

Learning Analysis: *The Dance Technique of Lester Horton*

Revolutionary and famed mother of modern dance, Isadora Duncan, once described dancing as, “the highest intelligence in the freest body.” If dance is the highest intelligence, then it follows that the teaching of dance requires refined and sophisticated pedagogies. In this paper, I will analyze the dance technique of Lester Horton as it is conveyed in the 2005 instructional DVD entitled, *The Dance Technique of Lester Horton: Advanced Level*. I will do so through the lenses of constructivist and sociocultural learning theories in order to render the epistemological roots of dance pedagogy more visible.

Background

Lester Horton Technique, or simply Horton as it is more colloquially known, is the namesake of Lester Horton a famed teacher, dancer, and actor. Not only did Horton work prolifically to codify his technique by synthesizing source material from theater, ballet, anatomy, indigenous and folk dances with his own idiosyncratic style, but he is also responsible for teaching some of the most influential dance artists of the 20th century including the likes of Alvin Ailey and Carmen de Lavallade (Frances-Fischer, 1992, 4, 6). This work is of vital importance to the dance community for Horton gave dancers of all colors and creeds superior training, artistic freedom, and an avenue to legitimacy as both performers and educators as early as 1946—a socio-historical era where the color of one’s skin could bar one from the study of dance altogether (Frances-Fischer, 1992, 5). His technique remains one of the predominant forms still taught and performed today alongside Graham, Limon, and Cunningham techniques at dance studios, companies, and universities around the world.

This particular DVD, is an archival attempt to preserve the work and pedagogical legacy of Lester Horton for future generations (Fisch, et. al, 2005). In it, an uncredited narrator provides historical context, instruction, and elaboration on dancers' movements. The first 7 minutes of the film will be considered in this paper and also features interviews of five significant dance educators and artists including: Judith Jamison, Artistic Director Emerita of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; Christopher Wheeldon, Artistic Associate of the Royal Ballet and former Resident Choreographer of New York City Ballet; Milton Myers, Resident Choreographer for Philadanco and Director of Modern and Contemporary Programs at Jacob's Pillow; Julio E. Rivera, former Professor of Dance, Hope College; and Tracy Inman, Co-director of The Ailey School. The structure of the video can be outlined thusly: (1) a narrated introduction, (2) followed by interviews, (3) the demonstration of exercises, (4) and finally, slow motion analyses of the exercises and recommendations for the dancer. The video is intended as an instructional tool for the advanced dancer or teacher and builds on skills addressed in previous texts and videos. The structure, content, and form of this video all work together to produce an effective learning tool that utilizes principles of constructivist and sociocultural pedagogy.

Pt. 1—Constructivist Learning in *Lester Horton Technique: Advanced Level*

Teaching practices rooted in constructivist thought consider learning to be an active process through which learner's make meaning. This is counter to arguably more traditional and hierarchal modes where a teacher or instructor is expected to share their knowledge with students. According to constructivism, a dance instructor would instead be responsible for creating an environment that facilitates students finding their own meaning and approach to dance-making. The goal is that a dancer would embody what is being taught. In other words, in

constructivist dance pedagogy, the student must independently utilize a learning opportunity provided by certain stimulus or environments, and then synthesize this information and reproduce some interpretation of that knowledge by performing movements with their own body. Observers must resist the temptation to characterize dance pedagogy as behaviorist and seeking mere imitation. A deeper understanding of dance technique and learning processes would help the observer to recognize how students' work is more accurately described through processes of assimilation and accommodation.

While yes, one must concede that “behaviorists conceptualized learning as a process of forming connections between stimuli and responses” by subsequently rewarding or punishing these connections to condition the desired response, that would be an oversimplification of what is happening in and through this film (Bransford, 1999, p.5). The DVD instead provides the viewer a visual example of what embodied knowledge could look like by having the professional dancers perform an exercise. The verbal and visual information stimulate thought for the viewer, however there is no subsequent reward or punishment provided. With this artifact, the viewer is free to decide if they would like to get up and try to follow along, take notes for later, or simply observe what is taking place. The video does not demand or condition any desired response. Instead, the viewer is left to decide how to use and “make sense” of the information provided, in the words of Bransford (1999, p. 8).

This is a constructivist process where the viewer is asked to “construct new knowledge and understanding based on what they already know and believe” (Bransford, 1999, pg.). The film reveals its constructivist framework as the narrator warns the viewer that, “this tape is designed for the dancer with a comprehensive knowledge of the elements of the beginner and intermediate level Horton vocabulary” (Fisch, et. al, 2005). The narrator or “teacher” in this

instance, is attempting to attend to the existing knowledge and or incomplete understandings the viewer may hold in order to facilitate the construction of new knowledge and skills (Bransford, 1999, p.10).

