

Understanding *Context* in the National Core Arts Standards for Dance

Context

Dance is a kinesthetic art form where imagination, ideas, and meaning are translated into movement. How are the movements of a dance perceived? How does a viewer “read” a dance? What is the meaning of the movement? What does one look *at*, or what should one look *for* when looking at a dance? How does context inform dance?

Context is often thought of in terms of written or spoken language. It defines the circumstances or setting in which words are written or spoken which give specific meaning to text. Context also refers to the words or phrases that come before or after particular words, therefore giving specific meaning or nuance to words to more accurately communicate intent and thought.

Dance is to be understood in much the same way. Dance is text just like words are text; however, dance is non-print text. In dance, movements act as words. Dance is like written or spoken languages where a series of selected words create sentences. In dance, a series of selected movements create phrases, and a series of phrases create dances.

Every spoken or written word is done so within a context. Words hold particular meaning and are used to communicate thoughts and ideas. Words can explain factual informational or be used to tell a story from someone’s life experience or from their imagination. Dance uses movement to communicate thoughts and ideas, too, to tell stories or show imagination.

It is important to mention that not all dances are created to relate personal ideas or stories. Sometimes a “lack of meaning” in a dance may be its entire reason for being. Dance is created for many reasons—an abstract dance or pure movement-based, non-narrative dance is as relevant or legitimate as dance that tells a story or strives to communicate a message that is personal or universal. Sometimes the whole “meaning” of a dance is simply to create a series of movements that happen to be performed simultaneously but with no particular relation to each other beyond existing in the same time and space.

Dance is a language made up of movement. To understand dance, context must be considered. Each dance is created based on a particular set of circumstances. The viewer must consider these circumstances if they are to bring meaning to a dance. Sometimes, the audience may be informed about the dance through program notes which give context for the viewer provided by the choreographer. More often, the viewer is left to figure things out on their own. Considering context will help bring understanding to the dance.

Dance may be contextualized through historical, societal, cultural, and personal circumstances. Whether viewing dance on a concert stage performed by professional dancers or watching children dance spontaneously to music in the park, every dance is defined in some way by context.

Below is an excerpt about context in relation to written work. Consider how this is the same for viewing dance; transfer the concept of words, paragraphs, and stories into the language of dance (movement, phrases, and dances) and convert the “reader” to the “viewer.”



Context includes the grammar of sentences and the meanings of words; a paragraph; a whole story or other text. Context is also taken to include the reader's expectations and purposes for reading; various aspects of the location and situation in which the person is reading; and even the person's culture and times—in short, the reader's entire background of knowledge and experience (e.g. Brown, 1997). These various factors operate simultaneously for proficient readers; they usually operate quite unconsciously; and they can affect the identification of single words as well as the reader's understanding of an entire text. The automatic use of context—of multiple contexts—is a crucial part of the reading process, though most people don't realize it.

<https://www.heinemann.com/shared/onlineresources/08894/08894f16.html> (retrieved April 25, 2014)

Context cues

Once context is understood as essential to grasping meaning, then context cues become an opportunity for creating meaning from movement. Context cues for dance are information obtained from the dance that helps confirm the meaning of a movement, group of movements, or a dance as a whole for the purpose of understanding or comprehending meaning and intent. Using context cues to comprehend dance requires seeing relationships between movements and making inferences about the meaning or intent of movement.

Context cues in dance require close observation. What does one observe? A partial list includes: how the dancers interact with the elements of dance (space, time, energy); the movement characteristics displayed; the movement dynamics used; the movement progressions over space and time; transitions between movement; mood or tone established by movements and stimuli; movement of dancers in relation to other dancers, in relation to space, to props or costumes; expressive qualities exhibited by the dancer(s); the setting (formal or informal performances spaces), etc.

Teaching context cues is about training the eye to look closely (in reading this is called “close reading”) for dynamic and subtle changes in movements and relationships. It is about repeating movement and breaking it apart so students have multiple opportunities to “see” what is important in a phrase and discuss what it is about the phrase that gives it meaning. What are the images that the dancers evoke? What is the relationship between the dancers? How do the dancers meet and part or make and break relationships with each other? What difference does it make? How do they move in space? What is their use of energy, flow, and dynamics? Does the dance tell a story? Are there characters in the dance? What motivations do the characters have? What are the consequences of the motives?

Communicating meaning and intent is the job of the choreographer; however, each person who views a dance will bring their own context to the dance and therefore create their own meaning when viewing it. If seeing the same dance again over time, one person's view of the dance may change as their own contextual experiences evolve; as different dancers interpret and perform the dance differently, if only slightly; and different performance spaces create different contexts. In this way, no dance is ever performed the same way twice nor is dance ever viewed exactly the same way each time it is seen. Dance is a living art form that is shaped by its context and the context that each viewer brings to every performance.