



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

A Chart of Skills and Concepts for Dance

Author(s): Janet Adshead, Valerie A. Briginshaw, Pauline Hodgens and Michael Robert Huxley

Source: *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Autumn, 1982), pp. 49-61

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3332192>

Accessed: 04/04/2013 17:21

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Illinois Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Aesthetic Education*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

A Chart of Skills and Concepts for Dance

JANET ADSHEAD, VALERIE A. BRIGINSHAW,
PAULINE HODGENS, and MICHAEL ROBERT HUXLEY

The Rationale

The formulation of our chart of skills and concepts for dance was begun after we had considered the article "The Artworld and Aesthetic Skills: A Context for Research and Development" by R. A. and C. M. Smith, who characterize the aesthetic situation as one in which persons are "engaged in the *act* of appreciation (apprehending plus prizing). Individuals perform certain critical/perceptual operations on the object—in short they practice a skill." Accordingly, the authors propose that "the proper method for aesthetic education is *teaching the basic skills of aesthetic appreciation*."¹ Arguing the case for aesthetic appreciation, they have produced a chart with concepts, skills, anticipated difficulties inherent in concepts, and anticipated difficulties based on misconceptions as its categories. A skills analysis is basic to this approach on a number of grounds, the major one being that without an explicit set of procedures, aesthetic education is open to attack by subjectivists and is ultimately unteachable—a point David Best has made consistently.² The scheme in question is limited to the visual arts and is meant to serve illustrative purposes mainly; but its authors also suggest that a "task for research would be to determine the major concepts and skills in other art forms and to find out how much analogy exists."³ It is in response to this suggestion that we have attempted to use their structure and relate it to dance studies.

Although we are aware of some of the problems involved, for the purposes of this article we assume with the Smiths that aesthetic appreciation

Janet Adshead, a Leverhulme Fellow in Dance at the University of Surrey, England, is the author of *The Study of Dance* and of articles that have appeared in *New Dance* and the *Physical Education Review*. *Valerie A. Briginsbaw*, *Pauline Hodgens*, and *Michael Robert Huxley* are doctoral students at the University of Leeds, England. Ms. Briginsbaw has published in *Dancing Times* and *Momentum* and Mr. Huxley in *New Dance* and *Ballet Info*.

0021-8510/82/3000-0049\$01.30/0
©1982 Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

is the central characteristic of art appreciation; that is, for art to be experienced as art, the main type of appreciation involved is aesthetic. In consequence, the chart offered is concerned only with dance as art. Insofar as it merely describes components of all kinds of dance, it is not specific to art; but in its development beyond the first two stages, the chart does focus on dance in the context of art.

The first question, then, concerns the concepts that characterize dance. We start from the proposition that dance (of any and all kinds) is *choreographed*, i.e., it is made or formed by manipulating movement and other elements into a structural whole. It is *performed*, i.e., given existence in time and space, in the technical sense of performance by trained bodies and in the sense of being an interpretation. Dance is *appraised* critically in several senses: in its creation by the choreographer, in the performance (in both senses mentioned), and in the evaluation by spectator and critic who use a different perspective. As notation is the means by which dances are recorded and reconstructed, it follows that the same concepts are assumed.

In the Chart of Aesthetic Skills and Concepts, the information is given in taxonomic style, that is, a hierarchical set of skills and concepts which characterize the visual arts is developed through four stages. If dance is considered instead of the visual arts, then the same delineation of skills and concepts is necessary in order to state clearly *what* it is one is appreciating. The “what” might be described in quite general terms, for example, as the overall atmosphere or mood of the dance which, however, must in principle be capable of being attributed to a number of specific components or clusters of components. Components, relationships among the components, and their comparative importance are the ingredients of interpretation and evaluation. They are therefore the basis for appraisal and criticism as well as for choreography, performance, and notation. It follows that the choreographer, performer, critic, and notator all *work* with the same aesthetic skills and concepts, although they do so in different ways. Furthermore, choreography, performance, criticism, and score are all *understood* and *evaluated* by using the same skills and concepts. Nonetheless, in each of the processes—making, performing, criticizing, and notating—additional skills may be required. These are not necessarily of an aesthetic character; for example, learning the symbol system of notation or acquiring facility with the critic’s language is not.

