-state.edu/labanlab/

by

Sheila Marion and Rachel Boggia

LabanLab is an interactive website for learning Labanotation. Created by Sheila Marion (project director, content) and Rachel Boggia (design, web technology, video), with music by Susan Chess, LabanLab uses multimedia computer technology to create a hands-on learning environment.

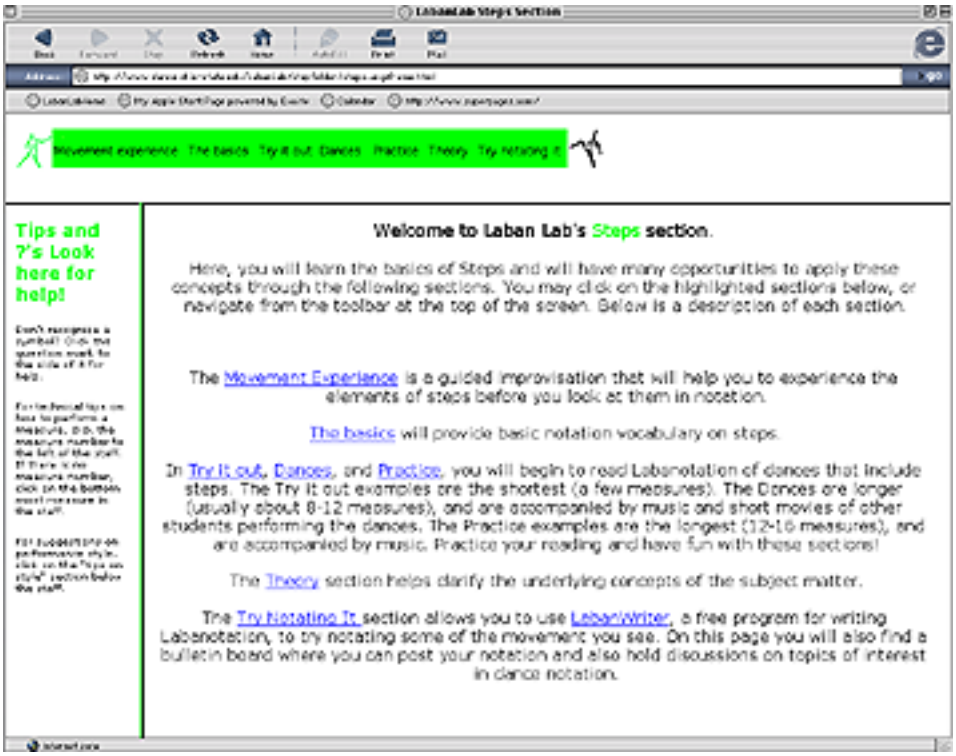
The website provides practical experience for learning the five core basics of Labanotation: steps, gestures, jumps, turns and rhythms. Emphasis is on learning by doing, and on dance, rather than notation theory. The site is designed to give the viewer a full experience, similar to a classroom, in the movement experiences, guided readings, and amount of practice material. However, it is also designed for learning without an instructor, so that viewers can work at their own pace and in their own time. Music supports each of the dances and practice readings, while text and video confirm movement understanding.



Although the website as a whole is fairly complex in its many layers, the overall look is open and simple. We wanted to give the viewer the feeling that Labanotation is accessible and fun to learn. The primary color scheme on a white background helps give the open look and serves as a simple navigation guide to each unit. Text is kept to a minimum, both to highlight the notation itself and to facilitate translation for those who may be learning in a language other than English. A conversational tone is used for all the explanations that link the various pages to give a feeling of accessibility. The interface is simple, favoring graphics over text, and the use of frames and progressively loading QuickTime movies and sound helps speed up the loading time.

In each of the principal pages, the notation is central, and brightest in color. Use of color in the notation helps facilitate score reading by distinguishing right and left foot for steps and jumps, for example, and direction of turns. Less important aspects of the notation are colored gray so as not to draw attention to themselves and so the main symbols stand out more clearly.

The varied approaches to the main concept within each topic—movement experience, basics, short examples to try out the concept, dances and practice readings—follow a typical classroom format for introducing new material in Labanotation, as currently recommended by the Dance Notation Bureau's Teacher Certification Course. The purpose of the various approaches to each topic is explained on that topic's main page.



The spirit of this approach is movement centered, and is similar to a conversational approach to learning a language. The idea is that once dancers have experienced the movement concept physically and learned a minimum of symbols, they will incorporate the knowledge on both a mental and physical level as they practice reading basic dance scores. Observation and notating simple phrases reinforces movement understanding. Later, followup explanations of theory give the reasoning and logic behind the symbols and their application. Discussion pages allow viewers to share questions, answers and observations. Finally, the section "more on notation" will link viewers to webpages for various centers for notation and let them know where they can continue their studies, order textbooks, or otherwise find out more about notation.

In using the web pages, while there is an implied order within the topics, and in the layout of the main units on the home page itself, viewers may wish to go to the material in any order, depending on their own preferences and learning styles. To accommodate this, each unit and page within a unit is as stand-alone as possible.

