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Dancing *Calgon*: Embodied Research through Motif Notation

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This embodiment study is presented in video from the qualitative analysis of two dancers' experiences with dancing and writing using Motif Notation as they engaged in the practice of learning a dance from video. They interpreted their scores, revised the notation, and performed for accuracy. Through the dancers' voices, movement, and Motif Notation scores, the study captures dancers' experiences of how score writing can inform embodiment of an unfamiliar dance style. The dancers shared their self-discovery processes of using intellect to deepen embodiment—and embodiment to deepen intellect. The study with these two dancers revealed that (1) Motif Notation deepens cognitive, social-emotional, and psychomotor learning, and (2) notating while learning movement supports the concept of a dancer as a "researcher," one who investigates in order to clarify meaning and improve embodiment. This study is IRB approved.

Keywords: dance; dance education; embodiment; jazz dance; Laban Bartenieff Movement Analysis; Laban Movement Analysis; Labanotation; Language of Dance®; learning; Motif Notation; self-discovery; score writing



VIDEO ARTICLE

Available to view here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.8903>.

Available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.8903.mp4>.

STILLS FROM THE VIDEO ARTICLE



VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

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[0:10]

Dancing *Calgon*:

Embodied Research through Motif Notation

Abstract

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[music plays]

Dancing *Calgon*:

Embodied Research through Motif Notation

by

Teresa Heiland, Mandi Taylor,

Marlene Jensen, and Stephanie Morikawa

[00:27]

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

We noticed the dancers seem to be thinking for a while. They read their Motif Notation, sense, identify, reflect, and move again. Motif Notation, also known as Motif Description and Motif Writing, is one system for graphically representing and recording movement.

Teresa Heiland and Krissie Marty 1996. *Calgon*

This IRB-approved research study was designed to capture the embodied experiences of two college dancers as they learn a jazz dance from video, write a score of the dance, and describe their experiences. These dancers are trained in beginner-intermediate Laban Bartenieff Movement Analysis and Language of Dance Motif Notation.

We wanted to learn about dancers' embodied experiences when they are notating and learning movement while writing notation. How does score writing inform embodiment? How do past dance practices inform notating and performing an unfamiliar dance style?

Over nine sessions, the dancers learned a jazz duet called *Calgon*. During eighteen hours, they learned a dance from video and notated using Motif Notation, Effort Qualities, and Breath. They described their intellectual and physical experiences, performed the dance from their scores, and described their experiences after dancing.

Atlas.ti software

Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle 2001

We used Atlas.ti software to analyze data using open, axial, and selective coding, which merged into themes that we compared to existing literature. We did a reliability check with our dancers for authenticity, credibility, criticality, and integrity and cross-referenced outcomes with the literature.

[2:01]

Three Modes of Representation

Enactive: Action-based, dancing

Iconic: Image-based, sensing and imagining

Symbolic: Language-based, Motif Writing

Bruner 1966

The literature we reviewed discusses the relationship between imagery, cognition, and movement. One of the theories is Jerome Bruner's Three Modes of Representation during cognitive development. Bruner explores how embodiment, imagery, symbol and language together create cognition: Enactive, such as dancing; Iconic, such as sensing and imagining; and Symbolic, such as Motif Notation.

[2:28]

Triple Code Model

Imagery

Meaning

Somatic response

Ahsen 1984

Another meaning-making model that is foundational in our research is the Triple Code Model by Akhter Ahsen. Ahsen proposes that imagery and one's somatic response is key to creating meaning. These theories relate to our study as they connect imagery, meaning making, notation, and the body.

Cycles of Language of Dance® Literacy Processes

Creating

Sensing

Observing

Reflecting

Identifying

Interpreting

Notating

Heiland 2023

An experiential learning model created by the Language of Dance Center USA community, based on Bruner and Ahsen's theories, frames our research study. It is called the Cycles of Literacy Processes and describes various ways dancers investigate.

There are seven processes: Sensing is the somatosensory and proprioceptive response to imagery. Observing is the process of seeing, watching, and noticing. Reflecting is developing thoughts, ideas, and opinions with purpose. Identifying

is the practice of recognizing and categorizing. Interpreting is the experience of explaining the meaning of information, words, and actions. Notating is the act of writing symbols to communicate or represent a language. Creating is the process of bringing something into existence through constructive development. In this case through either making movement or a score.