A verbal language is necessary for working with the medium of human movement and for coming to understand dance. Like any discrete and developed area of human investigation and endeavor, the specialized verbal language of dance is closely related to its conceptual structure. To put it more precisely, the language *is* the conceptual structure. Thus the dance language (verbal) one chooses is already to some extent a reflection of a dance style or form. A “neutral” movement analysis would be cumber-

some if it covered every movement possibility, but the general statement offered in Stage 1 of our chart (discerning, describing, and naming components of dance) attempts, in broad concepts, to embrace many dance styles and forms.

General concepts which may apply to many kinds of dance are useful, but as soon as one considers a specific dance, the range of components required for analysis is reduced because of those very characteristics that make one dance style distinct from another. In describing, discerning, and naming the elements of movement, it quickly becomes convenient to use shorthand phrases which summarize and name a particular kind of movement (i.e., clusters and complexes). In time, phrases such as “pas de basque” become the verbal currency of one style of dance, and it becomes unnecessary to explain them after the initial learning stage.

In the same way, the abstract symbol system used to notate a dance is a reflection of the range of movement used and its analysis. The same problems exist here over the generality and specificity of coverage required by any one dance form. Through several centuries, attempts have been made to devise a notation system, but for our purposes of charting dance as art in the twentieth century, we need consider only the two in which the dance repertoire is written, that is, Labanotation/Kinetography Laban and Benesh notation. Although both systems claim to be comprehensive in the sense of being capable of notating any kind of movement in a variety of settings in addition to dance—athletics, medical analysis, and animal behavior—their use in actual practice is indicative, among other things, of their perceived value within the dance realm. Further, although both systems have been used to notate ballet as well as modern dance, the Benesh system is used more for the former and Labanotation for the latter. Labanotation is, in fact, used for a greater range of purposes and styles of dance than is Benesh.

The Chart

In drawing up the chart in relation to dance, we have taken and adapted the Smiths' first two categories of skills and concepts but not the categories of anticipated difficulties.

Before describing briefly each stage of the chart, it is crucial to note that what is presented is a basis for the analysis of dance. The chart provides a structure and framework through which important elements of the dance might be located; it does *not* necessarily imply a particular order of events to be followed in the process or method of analysis. Users of the chart may enter it at different points depending on their interest, e.g., interest in a particular dancer's role, a prevalent dynamic stress, a recurring

motif—in other words, *how* one uses the model depends on *what* it is one wishes to study.

The progression from stage one to stage four of the model is hierarchical in the sense that the final evaluation of the dance rests on an interpretation having been made, which in turn relies on the recognition and characterization of the genre, the subject matter, and its treatment in the dance. This recognition and characterization are the consequence of perceiving relations of various kinds among sections of the dance and assessing their relative importance. This in turn is possible only in terms of the objectively available features of the dance, its movement components and qualities in the presentational setting. A strict hierarchical structure is not maintained within each stage of the chart.

The stages of the chart are interdependent: each stage describes a skill or related group of skills, first of discerning, describing, and naming components of the dance; second the discerning, describing, and naming relations among components of the dance and recognizing their comparative importance; third of recognizing and characterizing the dance statement or meaning in order to interpret the dance; and fourth of appraising and judging in order to evaluate the dance.

The skills of column one are related to the concepts of column two in that the nature of the dance itself provides the structure of concepts, and the skills are then used in relation to these very specific concepts. Of course one can describe, discern, recognize, and characterize many things. The conceptual structure appropriate to the subject tells us what, in the case of dance, we are attending to.

Stage 1 of the chart sets out the basic components of dance. These components are units of movement, for example, a single step taken by the right foot that is small and moves in a forward direction (relative to the body of the dancer) with lightness and at a quick pace. The simultaneous occurrence of such components forms a cluster of movement elements. It is possible to analyze movement in greater depth and from a variety of standpoints, whether anatomical or biomechanical; but it is suggested here that detail beyond this level of analysis is unlikely to be commonly used in choreographic or performance analysis or in the appraisal of a dance. The categories are not all-inclusive, but they can, in principle, be extended in depth to the minutest movement. Greater detail may, for example, be required by the notator.

