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## Embodying History through Katherine Dunham's *Choros I*: A Dance Literacy Model for Teaching Labanotation

by Rachael Riggs Leyva

As a symbol system for recording and reading movement on paper, Labanotation has potential as a tool for developing dance literacy beyond fluency in a notation system: viewing and analyzing movement for particular movement concepts; decoding Labanotation symbols for translating into movement; recognizing patterns and structure in dance scores and choreography; and critically analyzing and interpreting choreography. Callow (2006) emphasizes that learning activities that teach visual literacy should be enjoyable and culturally relevant to effectively engage students (p. 9). Most dance students do not encounter Labanotation until they reach college, at which point, they are highly skilled movers; movement content of beginning-level Labanotation readings are not often at the physical difficulty level of students. It is like using early elementary school books to teach adults to how to read. When reading materials do not stimulate full-bodied dancing or relate to students' dance knowledge, in my experience, they become disinterested in Labanotation.

Additionally, teaching Labanotation within a university setting has historically emphasized reading fluency through exposing students to a variety of short, non-related scores from multiple styles and cultures. In an unpublished handout from the Teacher Certification Course in Labanotation (TCC) on developing a Labanotation theory course, Odette Blum (1991) writes,

People enjoy learning excerpts from dances that they have heard about, dances of different cultures, excerpts from well-known choreographers' works. This provides a variety of styles and traditions that most dance students do not have the opportunity to experience. In our multi-cultural society it is important to include dances of cultures [sic] which have contributed to the traditions of this country. It is a crucial responsibility of teachers in all areas to broaden the cultural knowledge of students thereby helping to make them more open to, and understanding of, differences among people. (n.p.)

Access to different cultural dances and repertory is, undoubtedly, a major benefit to teaching and learning Labanotation. However, as students change movement styles from class to class, *Labanotation theoretical concepts* build cumulatively, but *movement content* between scores does not. With emphasis placed on reading existing scores, opportunities for writing and notating scores—writing their own choreography, or movement of their own interest—are limited. While reading dance scores from multiple styles and cultures offers students multicultural movement perspectives, the emphasis of the *course* is on developing system fluency, particularly in reading. There is little room for critical analysis of the notation as a knowledge system, for student production of scores/writing practice, or for engagement with additional practical applications of notation such as reconstruction or documentation.

As an instructor and as a graduate student of Literacy Studies at The Ohio State University (OSU), I began theorizing about a transformed model for teaching a Labanotation theory course that focused on not just system fluency, but on developing dance literacy through reading *and* writing. This model works from a view of literacy (Tannenbaum, 2005) espousing “analytical and comprehension skills applicable to various texts” (p.127) – and literate *practices* – interpretation of text, critical analysis of text, and reflection on learning process (p.126). A dance literacy-based model for teaching Labanotation focuses on student production of scores, learning cumulative excerpts of choreography from score, developing quantitative analysis skills, and encouraging critical analysis and interpretation of dance works. In this model, influenced by the revised TCC Labanotation-across-the-curriculum model, system fluency is a by-product of engaging with dance literacy rather than the end-goal for the course.

This particular dance literacy model is framed by a single choreographic work that builds throughout the course as a repertory experience. Students engage in interpretation by staging and learning the choreography, fostering discussion about how choreographic meaning is changed in new contexts and through reproduction. By extension, the meaning of a dance is changed when its context is changed: who is performing it, why it is being staged, where, what is now going on in the world? Cumulative movement content promotes longer-term investment because learning “real” choreography is meaningful to students who in turn embody history through physical practice. In this course model, practical application activities engage students in literate acts of reading and critically analyzing choreography and scores, composing and writing/notating their own movement whereby analyzing their movement thinking, and reflecting on their individual process of learning choreography from score and dancing it in a new context.