As the viewer makes sense of what they are observing, they can choose to accommodate or assimilate the new information. The act of viewing the video itself is in fact an example of assimilation for as the narrator suggests, the film is not meant for the novice dancer but someone with, at minimum, an intermediate level of understanding of the technique, it's exercises, and movement (Fisch, et. al, 2005). What is shared in the film, must be “incorporated” into the dancers’ understanding of their own “structures” or ways of framing what the technique *is* (Donaldson, 1978, p. 140). Accommodation, on the other hand, is when a learner attempts to “fit [its] behavior...to the environment” (Donaldson, 1978, p. 140). For example, once the viewer has made it through the more rudimentary exercises and built the necessary visual and

verbal vocabulary, they would see that in the dancers’ demonstration of Prelude 4, they move their bodies into a sort of Lateral T position. Obviously, one must understand what the Lateral T position is before being able to identify its occurrence at about 5 minutes and 23 seconds into the film—thus assimilating this new exercise to their existing

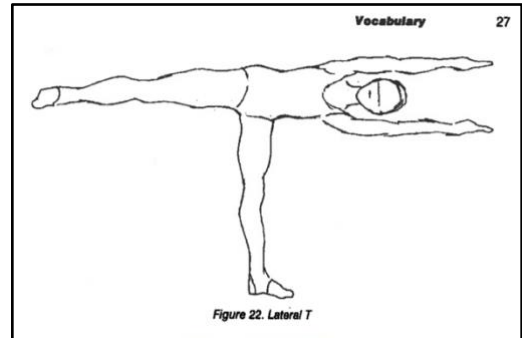


Image from “The Dance Technique of Lester Horton” (Perces, et. al, p. 27. 1992)

vocabulary knowledge. Yet, the modifier of “a sort of” was used in my description of this particular moment, because the top arm is not in it’s the usual placement for this body position to



Screengrab showing moment referenced in *Prelude 4*.
Obtained from posting of “*Lester Horton Technique, Advanced*” (Fisch, et. al, (2005) on youtube.com

be strictly described as a Lateral T. Instead, the top arm is at the dancer’s side, while the bottom arm correctly reaches forward. It is accommodation that would allow the dancer to still leverage their understanding of what the proper Lateral T position is, without being limited in the performance of this modified movement that is being introduced.

In short, through the medium of a DVD, the

teacher’s involved with the production of *Lester Horton Technique: Advanced Level*, have created a lesson to facilitate the learning of Horton technique. They have done so with a constructivist pedagogy that leaves space for the dancer/viewer to make their own meaning through processes of accommodation and assimilation. However, there is more to be unearthed in terms of understanding the pedagogy of this particular educational artifact for sociocultural learning theory is also shaping the ways in which its information is conveyed and can be understood.

Pt. 2—Sociocultural Learning in *Lester Horton Technique: Advanced Level*

In the introduction to their volume, *Power and Privilege in the Learning Sciences* (2017), Indigo Esmonde and Angela N. Booker provide a succinct definition of sociocultural learning theory that I will use to launch the next phase of our analysis. They write:

The sociocultural tradition offers promise to integrate a critical understanding of power with an analysis of learning. We use the term sociocultural theory to describe the diverse set of theories that are rooted in Vygotsky’s work in the early 20th century including

situated learning theory, cultural-historical activity theory, distributed cognition, and others” (Esmonde & Booker, 2017, p.2).

Esmonde & Booker go on to explain how, “All contexts are learning contexts, and the authors in this volume take the approach that power is ever-present in learning contexts...teachers wield power over their students” (Esmonde & Booker, 20017, p. 2). It is important to understand that this power may not always be oppressive, but it warrants investigation. One could also argue that this statement begs the question: Are there certain types of power that are more or less legitimate in learning contexts? It is possible that some power does more visible work to establish its legitimacy. What I mean by this is that power is built upon social capital—it is relative and cultural. A teacher can only be considered powerful in a culture that grants them authority and by students who subscribe to that culture. In the case of *Lester Horton Technique: Advanced Level* there are a number of moves being made to legitimize the authority of this film in preserving and disseminating Horton technique—if one is culturally literate and can discern the social capital being brandished.

Similar to academia, there is a pervasive hierarchy in the dance field. Larger dance companies with bigger budgets, international tours, and more virtuosic professional dancers are afforded more prestige. Western “classical” dance genres like ballet are venerated while folk or social dance forms remain marginalized. Dance companies like the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater or New York City Ballet are held in the highest esteem, and performing, studying, or teaching at these institutions with such proximity to power grants an individual dance artist a certain amount of gravitas.

This is relevant in order to understand the purpose of the interview section of the film that begins at 1 minute and 35 seconds, and why the director may have chosen to title these

interviews with speaker’s credentials. Not only do these titles serve to introduce the speaker, but they also declare the speaker’s cultural significance. The inclusion of these interviews in the instructional film and the speakers’ praise of Horton technique should be seen as acts of power.

The film uses these interviews to establish its own legitimacy through the endorsement of significant dance icons, while also underscoring the larger cultural value of proficiency in Horton technique within the dance community. Why else would an instructional modern dance film devote nearly half of its first seven



minutes to a series of interviews with little to no instructional value—especially one of a famous *ballet* choreographer? Christopher Wheeldon is shown saying:

The Horton technique is very useful for all dancers of all trainings because it enables them to have that core strength and give them freedom of movement that they need to be versatile for a choreographer, and the technique itself never once compromises movement flow or elegance in order to gain strength. (Fisch, et. al, 2005).