Dancers experience these in a variety of ways depending on what they are working on. In this case, they are working on Motif Notation writing of a dance from a video in order to learn about a specific role in the dance.

[4:02]

The Movement Alphabet®

Motion, Any Action, Rotation, Stillness, Destination, Traveling, Any Flexion, Balance, Any Extension, Any Direction, Motion Toward, Spring (Preston-Dunlop 1966), Change of Support, Motion Away, Relating, Falling, Shape

Guest 2000, 2005; Guest and Curran 2008

Motif Notation is related to Labanotation, but its purpose, function, and application are different. Motif Notation was created by Labanotation experts Ann Hutchinson Guest and Valerie Preston-Dunlop. Labanotation focuses on space, time, energy, and relationship, while the LOD Motif Notation by Ann Hutchinson Guest also addresses Motion, Destination, Action, and Stillness. Labanotation is specifically used to record movement precisely. Guest and Preston-Dunlop created Motif Notation as a creative tool to generate movement and identify dominant concepts through exploration, play, and critical thinking.

In this research study, Motif Notation is being used by the dancers to notate a dance from video so they can understand the embodiment of the style as they write their scores of the dance. As researchers, we are interested in the lived experience of how writing and dancing inform embodiment over time.

[5:11]

[Image: Measures 19 to 24 of Marlene and Stephanie's hand-drawn notated scores]

The dancers shared their Motif Notation scores with us. We briefly look at their scores to see what this process of writing unfolded.

Stephanie's Motif Writing

Stephanie seems to focus on small details to build her concepts.

[Stephanie:]

I'm very detail-oriented, I thought it was kind of difficult because, like, I wanted to get every single gesture.

Marlene's Motif Writing

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

Marlene seems to focus broadly to lay the general plan

[Marlene:]

I'll, like, look at the movement as a whole and, like, take out the most important part.

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

The dancers describe what it feels like to work with notation.

[5:36]

[Stephanie / Marlene]

It's both like writing a language but also like you're doing a math equation.

And a little bit like science, too.

It's also like science because you have to know, like, anatomical positions.

[5:52]

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

The dancers selected a portion of the dance to investigate more deeply.

[Stephanie / Marlene:]

The idea of, like, being luxurious because like the way I choreograph is not like that at all, so I, like, wanted to experience something different and like then go back to something I'm familiar with like the quick movements like the jumps.

Because it's not technical but I figured it would be one of the hardest sections of the dance because it's just style and I don't do well with, like, just style. I could do some leaps for you, but I can't, like, move around.

It's still like aspects of technique though it's like,

Yeah, there's the *sissones*,

Yeah and like, yeah,

But that's not like the important part of this section.

No, it's, like, the playfulness. It's like the mood and tone.

I always compartmentalize myself as, like, a "technique" dancer, and jazz has never been, like, super easy for me. It's interesting that to access that I have to like go into a very analytical state about it, whereas most people, they just feel it.

I don't know, doing this shape-flow with the ribs. I'm not used to, like, moving the ribs like I'm used to, like, just holding them together and like doing pirouettes or like tricks.

Okay, so, at 2:48, Krissie stands up and does some flowing poses, nothing technical. And I think it would be interesting for me to learn this section because everything I do in jazz is technical and I think that this section very much embodies Krissie and her style as a dancer.

[7:26]

Meta-analysis

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

The dancers reviewed their process of dancing, notating, and returning to the video to revise their scores. They described the difference between working with familiar key movement ideas and less familiar concepts that are esoteric to notate and perform. Here they talk about their experiences notating these concepts.

Guest 2000, 12

[Stephanie / Marlene]

The things that aren't familiar to me I have to sit and think about where it is in my body and what point I need to, what are the most important parts of that movement. Because in an attitude turn I know that the leg behind me and the turn are the most important part. But in other things, I don't know if it's the center or the arms or the legs or where they are going in space that's most important.

I do it like very mentally at first, so I like figure out like what foot goes where and like what foot starts first but um when I like started having to write it or like get it in my body I had to actually had to do it and like see if what I felt matched the quality that I was seeing on the screen.

