

Original Paper

Suggestions and Thoughts on Integrating Environmental Choreography into Dance Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the implementation of environmental choreography in higher education dance teaching. The aim is to better engage students in social and environmental issues through movement, and to promote the development of a more sustainable and conscious society. The paper proposes a framework for implementing environmental choreography in dance courses, including strategies for selecting relevant topics, designing movement sequences, and evaluating outcomes. The paper also presents case studies from universities in different regions, illustrating how environmental choreography has been successfully integrated into dance curricula and highlighting some challenges that still need to be addressed. Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing discussion on the role of arts in promoting sustainability and social change.

Keywords

Environmental choreography, Dance education, Sustainability, Social change

Introduction

Dance is not just a form of artistic expression, but also a means of communication, reflection, and action. Through movement, dancers can convey messages, embody emotions, and connect with their audience and environment. By acknowledging this potential, dance educators have started to explore ways to integrate socio-environmental issues into their teaching practices, creating meaningful experiences of learning and engagement. One specific approach that has gained attention in recent years is environmental choreography, which uses movement as a way to explore and raise awareness about ecological and social challenges. This paper aims to examine the implementation of environmental choreography in higher education dance teaching, and to propose strategies for creating effective and impactful experiences for students.

1. Environmental Choreography Definition and Conceptual Framework

Environmental choreography is a relatively new field of dance practice that emerged in response to the global environmental crisis and the need for more sustainable and socially conscious cultures. According to Kagan (2017), environmental choreography “explores the interconnections between the body, the environment, and the socio-political context, seeking to create movements that embody, critique, or transform these interrelations” (p. 3). This definition suggests that environmental choreography is not limited to a specific style or genre of dance, but rather encompasses a wide range of approaches that use movement to address environmental and social issues. These issues can include climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, human rights, gender inequality, among others.

To effectively implement environmental choreography in higher education dance teaching, it is essential to establish a conceptual framework that guides its design and evaluation. The following framework proposes four key components of environmental choreography: topic selection, movement language, contextualization, and evaluation.

1.1 Topic Selection

The first step in designing an environmental choreography project is to select a relevant topic that addresses a specific environmental or social issue. The topic should be chosen based on its relevance to the local and global context, its potential for artistic exploration, and its educational value. For example, a dance class in a coastal city could explore the impact of rising sea levels on the community, while a class in a polluted urban area could investigate the effects of industrial waste on public health. The topic should also align with the learning outcomes of the course and the interests and backgrounds of the students.

1.2 Movement Language

The second component of environmental choreography is the movement language, which refers to the vocabulary and style of movement used to express the chosen topic. The movement language should be informed by the cultural and historical context of the issue, as well as the aesthetic preferences of the choreographer and the dancers. It may include gestures, shapes, rhythms, partnering, floor work, improvisation, and other techniques that reflect the emotional, physical, and intellectual aspects of the issue. The movement language should also be accessible to a range of skills and abilities, and inclusive of different body types, cultures, and identities.

1.3 Contextualization

The third component of environmental choreography is the contextualization, which refers to the way the dance piece is situated within a broader socio-political and environmental context. The contextualization includes the setting, the music, the costumes, the lighting, and other elements that create a coherent and immersive experience for the audience. It should also include a clear message or intention that communicates the issue and the call to action. For example, a dance piece about deforestation could be performed in a forest-like setting, accompanied by sounds of nature, and dressed in earthy colors. The contextualization should aim to provoke an emotional and intellectual response

from the viewer, and to inspire reflection and dialogue.

1.4 Evaluation

The fourth component of environmental choreography is the evaluation, which refers to the assessment of the learning outcomes and impact of the project. The evaluation should include both formative and summative methods, and involve the participation of the students, the teachers, and the community. It should measure the students' acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to the topic, as well as their engagement with the creative process and the final performance. The evaluation should also assess the visibility and influence of the project on the wider community, and its potential for creating social change.

2. Case Studies: Examples of Environmental Choreography in Higher Education Dance Teaching

To illustrate the practical application of environmental choreography in higher education dance teaching, we present three case studies from different regions of the world. These case studies demonstrate how environmental choreography can be adapted to different contexts and challenges, and how it can foster interdisciplinary collaboration, social justice, and environmental awareness.