In 2009, I began experimenting with my model in a beginning-level Labanotation course at OSU. This course revolved around a sizeable excerpt of choreography from *Choros I* by Katherine Dunham, for which we received educational use permission from the Dunham estate. Standing on the shoulders of notation pedagogy giants such as Blum, I kept an important aspect of beginning-level Labanotation theory pedagogy pioneered in this department: we began the course using motif description with flexible uses of notation and moved toward the structured, 3-line staff notation as the semester progressed. Motif readings were extrapolated from the structured Labanotation score, so that students could dance around and engage with movement themes in the choreography before they began to learn specific choreographic phrases. Significant portions of the final exam included performing the excerpt of the choreography, and writing a self-reflective essay on the process of going from page to performance, including research and interpretation.

**Katherine Dunham in *Choros* costume.**

© Missouri History Museum,  
St. Louis.

In this dance literacy-focused course, the students acted as dramaturgs and staggers while they were learning the basics of reading a score—examining sites of production, the choreographic text itself, and modalities of meaning-making. Students broke into groups to research creative and social/historical contexts of Dunham, her philosophies, and choreographic and anthropological work, which were presented to the class for discussion. The students approached reading both the notation score and the choreography of *Choros I* asking: What were Dunham’s influences for creating the dance? What was going on in the world at the time of creation that may have affected Dunham or influenced her artistic beliefs? How, if at all, is this shown through the choreography? We used writing exercises and discussion frameworks for critical interpretation (Lavender and Oliver, 1993), encouraging students to create their own informed readings of *Choros I* as they learned it from Labanotation score.

Midway through the semester, I led the students through intertextual reading and discussion of *Choros I* using images, word clouds, and videos of performance, in order to foster the attitude of “the more we know, the more we see” (Natharius, 2004, p. 241). Juxtaposing cultural and historical information about and images representing Brazil and cultural icon Carmen Miranda with images from *Choros I* created interesting links and potential choreographic meanings. For example, although we were not able to discover whether Dunham specifically studied Brazilian *choro* music, learning about its pastiche of cultural roots enhanced possible connections between the music and choreography, and the personas of the dance’s contrasting movement styles. We knew from the Labanotation score that Dunham did not travel to Brazil before choreographing *Choros I*, but we did know that she was an anthropologist who incorporated her research into several of her artistic endeavors. Knowing the year when she choreographed *Choros I*, and that her composer Vidaco Gogliano previously worked with Carmen Miranda, we wondered what sort of exposure and influence the importation of Latin American music and dance into American popular culture had on Dunham while choreographing *Choros I*.

We viewed two videotaped performances of *Choros I* performed by the Alvin Ailey Dance Company and by the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, interpreting denotative and connotative features to enhance our intertextual understanding of our reconstruction. By prompting the students to specifically consider the contextual information and images presented, including Dunham’s coaching notes about the contrasting “big house”/quadrille and “slave quarters”/samba movement character styles in the dance (Dunham, 1941, v), students were guided through an exercise in how to look and interpret. For example, one student interpreted the Dunham Company performance as less formal, more social, and more “authentic” culturally. When asked what influenced her interpretation, she described this performance as being less precise spatially with the dancers’ limbs, having a more excited energy than the Ailey Company performance, less uprightness in the dancers’ torsos, and more free motion in the hips and shoulders. Many students agreed that the Ailey Company performance read as ballet-trained dancers trying to execute African-Diaspora-based social dance, and the Dunham Company performance read as less technically skilled, even sloppy in their eyes, but somehow more “realistic.” We saw how the context of performance, in this case who the performers were, influenced the performance and our reading of the choreography.

Using visual information from the images and videos as well as contextual knowledge students began making their interpretations of *Choros I*. They discovered how their statements revealed assumptions they had about both ballet-trained dancers and dancers trained in folk or ethnic forms. They perceived the folk-like dancers as untrained and natural, and therefore authentic, even though those dancers were highly trained. Additional points raised and interpretations made by students included: whether this dance was meant to represent actual Brazilian culture or whether it was meant as an artistic interpretation of general interests in African-Diaspora; Brazilian culture was referenced primarily through the costuming and less through the movement; the dance could easily be interpreted as a theatrical appropriation and stereotyping of another culture, depending on how it is performed; and whether Dunham’s anthropological background and experience with other African-Diaspora cultures and dance forms makes *Choros I* celebratory and appreciative, rather than stereotypical or exploitative. The discussion ended with a charge that students keep these ideas and issues in mind as we continued interpreting, reading, and performing the dance from score during the remainder of the quarter.