[8:31]

Embodying from the score

I like the process we have where we learn it from the video and then we try to notate it and we realize we maybe didn't learn it correctly, or like exactly right, and then when we're notating we have to fix all those little kinks.

The score gave me more detail so I could focus more on the details rather than just the movements themselves. I feel like it's more into the body than aesthetics because um I can create more fluidity of movement which makes it a lot more smoother.

We learned this a while ago so we have like an emotional understanding of what it should look like and the score is now like reminding me of the actual positioning and the steps.

[9:21]

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

From open, axial, and selective coding, 7 themes emerged from film clips that the dancers' confirmed represent their experiential embodiments with notation. Next we will explore each of the 7 themes.

Theme 1: Sensing to find cognitive understanding and to write Motif Notation

[Stephanie / Marlene:]

I'm learning, like, how playful the dance is and how it's hard to translate the expression of the playfulness into notation.

I am mostly trained in ballet and I Irish danced for a very long time so my torso is very rigid and straight and I don't ever really move it and I think that's the biggest difference between me and Krissie. She almost always is involved with her torso and I just have limbs. So shape-flow is not something I've ever really felt in my body. We did it academically when we had our Laban class where like you explained what shape-flow was and I said, oh, this is interesting, probably never going to use that. But then watching this I realize, oh, that's what she uses almost all the time, so I have to feel that in my body now if I am going to honor her dancing.

She rolls up and she has a little moment where she wobbles, and I am trying to decide if it's going to be an energy symbol. So, like, a rise in energy where she is alert and aware or if it's going to be a gravity related symbol where she, like, senses the gravity.

Rise in Energy

(Guest and Curran 2008)

Uplift with Gravity

(Guest and Curran 2008)

Light Weight Sensing

(Hackney 2000)

I look at this section and I see this happening and the lowering happening but that looks different in my mind than the way Krissie does it, so I want to change it to make it more accurate.

Like, pull up to, like, go down, like, you're still up but, like, you're sinking.

Because I knew there were things missing but I couldn't quite pinpoint it, um, like for the walking back, um, I needed to loosen up in my ribs and also my head, release my head. So just everything in the axial skeleton I needed to like release to feel Krissie's movement because Krissie is very tall and she has a very long torso so it's easy for her to just move around like that.

After learning that maybe, like, I should loosen the ribs and, like, open it or like flow like have shape-flow just have like more fluidity within the movements. It was a lot easier to understand.

I think it's interesting because I've only, before this I only ever notated anything that like I created. So, it was already in my body and I had a very clear understanding of what I was doing. So, that was challenging. It wasn't challenging to notate the steps, but it was challenging to notate the details and the way that Krissie danced it. Because I know how I dance and I understand, like, what effort qualities I use most, what relationship I have to gravity the most, but I didn't understand Krissie before we started so I had to like embody it.

[12:19]

Theme 2: Sensing to embody from notation

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

Here the dancers seem to shift their learning from sensing and writing to reading and dancing.

[Stephanie and Marlene:]

Because this is the section where she's walking backwards and her arms are floating and I just have it notated so that she walks backwards while her arms

move. I added shape-flow so that there's more ... It comes from her rather than just arms flying.

Krissie is very released and a lot of that is due to her breath. I hold my breath when I dance, so I don't really fold. But if I, like, breathe into the steps, it's more like how Krissie does it. And it also helps with the timing and the musicality. I think it's a lot more relaxed and it embodies the playful "I'm just taking a bath" kind of attitude.

After the turn, you do it too, where we go step point, step point, step point melt. We can't just make it. Right, for now, we're just walking, so we have to, there is kind of an epaulement too that we didn't notate, or I didn't, um.

I got it.

You got it?

Maybe.

Maybe. Um, and there, I have a gravity symbol at the very end when she melts, but I don't have anything on the step points. I am just step pointing.

[14:02]

Theme 3: Revising notation to clarify character styling

I am adding, um, some breath symbols for the part when we step and we point, and we step and we point, we step and we melt, because it takes more time than what I'm doing and it's probably because Krissie's breathing and I'm not.

Here I put an increasing breath symbol because this is where she's about to go into the jumps and she takes a big breath that propels her into the set of jumps.