To extend the example, the step described might be performed by two female dancers who take, respectively, a major and a subsidiary part in the total dance. The two dancers perform the step in the stage area limited by three large mobiles lit by a wash of blue color and placed in a triangular formation with one at the back of the stage and one at either side. Words are spoken off-stage at the same time that random sounds are produced by the clicking of parts of the mobiles against each other.

The purpose of this example is to demonstrate the several types of clusters, that is, the simultaneous occurrence of movement elements (2.11) performed by dancers (2.12) in a visual (2.13) and aural (2.14) setting. These simultaneously occurring elements and clusters form a more complicated unit that we term a complex (2.15).

A Chart of Skills and Concepts of Dance—STAGE 1

1.	Skills	2.	Concepts
1.1	discerning, describing, and naming components of the dance	2.1	components
		2.11	<i>movement</i> —whole body or parts—including actions, gestures, and stillness, e.g., steps, jumps, turns, lifts, falls, locomotion, movement in place, balances, positions
		2.111	spatial elements
		2.1111	shape
		2.1112	size
		2.1113	pattern/line
		2.1114	direction
		2.1115	location in performance space
		2.112	dynamic elements
		2.1121	tension/force—strength, lightness
		2.1122	speed/tempo
		2.1123	duration
		2.1124	rhythm
		2.113	clusters of movement elements—simultaneous occurrence of any of 2.11, 2.111, and 2.112
		2.12	<i>dancers</i>
		2.121	numbers and sex
		2.122	role—lead, subsidiary
		2.123	a cluster of elements concerned with dancers—simultaneous occurrence of 2.121 and 2.122
		2.13	<i>visual setting/environment</i>
		2.131	performance area—set, surroundings
		2.132	light
		2.133	costumes and props
		2.134	clusters of visual elements—simultaneous occurrence of any of 2.131, 2.132, and 2.133

A Chart of Skills and Concepts of Dance—STAGE 1 (Continued)

- 2.14 *aural elements*
- 2.141 sound
- 2.142 the spoken word
- 2.143 music
- 2.144 clusters of aural elements—simultaneous occurrence of any of 2.141, 2.142, and 2.143

- 2.15 *complexes*—simultaneous occurrence of elements of clusters and/or clusters, i.e., any grouping of 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, and 2.14.

Stage 2 of the chart analyzes varied types of relations that may exist within the total web of relations in a dance. Relations may be of a number of types, e.g., those seen at a specific moment, as in a photograph or when a film is stopped. *Relations at a moment* may suggest a large amount of movement through many strands of action which interweave in a spatial design, vary in dynamic quality, and are performed by a number of dancers who relate to each other in different ways. In contrast, relatively little movement may be apparent (in quantity), and what movement there is may be clearly directed toward a specific point, while the various strands of action may reinforce each other through echoing the spatial design or dynamic of movement. The parallel here is with harmonic/chordal analysis in music based on a vertical structure.

Under this category of relations sustained at one moment, the possibilities of what is related to what form a vast complex. The same possibilities are present in the category of *relations through time*, with the addition of all the relations that accrue from one moment following another. Essentially, relations through time involve a linear or contrapuntal analysis in which movements, dancers, as well as aspects of the visual and aural setting are considered in relation to each other from the preceding moment to the next; consequently, one complex is related to another following it in time.

Although the general term “development” is a tempting one to refer to progress through time, it is fraught with differing nuances of meaning. We have instead named particular relations through time resulting from the use of such choreographic devices as ostinato or canon. Fundamentally, any one component or cluster or complex may be sustained as it is, may be repeated from one moment to the next, or may be altered in a number of ways, for example, by adding new elements or by taking away something that was formerly there. The possibilities are endless.

