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Moral Considerations in Embodied Curriculum: A Review Essay

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Moral considerations in embodied curriculum: A Review Essay

This book is a treasure – a collection of significant and insightful works by an outstanding scholar in our international community of practitioner-researchers in dance and arts education. Recognized with both the American National Dance Education Organization's (NDEO) Lifetime Achievement Award and the Congress On Research in Dance's (CORD) Award for Outstanding Scholarly Contribution to Dance Research, Sue Stinson is known to many of us through her articles, her work in these organizations and Dance and the Child International (DaCi), and as a leader in the University of North Carolina Greensboro Department of Dance. I recommend this book as essential reading for critical dance researchers engaged in 'western' higher education and as an appropriate textbook for graduate students in dance pedagogy and curriculum.

My personal encounter with Sue's work began with her 1995 article 'Body of knowledge' originally published in *Educational Theory*. Beginning my own doctoral study in 1999, I returned again and again to Sue's words and the inspiration, encouragement and affirmation they offered me in the rather lonely journey of independent dance research in New Zealand at the time. She wrote:

> …I experience thought as something that occurs throughout my body, not just above my neck. Until I know something on this level – in my bones, so to speak – the knowledge is not my own… My somatic self, the self which lives experience, is necessary in my struggle to find forms that represent my lived experience, whether those forms are presented on stage or in a scholarly journal. (2016, p. 158)

Over the years I have read many of Sue's articles, (although not all), and this book so usefully makes accessible her substantial scholarship from at least 15 different journals, books and conference proceedings. Three of the chapters are co-written with colleagues, key contributors to curriculum and dance scholarship, including Donald Blumenfield-Jones, Karen Bond, Ann Dils, Doug Risner and Jan Van Dyke. It is thus a privilege and a pleasure to read and write about Sue's works as collected together in this rich volume, and to add my appreciation to that of many others internationally who acknowledge her leadership and rigorous scholarship.

Overall, the book is framed by introductory and finale chapters. In the introductory chapter Sue situates her dance research within her life as a whole and identifies the key interconnected themes of her work as voice, story, body, the search for meaning, reflexivity, and evolution (and sometimes "recycling"). The chapters between are collected into two parts and presented in chronological chunks so that we readers follow the development and reflexivity in Sue's theorizing and practice, from her early publications in 1985 through to her most recent writings. The two parts of the book focus on essays on curriculum, pedagogy and practice, and research methodology and voices of young people. Each chapter also includes a new section of commentary that demonstrates Sue's personal engagement in her own theorizing and her reflections on the political and social shifts that have changed the landscape of dance and arts education, particularly in the United States of America, but also internationally. Researching findings from interviews with dancers, personal reflections and anecdotes about teaching moments enliven her texts and thus even the more substantial theoretical sections of these chapters are satisfying and inspiring to read. While each chapter is coherent and accessible to read individually, when read together the connections between Sue's ideas accumulate to support reader understanding, and connect to a wide range of academic theorists and disciplines. In the finale chapter, Sue shares the ways in which lessons from dance, teaching and research have become embodied in her willingness and courage to experience uncertainty and engage reflexively, to consider moral and ethical practice

personally and in relationship with others. She also acknowledges how dance nurtures deeper awareness, listening and kinesthetic knowing, fosters creativity and stimulates searches for interpretation, in the journey of life as well as in dance.

As sometimes happens, this book comes to me to read at a particularly crucial time when I am reflecting on my own curriculum commitments and pedagogical practice as a dance educator in higher education. Currently I am focused on the development of a collection of undergraduate interest papers in dance towards cohesive dance major relevant for students studying both arts and education broadly, (though not specifically obtaining teacher training for schools). While describing work with graduate students and courses, there is much to inspire others in Sue's co-written chapter with Ann Dils and Doug Risner, in which they describe curriculum developments and assessment innovations implemented to develop graduate student research and writing. In relation to my own context, Sue's statement resonates strongly with me—that creating, performing and viewing art is personally and morally valid when it brings "the student into engagement with the world, to increased understanding of self and relation with others as subject with subject" and "it sensitizes, rather than anesthetizes, us to moral concerns" (p. 16). Thus I find myself reading intently and deeply reflecting on the prompts Sue has considered throughout her thirty years as an academic and educator - What does it mean to be human? How shall we live together? (Macdonald, 1995). These prompts encourage reflection on values and issues in our lives broadly and obviously in our endeavors in educational contexts.

Such broad questions lead well beyond the detailed activities of teaching modern dance technique or creative dance or choreographic crafting; beyond issues of performance or assessment in schools and higher education; and beyond the debates about dance as a core content area or as a component within cross-disciplinary learning. As Sue concludes, based on research into what students say about their schooling, making learning more meaningful and satisfying, more intrinsically rewarding, should be part of our recognition of this uniquely human capacity to reflect on our lives and seek meaning. Broad questions about meaning and relationships prompt critical understandings of power and social structure, of social justice and access, of identity, inclusion and community belonging, and of care and empowerment. And central to this shift is the subjectivity of the dancer as a participating, critically reflective learner and mover capable of experiencing a sense of power and freedom through agency. So it is to these broad and substantial questions that Sue returns, while always integrating her own experiences as a dance educator and mother into her discussion.

This book is a treasure and I acknowledge Sue's substantial contribution and fine scholarship, shared with love and personal commitment to enhancing embodied research

References

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About the Author

Karen Barbour is Associate Professor in dance in Te Kura Toi Tangata Faculty of Education at The University of Waikato in New Zealand. Her research focuses on embodied ways of knowing in dance and movement, reflecting a critical feminist and phenomenological perspective. Karen's work engages with higher education contexts for learning and performing contemporary dance, integrated with yoga and somatic movement education. Her book *Dancing across the page: Narrative and embodied ways of knowing* (2011), demonstrates her commitment to autoethnographic writing about dance and to articulating the unique knowledge contributions of dancers through creative practice as research. Other articles and book chapters feature research projects into site specific dance and digital dance making, along with more recent work on somatic dance pedagogy.

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