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# Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- **High-Impact Possibilities for Student/Faculty Collaborative Labanotation Projects**

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## High-Impact Possibilities for Student/Faculty Collaborative Labanotation Projects by Julie Brodie

We know it and understand it on an intuitive level: sustained learning experiences that are active and collaborative increase student engagement and success. I would argue that these “high-impact” projects or learning environments are also highly gratifying and informative for the instructors guiding them. While perhaps a relatively new buzz-word in education circles and not always purposefully included in curricula, high-impact experiences are not a new phenomenon—a fact that I can attest to as first a student and then a teacher of Labanotation. The Association of American Colleges and Universities reports that high-impact experiences can take many different forms, including first-year seminars, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative learning, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service/community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses (Kuh 20-21). This article presents several variations on high-impact notation projects that my students and I have embarked upon in the hope that it will inspire other such collaborations. These projects have typically fallen under the categories of collaborative, undergraduate research in the fulfillment of a capstone course, with each providing what is seen as the basis of high-impact experiences: “opportunities to integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge that are essential to deep, meaningful learning” (Kuh 27).

I first studied Labanotation as a graduate student at the University of Illinois. Thrilled to discover this language of dance that satisfied both the analytical and artistic sides of my nature, I completed the elementary and intermediate coursework under the tutelage of Professor Rebecca Nettle-Fiol. After doing the advanced course through the Ohio State University summer program, I was eager to continue learning. Professor Nettle-Fiol took me on as her assistant in staging *Swing*, a piece choreographed by Judy Allen.

These many years later, I think back on that project as a highlight of my graduate work. I felt energized and challenged in all the best ways to be entrusted with reading pieces of the dance and teaching the material to my peers. I recognized what a privilege it was to work so closely with my professor, and I loved taking notes on the coaching process with Allen and making suggestions for corrections in the score. To some degree, I attribute this experience with instilling in me, or at least cementing, my life-long fascination with Labanotation and its many applications.

After becoming certified as a notation teacher, I implemented a course in Labanotation at Franklin and Marshall College. One of my first students, Allison Smith (now Parsley) excelled in the course and eventually earned a Hackman Scholarship—a college grant to support her studying with me over one summer, assisting me with reading Helen Tamiris’ *Negro Spirituals*, and staging it the following fall semester. Allison acted as lead reader for specific parts, including “Swing Low,” which she also performed.

Allison recalls of this experience:

Working on reading and staging *Negro Spirituals* was one of the most profound experiences I have ever had in my dance career. It was the first time that I truly felt connected to the history of a dance piece that I was learning. Learning the dance through Labanotation allowed me to more fully connect with the work and I felt as though I could more accurately follow the thought processes of its choreographer, Helen Tamiris, by following the notation.

Years later, a similar project emerged at my current institution, Kenyon College. At Kenyon, dance majors are required to complete a senior exercise—an in-depth project of the student's choosing. Delaney Lowman had taken the elementary Labanotation course with me and wanted to do a staging for her capstone experience, so we embarked on a year-long plan. She completed the intermediate coursework as an independent study and we began preparation for staging Doris Humphrey's *The Shakers* together. This was a fortuitous situation, as material from the score could be utilized in teaching the intermediate concepts. Delaney assisted with reading and staging, and she wound up taking on the challenging canons in the "Nines" and "Tens" sections on her own (Humphrey 152-169). When Odette Blum came to coach the staging, she was impressed that a student read and taught the timing with such accuracy.