Additionally, Horton and general modern dance guru Milton Myers asserts in his interview around two and half minutes into the film that, “[Horton is] the most complete technique after all these years of studying and seeing and just watching and traveling and looking at so many fabulous teachers in the world” (Fisch, et. al, 2005). Myers is a world travelled dance educator



employed by two of the most elite training institutions in the world—Jacob’s Pillow and The Ailey school. Members of the dance community are able to understand the value of these culturally significant associations and credentials, and the

utilization of a sociocultural learning theory is what prompts the producers of the film to include such testimonials and legitimize the authority of the speakers by including their titles.

The interviews also serve the purpose of mediating learning between the video's explicit information, the focal learner/viewer's zone of proximal development, and interviewees broader expertise and understanding of how Horton technique fits into the larger dance landscape. The interviews give the viewer access to what Moll & Greenberg term "funds of knowledge" or "social sharing of knowledge as part of the [a cultural learning context's] functioning" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 320; Greenberg, 1989; Velez-Ibanez, 1988a). Though the interviews do not provide the same step by step, or embodied instruction that the dancers do later on, the speakers do provide tools or ways of understanding what the video does also explicitly teach. For example, around a minute and half into the film, Judith Jamison explains how an understanding of Horton technique enabled her to:

... develop an instrument [that can] implode as well as explode on stage. You know? Your power is very central—I'm doing the solar plexus thing—but, it is truly a central power that radiates from the center of the body so that your extremities also are...it's like a [bamboo] tree. Your extremities are just as strong as that trunk is (Fisch, et. al, 2005).

Jamison's statement is more than a testimonial, she is providing the viewer images and frameworks with which to make meaning out of the subsequent instruction. These tools might make all the difference in a dancer being able to embody the codified movements with not only depth and clarity but vitality. The interviews thus prime the viewer to more completely understand the movements shown in the exercises themselves and mediate or bridge the focal learner's current understanding, capacity to learn, and the new information shown.

The sociocultural tradition also provides a way to understand the influence of social contexts on learning, and not just a “critical understanding of power” (Esmonde & Booker, 20017, p. 2). According to the founder of sociocultural learning theory—Vygotsky—all learning takes places on the social plane first (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992, p. 549). This means that in order to learn a particular skill or concept, the learner must first leverage their social sphere which is defined by the formation of key relationships, language, and cultural tools that then allow understanding of that particular skill or concept. While an instructional film may seem devoid of any social interaction, *The Dance Technique of Lester Horton* actually creatively engages the focal learners’ social world. The recorded interviews mimic interpersonal conversation. The film’s structure which first shows the demonstration of an exercise, and then follows with slow motion explanations transforms the oral tradition of dance pedagogy where a teacher might demonstrate a full dance or combination, then break it down into more manageable chunks for students. Though there is no direct person to person transfer of knowledge, the film still requires the viewer to use their interpersonal communication skills, language, dance vocabulary, understanding of the oral tradition, and observations of other humans to interpret the information being transmitted. In this manner, the medium of film still subscribes to Vygotsky’s genetic law, but in an innovative and modern way.

Conclusion

The difficulty in preserving dance knowledge has always been its corporal nature and temporality. Dance is movement in time and space—it is seen at one moment and gone the next. While there are written notation methods and video recording, nothing truly captures the full essence of live performance. The pedagogy of Horton technique, and this DVD are attempts at

capturing that essence, or knowledge, and transmitting it to future generations by using constructivist and sociocultural theories. It is both spoken by the film's narrator and embodied in the dancers' demonstrations just how:

The legacy that was left by Lester Horton who died in 1953, continues to live and to inspire today's artists. This advanced tape is the culmination of the documentation of that legacy, which endures as an American modern dance technique (Fisch, et. al, 2005).

In fact, the technique has endured well into the 21st century. I have used it as reference material in my own teaching. I return to it again and again to review exercises and refine my own understanding with the concession that I am not free of dance culture and its biases, but part of a lineage of instructors, "cultural tools" and teaching practices (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992, p. 551). I modify the preludes and exercises, mixing them with my own choreography in order to construct a Horton-based technique that appears freer and fresher to my students without losing the technique's foundational focus of building dynamic expression, strength, and flexibility in equal measures. Basing my dance instruction on Horton technique this way legitimizes me as a knowledgeable instructor and is a benevolent use of the power that Esmonde & Booker describe. I do however wonder, how the unexamined use of Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theories might not perpetuate oppressive hierarchies between student and teacher as I consider the work this artifact does to legitimize itself again and again. Pushing this aside however, I think the creation and use of this DVD ultimately serve an instructive and benign purpose. It is my belief that the producers of *The Dance Technique of Lester Horton: Advanced Level* relied on the notions of teaching and learning rooted in the works of Piaget and Vygotsky in such numerous and sophisticated ways so that such knowledge would never be lost.

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