In this course, students completed a Notator-Ethnographer project, creating four scores in motif and/or structured form to record exercises from their technique classes. The Notator-Ethnographer project provided students the opportunity to act as movement ethnographers/dance anthropologists à la Katherine Dunham while simultaneously producing their own notation scores. Art educator Kerry Freedman (2003) proposes students engage in producing visuals (in our case scores), so that conceptual development and critical thinking in relation to art be taught early on with technical skills. Under this approach, students learn how to analyze and produce works of art/dances, so they can be critical consumers, giving them the wider skills that can be applied as dance teachers, choreographers and performers, and audiences. In the Notator-Ethnographer project, with permission of their current technique teachers, students became participant-observers studying and documenting not just movement phrases but also the cultural norms of their technique classes.

When students are just beginning to engage with Labanotation or Motif Description, encoding movement into symbols requires a very open view of system (Heiland, 2006, p. 185). As students progressed, they moved from pure motif scores into hybrid motif-structured and structured scores. In these scores, they began to record more specifically, but incorporated motif description elements for movement aspects for which they had not yet learned the advanced notation conventions. Students worked with their own preferred styles and ways of moving without being limited to using movement that is easily recorded in beginning-level structured staff theory. Because they were notator/ethnographers, they also engaged in quantitative analysis of movement, looking at structure, sequence, and conceptual specificity. They learned how scores are made and as beginning-level students, experienced the multiple subjective decisions in the process, typically reserved for advanced notation students: first, what kind of movement is even chosen for recording; what aspects of the movement are chosen to record; how and what to represent and encode in notation; and even how the notation communicates conceptual thinking about movement intention.

If we are not trying to teach system fluency, then what else can we learn through Labanotation? In my transformed notation pedagogy model, I turn to dance literacy. Labanotation is a dance-specific way of organizing and categorizing, thinking about movement, movement concepts, bodies, and time; it is a dance-specific form of discourse. In this dance literacy model, beginning-level students engaged with reconstruction and documentation issues that are typically reserved for advanced students and notators. This model reaches for teaching Labanotation beyond learning the ‘ins-and-outs’ of the system and gaining fluency in reading symbols; it expands the Labanotation-across-the-curriculum model of the TCC by more explicitly bringing the curriculum—history, composition, criticism, technique—into the Labanotation theory classroom. Since 2009, I have continued to experiment with additional ways of focusing my notation teaching on developing various aspects of dance literacy; the embodying history through repertory model is only one of many possibilities.

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## Billie Mahoney reports from Kansas City, December, 2016:



**Brian Seibert (L) and Billie Mahoney**

New York Times Dance Critic, Brian Seibert contacted me recently saying he would be in Kansas City to promote “What the Eye Hears”, his book on the history of tap dance that was coming out in paper back. He would be appearing at the Kansas City American Jazz Museum. Not only did he ask if I could get the local tap dance community to attend, but also requested that I interview him on my TV program, DANCE ON. He sent me a copy of his book, which is a very good history that reads like he was there – although he wasn’t even born yet. But I was there, and although there were a few omissions, I do appear on one page! Turns out tappers here had bought the hardcover edition a year ago when it was first released and were very excited to meet him.

December 15<sup>th</sup> was the big day. I recorded three guests for DANCE ON before the main event at night. It was arranged for the Executive Director of the Kansas City Ballet to show Brian our unique building. The Todd Bolender Center, where I teach tap and we do the shows. Kansas City’s leading tap dancers, The McFadden Bros., as well as jazz musicians, KC’s top jazz disc jockey, and members of my tap company came to the event. I coordinated a jam session to follow Brian’s talk and film presentation. Brian put on his tap shoes and was delighted to jump in and show his skills. He is an excellent tap dancer and really had a lot of fun, which should provide him with good memories of Kansas City.

After the DNB Library Newsletter publication of my articles about “How I Got Hooked on Labanotation,” colleagues from long ago and from around the world have contacted me. I even heard from Henrik Neubauer who, in the 1960s, had come from Yugoslavia to study at the Bureau and took private jazz and tap lessons from me. The world of dance is a remarkable place.