Theme 4: Describing concepts used to embody qualities

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

They describe key concepts needed to embody their characters.

[Stephanie / Marlene]

For me it was breath, shape-flow, and then, not in this section but throughout the score, from like previous days, it was the buoyancy gravity symbol. She's a very buoyant dancer.

Um for me it was shape-flow and like initiation points um and like spatial like peripheral spatial tension.

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

Marlene revised her score to add nuances that she felt better captured her character.

[Stephanie / Marlene]

I put another breath theme here because this is another place where she poses in quotes. And it's just a big breath that she takes that propels her into the next set of jumps. So I should probably change this to an increasing breath. Here I have a breath theme because this is where she is posed and waiting.

So right here I have to use shape-flow especially in my torso as I'm walking back but there also needs to be breath to free up the torso. And then here there is breath because it's a nice pause, and then the jumps have a level of buoyancy. And then here's some sustained time and then four buoyancy, breath and more breath.

[15:58]

Before: Working on steps and positions

After: Working with shape-flow and breath

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

Marlene showcases the nuances she explores with shape-flow and breath, and the patterns of yield, push, reach, pull, to capture the release of her character's spine, chest, and neck.

Before: Working on patterns of arms and legs

After: Working with yield, push, reach, pull

Stephanie added qualities to give nuances to her character's score.

[Stephanie:]

In the score I decided when we initiate from the elbow to do an arm gesture upwards I think that Shape-Flow fits here because you're initiating from the ribs. Here like right before we do the runs into the large *sissones*, I chose to do strong weight and breath. You have to initiate with your breath in order to get further and more deeply grounded.

For this section we start off with an arm gesture, so it's like shape-flow. So, you're going to want to move the ribs and then you initiate with the distal ends in order to like lean into gravity and like spring off into three chugs and you're going to like use momentum to like bring the turn around and fall into gravity. So, you're gonna like, there's a sense of like just giving into gravity, but then you're gonna like release and then you're gonna when you run you're gonna have to like use whatever you just used from the little take off and then you're running and you're gonna jump and then you pause and there's a sense of like sustainment.

[17:41]

Before: Working with Space

After: Working with Shaping

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

Stephanie showcases the nuances she explores with shape-flow and gravity as she falls and releases.

[music plays]

The dancers appear to accept new movement possibilities. We noticed how their research processes seem to change over time as well.

[18:00]

Often used LOD teaching approach:

Sensing

Observing

Reflecting

Identifying

Interpreting

Notating

Creating

(Heiland 2023)

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

Language of Dance educators often explore literacy processes in this order. Rather than start with Sensing, Observing, and Reflecting, we asked the dancers to start with Observing, Identifying, and Notating. The dancers then developed the order that worked best for them.

Marlene's early investigative research approach

Marlene's later investigative research approach

For Marlene, her approach started with Observing and Identifying. She seemed to begin Notating immediately. Sensing seemed to be used very little at first. After Marlene has sketched the score with general ideas, Observing, Sensing, and Reflecting become primary literacy processes as she appears to become more

embodied and has time to gain understanding of the movement. While Sensing seemed to become more pronounced, Observing seems to remain her key research approach in this study.

Stephanie's early investigative research approach

Stephanie's later investigative research approach

For Stephanie, her approach starts with Observing and Identifying. She seems to use Reflecting before Notating. Sensing seemed to be used very little at first as she is focusing on precision of concepts and writing. After Stephanie has finished mapping the details in her score, she shifts her process to Interpreting and Sensing to find ways to ground and deepen her embodied and intellectual understanding of the dance. While Sensing changed the most over time, Reflecting remains her key research approach in this study.

[19:13]

Theme 5: Focusing on relating, shaping, and partnership

As the dancers progress through the dance, they shift from a focus on themselves to a focus on relating to each other.

[Stephanie / Marlene:]

We didn't have a relationship when we put it together the first time. We were just two solo's dancing.

Yeah.

On the same stage, doing similar.

I think it goes back to when we first notated though because we didn't notate together, we notated separately.

Yeah.

So, it was like we were notating solos, and the only time I really paid attention to what you were doing in the video was when we were, like, dancing together like we were making physical contact.

Right, yeah.

