

Rethinking Language: Exhaustive Translation in Dance as an Inclusive Creative Tool in Dance Education

By Sydney Erlikh & Silva Laukkanen

Synopsis in Plain Language

Our presentation looks at how dance language can be more inclusive. Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) are tools that can be used in addition to or instead of speech. These can include symbols, pictures, text to speech. There are many forms but our presentation looks at a Simpson Board which uses Laban Notation and Boardmaker symbols. The Notation system used on the Simpson Board and Boardmaker are codified symbols. Laban Notation is used to record dance scores in writing. We demonstrate how the Simpson board invented by Lisa Simpson, Adam Benjamin, and Johnathan Thrift can be broken down and taught in pieces but can also be used in choreographic workshops. For this, you need a dance maker, an assistant or a translator who speaks the instructions to the users, and the dancers. We also demonstrate how Boardmaker symbols can be used to create boards for dance teaching, making, and feedback. The presentation includes two videos, one of a workshop, and a dance made from an AAC board.

Big Question-

How can we make sure that our language is inclusive when we choreograph or teach? How can we be truly inclusive and give agency for all, if our language isn't accessible? Some basic systems, like choosing the words in which we teach like from walk around the room, to move around the room. Instead of stand up, we use language like come to the highest level available for you when we say find a stillness we say whatever stillness means to you. These are easy solutions but how can we create systems to communicate more complex dance language, so that we can include more people in the process of choreographing, teaching, and describing movement.

Dance has its own language which is uniquely defined by the culture and environment where it is created. We demonstrate how moving, sharing, and analyzing different forms of Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) can expand creative and inclusive practices. Applying disability culture and aesthetics we examine how movement choices can bring out each dancers' individual shine. Creating a practice that allows dancers to learn the artistic power of choosing our own way.

Background of the Work-

Two years ago we had a discussion about the different ways that dance language has been exclusive when in dance classes. Dance terminology that focuses on western classical dance can be an access barrier to people who were not allowed to study dance. We found in a few workshops that American Sign Language Interpreters might not be able to translate these codified terms. Differences in dance training caused confusion when describing a movement.

The most successful moments in teaching dance to a diverse group generally included using AAC.

It's important to understand how AAC can be related to disability aesthetics since dance is often tied directly to the culture's aesthetics. The late disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers defined disability aesthetics as, "disability aesthetics seeks to emphasize the presence of different bodies and minds in the tradition of aesthetic representation, that tradition concerned most precisely with the appearance of the beautiful". (p.542-543). Siebers claims, "this goal may take two forms: (1) to establish disability as a critical framework that questions the presuppositions underlying definitions of aesthetic production and appreciation; (2) to establish disability as a significant value in itself, worthy of future development" (p.543). Our works towards Seiber's second goal in our dance teaching practice. Promoting disability aesthetics in dance education can expand creative expression by using AAC. The idea of exhaustive translation was formed by applying Seiber's goal in the dance classroom. This looks at the essential meaning and force behind that individual movement. This force is then translated into different bodies. It works from the position that bodies are different every day and movement will vary based on their needs that day.

Simpson Board-

Teaching dance at the highest special needs school in the Austin Independent school district in 2014 I wanted to create a space where I could give each student the agency for creative decision making. A goal for the dance class aligned with the teachers as independence and decision making were integral parts of almost every student's IEP. I started researching tools that would help me to reach my goal and go beyond choosing between this and that movement, direction, or action in dance class and found the Simpson Board.

Simpson board was co-created in 1995 by Lisa Simpson and Adam Benjamin who are both UK based choreographers and teachers. The research that started the Simpson Board came from the idea of how people with multiple disabilities could be more fully involved in thinking about, understanding, and creating dances. When Adam watched how Lisa, who has cerebral palsy and uses Augmentative Alternative Communication, created pictures with stones. He thought, "Can this be done with bodies". That's how Simpson Board became the tool for the freedom to select, organize, and craft movement of bodies in space.

The Simpson Board; a flexible A3 sized laminated board covered in the words, diagrams, and symbols needed to create a dance. It allows the user, choreographer, to indicate using their eyes or by pointing where, on a virtual stage, they would like the dancers to go and what sort of moves they should make. An assistant, translator, who sits alongside the user, reading the Board then speaks these instructions aloud to the dancers. The choreographer can only use their eyes or pointing as a way of communicating no matter their ability to speak or not. This draws away

from the idea that this is a special tool only meant for disabled choreographers but it is a way to draw sharp focus, be precise, and use accurate language when creating.

Actions are in **yellow**

Movement quality **purple**

Space/direction **green**

Numeric **red**

Object body/chair white

Other communication **blue**

When the choreographer is indicating the two masks this turns the colors into emotions. Degrees of emotion can be indicated by using the color gradient at the right of the board. Later this year Lisa Simpson will teach a virtual workshop on the Simpson Board. By using Laban Notation the board allows dancers to cross-language barriers since it focuses on a dance notation system. These symbols can be taught to students through scaffolding and then applied to the whole board.

Boardmaker Boards-

Thinking about how Augmentative Alternative Communication can be used as a creative tool. AAC is a tool that can be used in addition or instead of speech. These can include symbols, pictures, text to speech. There are many forms but my experience with AAC had been using two codified forms called Boardmaker or symbol stix. As a classroom teacher, I made boards on my student's devices to take to Art class. I wanted to try these in dance classes. I am currently making and remaking different boards for choreography, improvisation, feedback, and others to be used as creative and educational tools.

Using AAC in multiple settings and promoting understanding of its benefits allows for increased creativity and mobility of people and ideas. Zisk and Dalton cite one of the current barriers to using AAC is "attitudes about who AAC is useful for" (2). Due to perceptions that AAC is only for non-verbal people with disabilities, AAC has been stigmatized in its use within the broader society. It is perceived as a language that is not capable of making meaning since the people who use it are considered incapable of ascribing meaning due to their alternative communication. Using AAC in dance contradicts these ideas and acknowledges its creative capacity.

With this in mind, AAC can be used in dance classes in multiple ways. First, it can be used as a creative tool, similar to the explanation above: as a guiding tool, and as a feedback tool. Boards are brought to class to help pairs create movements. This is useful in multiple ways. It provides perceived parameters of where to begin creating movement and dancers make their own choices rather than be guided by others' expectations. These symbols can also be used as an improvisational score and as a dance score that stays posted for the group during performances.

AAC can also be used to create a pieces. In a dance for film, a choreographed movement phrase was then paired with selected symbols for this phrase. For this project, there were no words on the images which were sent to international dancers in the inclusive dance community. These dancers then filmed their phrases and sent them back to be combined in a film.

Questions for application-

- How can these tools support you in creating work?
- In what ways are these tools useful?
- How does this tool engage learners and deepen understanding?
- How does it feel to create movement from symbols?

Suggestions for teaching-

- Acknowledge students creative choices
- Promote students listening to the body when moving and creating.
- Think about what aesthetics are being promoted in educational materials and samples
- Encourage students to think outside of right or wrong

References-

Benjamin, Adam. "The Simpson Board." Unpublished,(2006)

Siebers, Tobin. "Disability Aesthetics." *Pmla*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2005, pp. 542-546.

Zisk, Alyssa Hillary, and Elizabeth Dalton. "Augmentative and Alternative Communication for Speaking Autistic Adults: Overview and Recommendations." *Autism in Adulthood* (2019).