2.1 Case Study 1: The Ocean Project at University of California Santa Cruz (USA)

The Ocean Project is a multidisciplinary initiative at UC Santa Cruz that engages students and faculty in exploring the ecological and socio-political dimensions of ocean health and conservation. As part of the project, a dance course was developed that focused on creating environmental choreography related to marine issues. The course included visits to local oceanic sites, lectures on marine science and policy, and collaborative work with marine biologists and conservationists. The students were encouraged to investigate diverse themes such as coral bleaching, ocean acidification, overfishing, and plastic pollution, and to express their findings through movement. The project culminated in a public performance that showcased the students' choreography, accompanied by spoken word and live music. The performance was attended by a wide audience, including local policymakers and environmental activists, who praised the students' creativity and activism.

2.2 Case Study 2: The Green Step Dance Project at University of Cape Town (South Africa)

The Green Step Dance Project is a community-based initiative at UCT that aims to raise awareness about environmental issues affecting local communities in the Cape Town area. The project involves collaboration between dance students, local environmental NGOs, and community members, and focuses on creating site-specific environmental choreography that responds to the specific needs and concerns of the community. The students first conduct research on the environmental challenges facing the community, and then work with local residents to create movement sequences that embody these issues. The project also includes educational workshops on sustainable living, waste management, and biodiversity conservation, as well as performances in public spaces such as parks, markets, and community centers. The project has been highly successful in engaging diverse audiences in environmental issues, and has inspired many students to pursue careers in environmental education and

activism.

2.3 Case Study 3: The Eco Dance Project at Taipei National University of the Arts (Taiwan China)

The Eco Dance Project is a student-led initiative at TNUA that explores the intersection of dance, biology, and ecology. The project involves collaboration between dance majors and science majors, and focuses on creating interactive environmental choreography that highlights the biodiversity and ecological characteristics of the local environment. The project includes fieldwork in different ecological sites, such as forests, wetlands, and urban parks, and laboratory work on biological systems and processes. The students are also encouraged to incorporate technology and multimedia into their performances, using sensors, projections, and soundscapes to create immersive experiences for the audience. The project has attracted significant attention from the scientific and artistic communities in Taiwan, and has been recognized as a pioneering example of interdisciplinary education and research.

2.4 Case Study 4: The “Balcony Garden choreography” Project of Beijing Dance Academy (China)

In a balcony garden choreography performance of Beijing Dance Academy, the students used the balcony garden as a dance venue, and arranged the trees, flowers and other elements in the garden, forming a beautiful dance scene. During the performance, the students constantly interact with the garden elements, showing the harmony between the body and the natural environment.

3. Challenges and Recommendations

Despite the many benefits of environmental choreography in higher education dance teaching, there are also some challenges that need to be addressed. These include the lack of resources and support for interdisciplinary collaboration, the difficulty of defining and assessing the learning outcomes of the project, and the risk of superficial or tokenistic engagement with environmental and social issues. To overcome these challenges, we suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) Foster interdisciplinary collaboration and dialogue between dance educators, environmental scientists, community activists, and policymakers. This can be done through joint projects, workshops, and conferences, as well as by integrating interdisciplinary perspectives into dance curricula.
- 2) Develop clear and measurable learning outcomes for environmental choreography projects. This can be done by aligning the projects with the objectives of the course, and by using formative and summative assessment methods that evaluate both the students’ artistic and environmental skills and knowledge.
- 3) Ensure that the engagement with environmental and social issues in environmental choreography is authentic and meaningful. This can be done by involving local communities in the research and creation process, by acknowledging the power dynamics involved in environmental activism, and by promoting an ethic of care and respect for the environment and its inhabitants.

4. Conclusion

Environmental choreography is a promising approach to integrating socio-environmental issues into higher education dance teaching. Through movement, dancers can communicate, reflect, and act on the challenges facing our planet and its people, and create meaningful experiences of learning and engagement. This paper proposed a conceptual framework for implementing environmental choreography in dance courses, and presented case studies from different regions of the world that illustrate its potential and challenges. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, developing clear learning outcomes, and promoting authentic engagement with environmental and social issues, we can create a more sustainable and conscious society, one dance at a time.

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