And there are a lot of like areas where we should probably add, like, an awareness or nearness because I have like one in this whole section when you pass by me.

It was quite difficult, like, maintaining ...

Yeah

... the dance and like the integrity of the relationships when we're not really relating to each other.

We figured out our spatial relationship.

Yes.

Um, mostly by watching the videos we would see, like, where we are actually where we are spatially.

Yeah.

Like physically, spatially and then also like how do our movements relate to each other because there are points where like she goes down and I go up and then we switch or like I'm in stillness and she's moving really fast or she's like moving really slow and I have to be really fast and so we had to like line those up and make them make sense to each other.

It's like a conversation.

Yeah.

So, we're not talking over each other or we're both not just sitting in silence.

We are relating. We start this dance relating, which is a very big thing throughout the second dance. What are you doing Stephanie?

Um, I am trusting Marlene to take my weight and so there's a sense of like supporting.

Um, in this position I continue to support or like there's a sense of support given, and, um, put some weight on her while still trying to act casual in a sense.

Like the tone of the piece is pedestrianish. It's about relating.

And I have to drag her. There is a heavier weight to this dance.

It's very hard, It's very physically strenuous to hold these poses. It's also hard because we didn't notate how to get into them, we just notated the end pose.

Yeah.

[21:56]

Theme 6: Analyzing to create a list of key concepts

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

After completing the notation, the dancers talked about the concepts that were key to notating the characters and their movements.

[Marlene:]

So, there's a control of the breath and it's just constantly increasing and decreasing.

Bernardet et al. 2019

Laban and Lawrence 1947

Maletic 1987

[Stephanie:]

Throughout this dance, there are points where we have weight sensing and there's a lot of rhythmic things happening with weight going down, but then as the weight is going down in the lower half of the body, the upper extremities are often staccato and light with weight going up.

[Marlene:]

Within the dance there's also a sense of relating um whether it's awareness or there's contact or even supporting, especially in the partnering sections, where, um, one dancer is sitting on top of the other.

Guest 2000

Guest and Curran 2008

[Stephanie:]

Flopping, sounds like a bad word, flopping, like, very heavy weight.

[Stephanie / Marlene:]

Yeah.

In the chugs, especially most evident in like the step touches.

There's a sense of rhythm state just generally, so there's a sense of time and light weight, um, present throughout the dance.

[23:26]

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

Marlene reflects on her experience with writing notation to learn a dance.

Theme 7: Experiencing body-mind connection

[Marlene:]

It feels more comfortable, more solidified. Like, mentally and physically, like there's no disconnect between the mind and the body. It's all one unit.

[23:45]

[Teresa Heiland / Mandi Taylor:]

To summarize, the seven themes that emerged from the study reveal how Motif Notation supported these dancers.

Seven Themes in This Study

- 1: Sensing for understanding to write Motif Notation
- 2: Sensing to embody from notation
- 3: Revising notation to clarify character styling
- 4: Describing concepts used to embody qualities
- 5: Shaping, relating, and partnering
- 6: Analyzing to create a list of key concepts
- 7: Focusing mind-body connection

Sensing for understanding

Sensing to embody

Revising for style

Describing qualities

Shaping for partner

Analyzing concepts

And focusing body-mind connection

Marlene and Stephanie commented that they were not comfortable with jazz dance, but after notating the dance they seem pretty comfortable with this style of jazz. How did notating a dance encourage that to happen? How does score-writing inform embodiment?

This study suggests that the integrated experience of dancing, imagining, and Motif notating deepens cognitive, social-emotional and psychomotor learning.

Writing with Motif Notation while learning a dance supports development of dance skills these dancers felt they often overlooked or avoided in their prior dance training. This alternative approach to learning dance supports the concept of the dancer as a researcher, one who investigates in order to clarify meaning and improve embodiment.

[music plays with dancing]

[25:25]

Author Bios

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Original *Calgon* (1996) footage used with permission by Teresa Heiland and Krissie Marty

The Motif Notation systems used in this film are from the Language of Dance® and Laban Bartenieff Movement Analysis

This video was recorded with an iPhone 6

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Teresa Heiland, Mandi Taylor, Marlene Jensen, Stephanie Morikawa 2022 CC BY

[25:47]

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