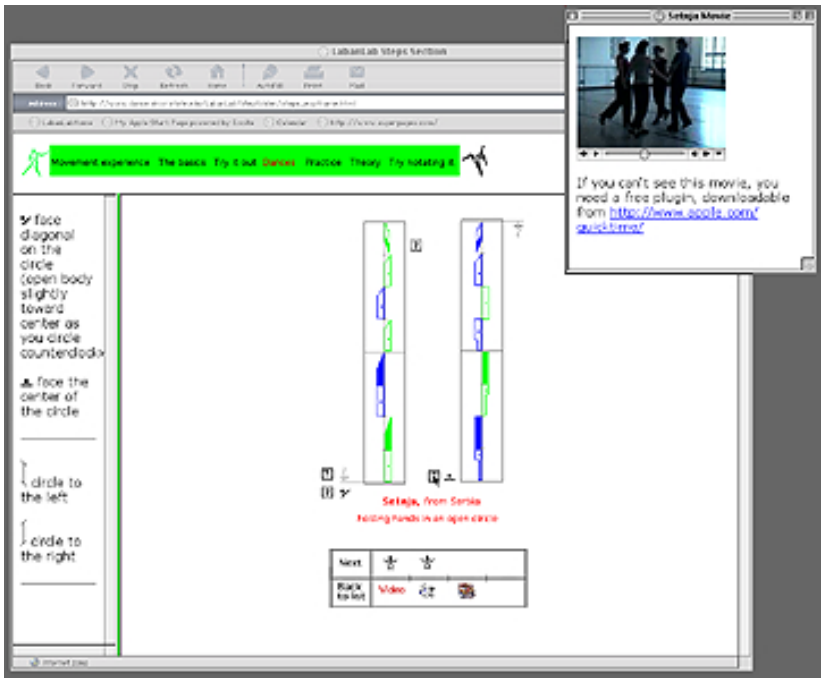
The varied approaches to each topic are supported by different media:

The "Movement experience" (not yet constructed) will be a guided improvisation using music with voice-over and accompanying text. The purpose is to allow viewers to experience the movement concept physically, without symbols, in order to find the sense and flow of the movement itself.

The "Basics" uses notation and text to introduce the main symbols and general application for each topic.

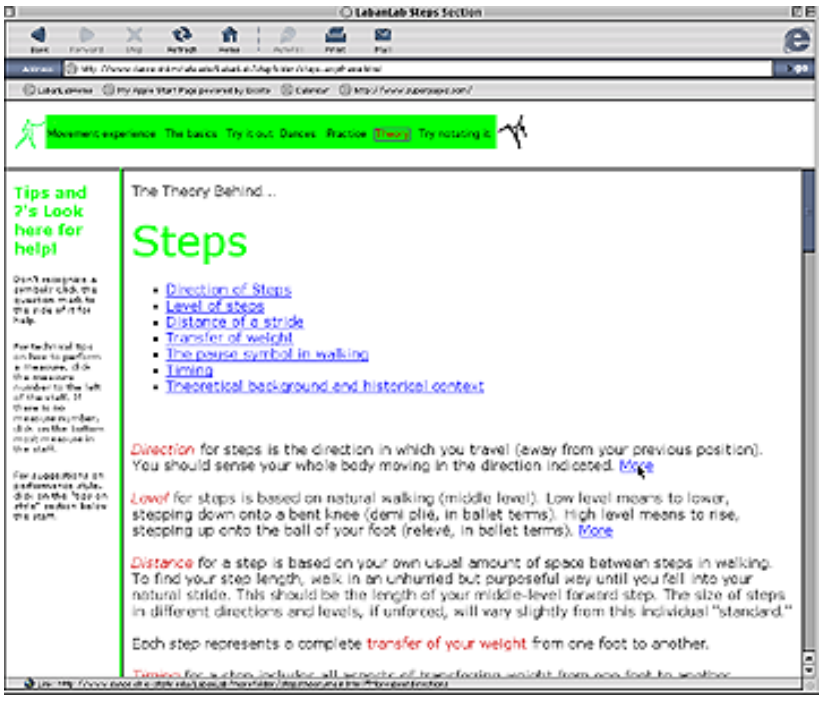
In "Try it out," notation of short, easily recognizable patterns—from social dance, ballet and modern dance—is accompanied by wordnotes which are colored gray to minimize their impact. Unfamiliar symbols which are not dealt with in the basics have a question mark beside them. A click on the question mark brings up an explanation in a frame alongside the notation. This device keeps the main frame from being cluttered with text and allows the viewer to choose whether to look up the explanation, or to skip it if they understand the meaning through the movement context.

The "Dances" section for each topic includes a variety of short folk dances from around the world. These pages are the most complex in their layers of media. A menu below the notation gives a number of options. The book-stack icon leads to background information about the dance, which usually includes links to related websites. Viewers can click on the filmstrip icon to open a QuickTime movie of the dance, and on the music-note icon for audio accompaniment for each dance. Supporting text appears in the frame at the side of the notation and includes tips on performance (accessed through the figure icons in the menu at the bottom), wordnotes explaining the notation (opened by clicking either on measure numbers or on the bottom of each staff) and information on unfamiliar symbols (linked by the question marks beside the notation).