Relations between a particular moment (vertical analysis) and the linear (contrapuntal) development through time may account for the emphasis on certain parts of the dance by reinforcement, directing attention to a climactic point, or highlighting areas of the dance. The recognition of units of the dance, whether these are phrases with a parallel in music or chunks that hold together in other ways, reveals relations between sections of the complete work and leads to a consideration of the dance form as a whole. The total dance form might then be related to the visual environment or to the relative importance of certain clusters or complexes of elements throughout the work. Several different lines of development may be continuing, with one of them predominating, all of them being in balance, or one resulting from another.

Thus at Stage 2, the dance form (2.2) may be analyzed according to the components that are related (2.21), that is, the movements, the dancers, the visual and aural components, clusters, or complexes. The total form may also be seen in terms of occurrences at any one moment (2.22) or through time (2.23) or through a further relationship of the moment to the linear progression (2.24). In consequence, certain sections of the dance may reveal strands that recur many times or relatively minor events or highlighted moments that occur only once (2.25). It is the recognition of these complexities and the acknowledgment of the relative importance of different parts that allow an interpretation to be made.

A chart of skills and concepts for dance—STAGE 2

1.	Skills	2.	Concepts
1.2	discerning, describing, and naming relations of the dance form	2.2	form
		2.21	<i>relations according to components</i>
		2.211	relations within and between movements, e.g., within and between spatial and dynamic elements and clusters of movement elements
		2.212	relations within and between dancers, e.g., within and between numbers, sex, and roles of dancers and clusters of elements pertaining to dancers
		2.213	relations within and between elements of the visual setting/environment, e.g., within and between the performance area, light, costumes, and props and clusters of visual elements

A chart of skills and concepts for dance—STAGE 2 (Continued)

	2.214	relations within and between aural elements, e.g., within and between sound, the spoken word, music, and clusters of aural elements
	2.215	relations within and between complexes (see 2.15—Stage 1)
	2.22	<i>relations at a point in time</i> , i.e., any combination of 2.21
	2.221	simple/complex
	2.2211	likenesses/commonalities
	2.2212	differences/opposition
	2.23	<i>relations through time</i> , i.e., between one occurrence and the next, e.g., between one movement and the next or one dancer and the next resulting in named relations (canon, fugue, ostinato, etc.) and general categories (elaboration, inversion, etc.)
	2.231	exact repetition/recurrence
	2.232	alteration of one or more components and/or clusters
	2.233	addition or subtraction of one or more components and/or clusters
	2.234	alteration of the order of events
	2.24	<i>relations between the moment and the linear development</i> (at a point in time and through time), i.e., relations accounting for particular effects which depend to some extent on a specific moment(s), e.g., emphasis by means of accent, reinforcement, focus, climax
1.21 recognizing the comparative importance of relations within the dance	2.25	<i>major/minor/subsidiary relations</i>
	2.251	complexes, strands, units, phrases, and sections in relation to each other
	2.252	complexes, strands, units, phrases, and sections in relation to the total dance form
	2.253	the total web of relations

Stage 3 attempts to locate elements that contribute to the recognition and characterization of genre, style, and subject matter and that lead to an

interpretation of the dance. It necessarily draws on the preceding two stages in that they describe the components of the dance in relationship and thus offer a structure for marking the observable features of the dance. The terms “genre” and “style” are open to a variety of meanings, as is evident in the literature of the arts; their use for purposes of this article is explained below.

The recognition of the *genre* (2.31), that is, the requirements and characteristics of a particular form of dance—e.g., ballet, tap, jazz—is crucial to a valid interpretation. It would be simply inappropriate to make statements about tap dancing using criteria of appraisal relevant to ballet. This recognition of genre is derived directly from 1.1 and 1.2, since each form of dance is a particular selection from the total available range of movement possibilities and relationships, made in a way that produces a distinctive statement. Genre is recognizable as jazz dance or modern dance by its use of specific kinds of movement.

The *style* of a dance is recognized by the manner of expression used in that dance. For example, Graham, Hawkins, and Humphrey are all modern dance choreographers of the same era. Yet there is no danger of confusing a dance choreographed by one with that by another, as each choreographer has developed a distinctive expressive style.