**The cast of *The Shakers* with Odette Blum (fourth person from right) and Delaney Lowman (in black zipper jacket)**

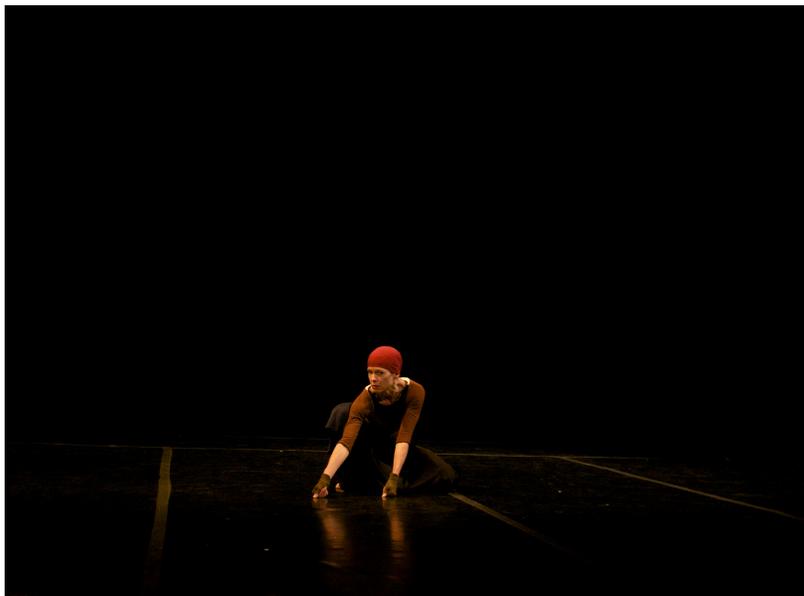
These initial projects established a basic framework. Students further their knowledge of Labanotation through independent study, and they apply this information to the reading of a specific score. The students also work collaboratively with me on the staging of the piece, and as part of this process they research the historical context of the dance being recreated to deepen their understanding of the artist, the time period and the style. Typically they are assigned sections to work on individually and they assist me with other parts. I am present and checking their work as we progress through the score. Staging pieces requires students to work in a leadership capacity with dancers, usually fellow students. Always, the students engage with Labanotation specialists brought in to coach the pieces. In the past two years these projects have taken on some interesting twists.

Gabby Mitchell's 2015 senior exercise was similar to Delaney's but with one major distinction—she set the notation on me. As with Delaney, Gabby wanted to work with dancers on a performance, and her interest was in reading, teaching, and coaching notation rather than choreographing. This time the goal was to work with *Tenant of the Street* by Eve Gentry, and the plan evolved such that Gabby would stage the solo piece on me. This project wound up having many complexities worth describing.

The role-reversal inherent in this project was both challenging and rewarding, as it led to a shift in the usual student and professor dynamic. Near the beginning of the staging process, both of us tended to revert to our established relationship. It was difficult for Gabby not to rely on and defer to me when she did not feel confident in her own abilities. At the same time, I struggled with balancing being Gabby's teacher and checking her reading while still giving her the authority to teach the dance. Initially Gabby also struggled with the tendency to go straight from the page to teaching, skipping the step of putting the movement into her own body. Throughout the process, Gabby discovered the vital importance of feeling the movement in her own body so she could fully explain it to me. This allowed for more effective and kinesthetically satisfying teaching sessions. As we got deeper into the reading of the dance I became more immersed in my role as performer, and Gabby became more assertive in her role as stager.

Gabby not only grew in her ability to interpret the notation, she also navigated working with the two coaches for *Tenant of the Street*, Trisha Bauman and Mary Anne Santos Newhall. I learned of Gentry's piece from Bauman, one of my instructors in the Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) certification program. Bauman had suggested I might consider doing *Tenant*, as she felt the intensity of the piece benefitted from performance by a mature artist. Bauman had performed the work herself in France with Compagnie Labkine, under the direction of Jean-Marc Piquemal and Noelle Simonet. Mary Anne Santos Newhall is in charge of the Eve Gentry Foundation. She learned *Tenant* from Eve Gentry herself, and Mary Corey notated Newhall's performance of the piece in 1998 (Gentry vi). Newhall coaches all stagings of *Tenant*, including the one Bauman had participated in with Compagnie Labkine in 2008.

These two coaches have very distinct approaches that Gabby learned from as she watched, listened, took notes and asked questions. Bauman utilized our common language of movement analysis heavily in coaching the work. Newhall's coaching emphasized the internal narrative of the work as well as the physical specifics that she has been entrusted with preserving. Gabby had to take ownership of communicating with the coaches in a different way than in previous projects, as I was on the floor dancing, not sitting next to her as a co-stager. For me, the entire process was a reminder about the challenges of dancing in an historic piece where the performer is being asked to stay true to the original form while bringing their own artistry to the work. It was also a learning experience in terms of experiencing (first hand!) effective tools staggers and coaches can utilize in addressing this challenge.



**Julie Brodie performing *Tenant of the Street*, choreographed by Eve Gentry**

Brianne Presley's 2015 senior thesis staging of *Prey*, choreographed by Bebe Miller and notated by Valarie Williams, wound up being unique in its own way. Brianne wanted to work with a contemporary piece that would challenge perceptions about notation being limited to historical works. The score for *Prey* is complex, especially the partnering. We spent hours piecing together individual's movements and how they connected to their partner's roles. In other sections, multiple groups perform different material simultaneously. I entrusted Brianne with reading sections as I worked on others. It was truly a partnership in staging. Brianne also assumed the responsibility of organizing rehearsals and ran one rehearsal a week on her own—reviewing, clarifying or completing material we had set the previous session. In the second semester, I was abroad, and *Prey* was selected for presentation at the American College Dance Association regional conference. Brianne ran all of these rehearsals and also taught a replacement dancer one of the roles successfully in my absence. She recalls of this experience:

Staging *Prey* with Julie Brodie was the capstone of my career at Kenyon College. The process for staging was educational and inspiring. Throughout the semester we saw our cast learn and fully embody the movement, bringing the score to life. I am also beyond grateful for the unique and incredible relationships I built throughout the process with Julie and our cast, as well as Bebe Miller. One of my favorite memories is of Julie and I trying to figure out a partner section in the score and being twisted up like a human pretzel as our cast

of Julie and I trying to figure out a partner section in the score and being twisted up like a human pretzel as our cast watched and laughed with us. Staging *Prey* with Julie was an unforgettable experience and continues to be pivotal to my work after graduating from Kenyon College.



**Kenyon College dancers performing *Prey* by Bebe Miller**

George Kuh theorizes that high impact experiences are effective because students are required to devote considerable time and effort to a substantive task while interacting with faculty and peers, and the work is usually accompanied with significant and frequent feedback (Kuh 24-27). All of these notation projects met these criteria. The students invested in one or two semesters of individual study and research under my direct advisement. They worked collaboratively with me, and usually with peers, in a leadership capacity. Their work was ultimately “vetted” through coaching sessions with professionals in the field, and the projects culminated in public performances.

Objective outcomes for these students include improved reading, staging, and coaching abilities. More subjectively, I witnessed how working with peers (or me!) in a leadership role develops confidence and leads to a heightened sense of responsibility and investment in these projects. I observed and guided these students through moments of conflict and frustration, and many times I learned from how they worked with each other. The students developed a strong and passionate commitment to Labanotation and to the absolute necessity of preserving our dance legacy through this medium. It also has become apparent to me that the dancers in our program are excited to perform in these notation projects when their peers are involved in the reading and teaching.

Gabby reflects on this experience:

Working on this project with Julie during my senior year has definitely left an impact on me that goes way beyond the dance studio. The biggest lesson for me was learning to take the reins of my own work and be confident in its outcome. When Julie and I started I was hesitant to tell my professor, someone who had so much more experience than I, what to do and to give corrections. I was uncomfortable taking control and being the leader, but Julie pushed me out of my comfort zone in the best way possible. For the project to truly work, I had to be confident in my reading of the piece and my ability to convey that to someone else. I am in law school now and that lesson of taking control of my work has helped me through some tough situations and I believe it will make me a better lawyer.

As far as longer-term impact, Allison went on to be certified in Language of Dance (LOD) and ultimately used the LOD material in creating a dance for her Masters Concert at NYU. She then attended The Ohio State University and received her MFA in Dance in Directing from the Score, crafting her thesis on how Labanotation can accurately capture an artist's style. Delaney and Brianne both did internships at the Dance Notation Bureau after graduation. While there, Brianne assisted with teaching the intermediate material, and she hopes to continue staging pieces in graduate school for dance. She also plans to develop methods for utilizing notation for creative purposes in her choreography. Gabby attended the 2015 ICKL conference in Tours, France where she co-presented with me about the process of staging *Tenant*. She is incorporating dance and notation into her legal studies, as she was recently accepted to the Intellectual Property Law Journal. She plans to focus her research on Labanotation and copyright.

Allison says of this collaborative staging experience:

The lasting impact of this project was that I decided that I HAD to have Labanotation be a part of my dance career. In my current teaching at Mamaroneck High School in Mamaroneck, NY, I use Labanotation and Language of Dance (LOD) with all of my students. I believe that the LOD work is an excellent entry point into choreography for dancers and non-dancers alike and I have been able to share my love of Labanotation with my students who never knew there was a way to read and write dance. It forces my students to think about, analyze, and discuss dance in ways they never even thought possible. Their choreography is richer, more intense, and more unique because they have been exposed to LOD and Labanotation. And, it brings literacy into the dance classroom!!

Happily, high-impact experiences are being more purposefully integrated into curricula, with a focus on making them available to all students. The recommendation is that every student has at least two high-impact experiences during the course of their college career (Kuh 29). Using notation projects as capstone experiences is an opportunity to get our students deeply engaged with Labanotation (and dance history), it can make Labanotation more visible and respected in the eyes of students, faculty, and administrators, and it lends additional rigor and credibility to the dance curriculum. From my perspective, the bonds created while working intimately with students is one of the most gratifying aspects of my job. Being able to share my passion for notation with the next generation, learning from our trials and successes, and hearing about their ongoing notation pursuits inspires me, keeps me current, and gives me hope for the future of notation.

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