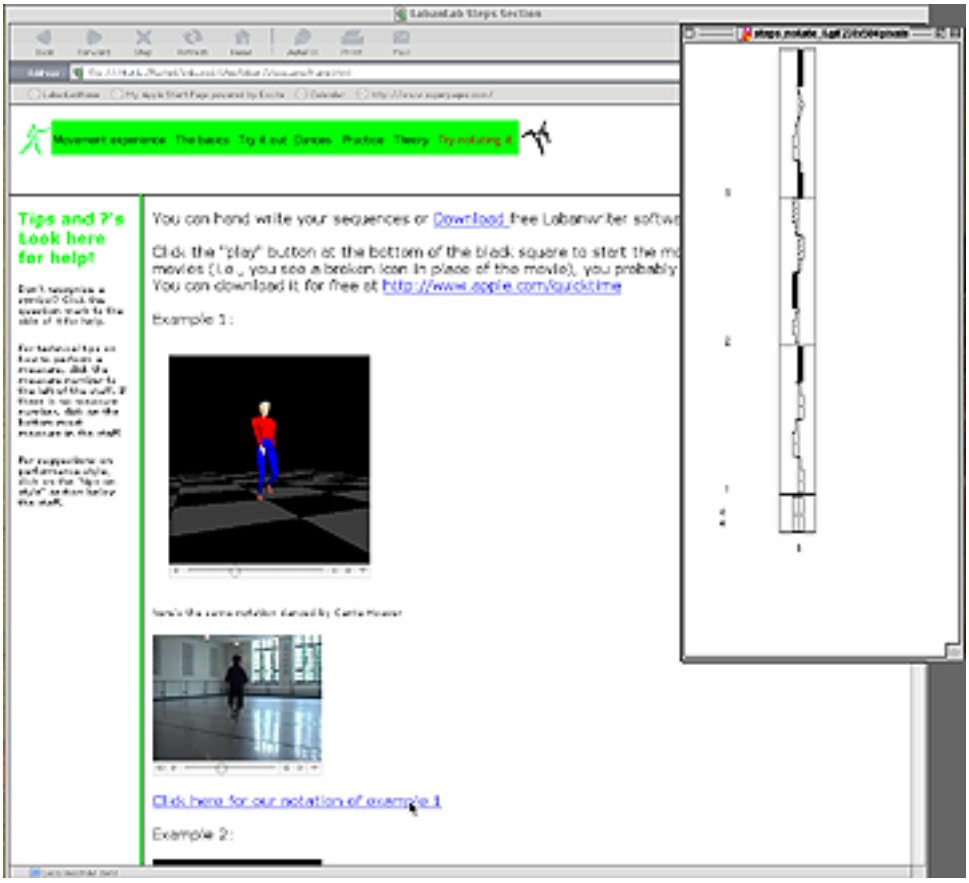


The “Practice” combinations are longer reading examples in modern, ballet and jazz dance styles. Like the dances, they have wordnotes, explanations of unfamiliar symbols, and tips on reading or performance, all of which can appear in the frame at the side of the notation through clicking on the various icons. The practice combinations have audio accompaniment but no video.

The “Theory” sections are simply text with examples, but links are used to guide the viewer and to keep the initial explanations simple, while providing more information on demand.



In “Try notating it,” viewers can link to LabanWriter to download the software, view videos of short examples, and bring up our notation to check against their own. Originally, LifeForms animations were to be used for the examples in the “Try notating it” sections, in contrast to videos of live dancers for the Dances sections, but technical difficulties with animation have made this a question for further exploration.



The challenge in designing the site was to create an easy to use and simple interface. The initial problem was how to set up the page so that interactivity would be convenient and would not clutter the user’s desk top with pop-up windows. The solution, using frames (like a “TV dinner tray” in which the main information is shown in the largest portion of the page and peripheral information can load independently in smaller portions to the side of the page) is a trade off. Frames speed load times and keep the workspace clear for most users, but very old browsers and most non-graphical browsers are not frames-compatible. However, the page would be useless without graphics and free updates on browsers are available. In order to print notation from the page, click in the desired frame before selecting the print command.

With the complexity of the website, the challenge has been to keep it fast loading and as widely accessible as possible. Solutions included keeping graphics to a few colors and saving them as "gif" files optimized for the web, minimizing "rollovers" (still in progress), and keeping navigation bars in their own frames. Movies and sound are in QuickTime, a widely used format with a free player downloadable from the web. We attempted to minimize scrolling by optimizing notation for a 800 X 600 pixel screen space. The site functions are optimized for 3.2 and later versions of Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator, and 4.0 versions of other browsers.

The tools used include Adobe Premier 6.0 for video editing, Media Cleaner Pro 4.0 for video and audio compression, LifeForms for animation, Macromedia Fireworks and Adobe Photoshop for graphics, and Macromedia Dreamweaver for web design. The design was created on Macintosh G4 towers with 21"monitors.

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CONTACTS
Sheila Marion: marion.8@osu.edu
Rachel Boggia: boggia.3@osu.edu