The way in which the *subject matter* is dealt with makes it in some ways a subsection of genre. It involves recognition of certain general characteristics of the treatment of subject matter (2.31)—including, for example, abstraction, representation, and impressionism—that may have currency across the arts. Aesthetic descriptions of quality, mood, and atmosphere (2.33) derived from complexes and from sections of the total dance form are backed up by statements of the relative importance of sections/themes identified in the previous stage. Understanding and expression of the “artistic statement” and “meaning” of the dance are dependent upon the sum total of these three stages.

A chart of skills and concepts for dance—STAGE 3

1.	Skills	2.	Concepts
1.3	interpreting, recognizing, and characterizing the dance statement/meaning	2.3	interpretation
		2.31	<i>genre</i> , i.e., a particular form of dance, e.g., ballet, modern dance, stage dance
		2.311	general style, i.e., a distinctive example of a genre: ballet—preromantic, romantic, classical, modern; modern dance—pretraditional, Central European, traditional, contemporary, postmodern; stage dance—tap, musical, jazz, cabaret

A chart of skills and concepts for dance—STAGE 3 (Continued)

- 2.312 a distinctive choreographic style, e.g., Ashton, Balanchine, Tetley, Graham, Hawkins, Cunningham, Robbins
- 2.32 *subject matter*
- 2.321 content, e.g., “pure” movement, a story, a theme, a topic, an idea
- 2.322 treatment of the subject matter, e.g., representative, narrative, literal, dramatic, mimetic, lyrical, expressionistic, impressionistic, abstract, symbolic
- 2.33 *quality, mood, atmosphere*, i.e., aesthetic descriptions of clusters, complexes, relationships, phrases/sections, and the whole dance
- 2.34 *artistic statement/meaning*
- 2.341 relationships between 2.31, 2.32 and 2.33

Stage 4 is concerned with evaluation, that is, with appraising and making judgments. The effectiveness and appropriateness of the dance are assessed with reference to discrimination among parts and between parts in relation to the whole, to the way in which the material is presented and structured, and to the characterization of specific complexes and units as meaningful, all taken in relation to the question of genre and style. It then becomes possible to say whether a given dance is a good dance of its type, i.e., within the particular genre and style. The dance may be more or less convincing in these terms. Certain criteria, canons, and standards are implicit in different kinds of dance, and the dance may be judged effective in this light.

It may be the *choreography* that is evaluated (2.41) and/or a particular *performance* of it (2.42), in terms of both the skill exhibited in the performance and the interpretation offered. The performance may be compared with others of the same work. Further, the *response* to the dance may be evaluated (2.43).

In many ways, the individual response is the most important aspect of the entire enterprise, since it is the *raison d'être* of the dance as well as the spectators' reason for looking at it. Works of art are seen to be of value when they move the spectator and offer a heightened experience. It is our contention that everything in the chart leads to this response and, in turn,

is derived from it. We would argue that an informed response is the ultimate aim of dance studies in the context of aesthetic education. For most students, this response will occur in watching dance and for some also in making or performing.

Within aesthetic education, the purpose must be to come to appreciate and understand the dance more fully. One's own response may be limited, and illumination may occur through studying the responses of others. The study of critical writings reveals reasons for the appraisals offered, and these reasons are given in relation to visible, objective features of the work. Interpretations placed on a group of such features may vary to some degree, but in order to arrive at a considered judgment, the reasons for an interpretation can be examined and validated by reference to the dance itself.

A chart of skills and concepts for dance—STAGE 4

1. Skills	2. Concepts
1.4 evaluating, appraising, and judging the dance	2.4 evaluation 2.41 <i>choreography</i> 2.411 appropriateness and effectiveness of genre—general and choreographic style, subject matter—content, and treatment in relation to quality, mood, atmosphere, and meaning 2.412 appropriateness and effectiveness of this dance vis-à-vis other dances which have similar characteristics 2.42 <i>performance</i> 2.421 appropriateness and effectiveness of a particular performance of the dance in terms of technical competence and the interpretation given 2.422 appropriateness and effectiveness of other interpretations of the dance 2.43 <i>response and appraisal</i> 2.431 appropriateness of the response—liking/disliking, reasons offered and substantiated 2.432 validity of other appraisals, of the critical response of others.

Some Notes on Interpretation

The notion of “interpreting” the dance (Stage 3 of the chart) perhaps needs some amplification, since the word can be used in a number of rather different ways, e.g., with reference to different parts of the act of performing or to various people involved in the performance. The *member of the audience* may place a certain interpretation on a particular performance in the sense of the meaning(s) derived. The educator and student are also spectators and respond in the same way the audience does, but they may apply more analytic procedures to the work in their attempt to arrive at a considered statement of its significance. At the other end of the continuum from the casual spectator, the professional critic interprets the dance in a particular way and passes on that interpretation by means of impressionistic, descriptive, or reasoned statements about the dance.

From a rather different point of view, the *dancer* offers a particular interpretation of the dance through the way in which he or she performs it. The dancer’s interpretation does not reflect idiosyncratic mannerisms but a fully thought-out approach to the performance of the dance. It is precisely this which the critic or scholar attempts to locate in comparative analyses of different performances. At the level of interpreting a work as a whole, one might consider whether the Royal Ballet’s performance (interpretation) of Tudor’s *Dark Elegies* offers an interpretation similar to that of the Ballet Rambert. Anyone who has seen both or who merely has read the critics on the subject would know that contrasting interpretations were being offered by these companies, which substantially affected the judgments made of the work.

The choreographer is in the unique position of *making* the dance and therefore of determining, through specific structure and form, the range of possible interpretations. The choreographer will, by linking this particular set of movements in this particular way, set a boundary for the validity of any one interpretation.

The basis upon which *all* these kinds of interpretation rest is, however, the observable features of the dance, that is, the movement components, the dancers, the setting and accompanying aural elements, and the clusters, complexes, and relations which they form (2.1, 2.2). Interpretive statements are not plucked from the air but are rooted in one or more particular realizations of the dance in which pertinent features can be located. In consequence, reasons can be adduced for the statements made.

Clearly, when the director of a performance is also its choreographer, one might assume congruence between the interpretive and choreographic roles; but as soon as someone other than the choreographer brings a performance into being, elements of a different or alternative interpretation may enter. In time, if the dance remains in the repertoire, a number of different directors will produce the dance, and a number of different inter-

pretations will be available for enjoyment, illumination, and study. It is an important area of dance performance analysis to locate those aspects of different performances that are crucial to success, that is, those that appear consistently as opposed to those that change. For example, costume is often a variable, and a parallel might be a Shakespeare play performed in modern dress. Some universality of meaning overrides these changes or is perhaps highlighted by them. One might argue that for a dance to remain the same dance, some core of meaning must remain constant—as is the case with some pieces of music that are still perceived as artistically significant years after their contextual surroundings have changed, many of their performance features have altered, and their performance is purely a reconstruction from a score.

Both the critic and the performer/director require knowledge that goes beyond the levels of analysis identified here. The possession of an artistic background, which illuminates any dance, is relevant, as is familiarity with the medium and with specific styles and genres within the medium. Acquaintance with other instances of performance of the same work and study of its score also contribute to an understanding of any one interpretation of it.

Summary

The chart of skills and concepts for dance demonstrates agreement with, and offers practical support for, the basic assumptions upon which the original chart was constructed. The “aesthetic domain” of dance has been clearly laid out in terms of skills and concepts for what the Smiths term “skillful probing” and “full participation.” In effect, the use of the chart may provide a means by which a more informed response to and a deeper experience of dance may be made possible and in consequence a more discerning dance public may be created.

NOTES

1. R. A. and C. M. Smith, “The Artworld and Aesthetic Skills: A Context for Research and Development,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 11, no. 2 (Apr. 1977):124.
2. David Best, “The Objectivity of Artistic Appreciation,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 20, no. 2 (1980):115-27.
3. Smith and Smith, “Artworld and Aesthetic Skills,” 124.