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On: 29 August 2013, At: 08:38

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Journal of Dance Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ujod20>

### Best Instructional Practices for Developing Student Choreographers

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To cite this article: Kathryn Humphreys MA & Sinad Kimbrell MA (2013) Best Instructional Practices for Developing Student Choreographers, Journal of Dance Education, 13:3, 84-91

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2013.812790>

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# Best Instructional Practices for Developing Student Choreographers

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**ABSTRACT** Drawing on more than two decades of experience refining this teaching process, as well as insights from two consecutive research studies of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago’s education work, this article presents best practice strategies for teaching choreography to elementary students in schools. The article outlines the rationale behind the Prepare, Create, Perform, Respond (PCPR) process used with students in Grades 2 through 6, with residencies spanning 10 to 25 sessions (approximately 8 to 25 teaching hours) in Chicago-area public schools. Our programs use universal dance vocabulary, which covers dance concepts (body, energy, space, and time) as well as a set of seven choreographic devices (retrograde, expansion, transposition, diminution, accumulation, canon, repetition). This basic vocabulary is consistent in all residencies, and is linked to each residency’s inquiry or guiding question. This inquiry helps identify the specific dance concepts to be used (e.g., size and energies, in the case of a residency focused on form and function), or choreographic devices (e.g., retrograde, canon, and diminution, at a school whose inquiry is shaped around “reduce, reuse, and recycle”) to shape student choreography. This article provides practical application of instruction and assessment practices within the PCPR process.

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Our organization’s education work is centered in the philosophy that experiences in the creative processes of dance, combined with seeing the results thereof in professional performance, provide unique learning opportunities. “Creating dances and making sense of dances require reasoning, understanding symbols, analyzing images and knowing how to organize knowledge” (Hanna 2008, 497). After years of refinement, we have arrived at the idea that our dance curriculum for public and private elementary school students develops artists, like the work of the company itself, through the choreographic process. Every teacher, teaching artist, and student begins with choreography. How we generate movement ideas, refine them, shape them, and present them is the work of our in-school residency programs.

Research confirms the potential benefits for integrating the creative processes of choreography into school curricula. Utilizing the choreographic process can provide insight into learning through the body that fosters the education of the whole child and creates a resource-rich learning context. It fosters multiple intelligences through creative problem solving (Bresler 1992; Deasy 2002; Hanna 2008) and linguistic growth in reading and expressive communication, as well as enhanced interpersonal relationships expressed through social interaction and the development of social tolerance (Aprill, Burnaford, and Weiss 2001). When students choreograph, they employ a representational mode not always incorporated into curricula. “Translating emotions, ideas, and data from one medium to another, such as thinking metaphorically through a physical embodiment of written or spoken text, requires an understanding of subject matter that includes being able to use it in new contexts” (Hanna 2008, 500). Whether or not students continue to choreograph after the completion of a residency, this

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approach posits that engaging them with the creative process through dance moves forward the art form and student learning (Smolin 2012).

In teaching the creative process, the cyclical formula of Create, Perform, Respond is the functional outline for our work. This process is anchored in a variety of curricular standards, at the state level, as well as within the National Dance Education Organization's national dance standards. Given the general lack of dance experience among students, however, we have added Prepare to the front of this formula. We acknowledge that these students need to understand how to create movement ideas and gain basic dance knowledge, not necessarily dance technique, before choreographing in the Create step (which includes revision and refinement tasks). Through research studies led by Dr. Louanne Smolin (2012) using the assessment tools included in this article, we have demonstrated that this cycle does facilitate student learning of the choreographic process, evidenced by measurable changes in students' choreography rubric scores, pre- and postresidency.

The following outlines specifically how students generate movement ideas, refine, shape, and present them using the Prepare, Create, Perform, and Respond (PCPR) process. Preparing students to create means introducing a shared vocabulary, one that allows them to begin with personal, sometimes pedestrian movements and make choices that turn these into dances, on which they can then reflect. Students create, perform, and reflect on their work just as professional choreographers do. Like professional choreographers who draw inspiration from the world around them, students draw information from their worlds, the school environments in which they spend the majority of their day, and through collaboration with their classmates. This insistence that students are choreographers, that they can create and manipulate movement using the same tools and thought processes as professionals, defines a new paradigm, shaping best practices in dance education.

## INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT TOOLS

In our approach the Create, Perform, and Respond steps are embedded throughout the creative process. The cycle of PCPR occurs in each class on the microlevel, as well as during performances and subsequent reflections by students and parents at the end of each residency or unit. Even during the initial step, Prepare, students are asked to perform while creating and responding on the spot, to ensure understanding and drive the curriculum forward. For the purposes of this article, we outline them separately, with nods to how they overlap within each section, and provide an "in practice" section with specific classroom examples.

Throughout the work, three main assessment tools are utilized: the Choreographic Rubric (Figure 1), the Eyes See/Mind Sees reflection process (Figures 2 and 3), and the Choreographic Process Worksheet (Figure 4). Each of these

tools was developed and refined by staff in collaboration with a roster of teaching artists. This contribution by teaching artists, although difficult to extract clearly, cannot be overstated, as their feedback has been invaluable to the development of these tools' effectiveness.

## PREPARE

Maxine Greene (1995) states, "students need to pursue their own images, their own visions of things. . . . (T)hey can be enabled to realize that one way of finding out what they are seeing, feeling and imagining is to transmute it into some kind of content and to give that content form. Doing so, they may unexpectedly perceive patterns and structures they never knew existed in the surrounding world. They may discover all sorts of new perspectives as the curtains of inattentiveness pull apart" (58–59).

Prepare includes three components: learning concepts and devices in preparation for developing each student's movement vocabulary, exploring concepts and devices through improvisation as they prepare to become choreographers, and observing dance, both of their peers and of professionals, to become articulate and informed audience members.

Because many of the students do not have prior knowledge of dance, we begin by teaching students to create and modify their own movement ideas, rather than utilizing codified steps from dance techniques. This method provides the added benefit of creating a student-centered learning climate that drives student engagement and encourages authority over students' own learning. Students engaged in these art experiences begin to develop habits of mind, ways of understanding and representing the world. And in this age of mass-media marketing, learning in the arts enables students to become producers of culture, not simply consumers (Rabkin and Redmond 2004).

### Prepare: In Practice

Before entering the classroom, teaching artists and staff need to determine what knowledge and skills students might already have. Students are asked to complete a choreographic assignment during the first class to set a baseline. This assignment asks students to create a dance using the following four guide points from the Choreographic Rubric:

- Use of required choreographic elements (concepts or devices covered by the unit).
- A clear beginning, middle, and end.
- Rehearsable and repeatable in composition.
- Interesting and engaging for audience.

The descriptors for each of these items (Figure 1) are discussed in the "Create" section of the article.

	Nope	Try Again	Getting Closer	OK	Almost There	Yeah!
Required materials of assignment are highlighted	No attempt	Attempted to highlight at least one requirement	Attempted to not pantomime required material or highlight at least two requirements	No pantomime; all requirements are at least present	At least half of required material is fully embodied/clearly articulated and the rest is present	All required material is fully embodied/clearly articulated
Clear beginning, middle, and end	No attempt	No sequence present; Transitions are not present	Sequence is present; Transitions are not present	Sequence is present; Transitions are present	Sequence <b>or</b> transitions are clear and purposeful	Sequence <b>and</b> transitions are clear and purposeful
Dance is rehearsable and repeatable in composition	No attempt	Group knows movements but not fully embodied	Some of the group fully embodies choreography with original intentions but not every time	Some of the group fully embodies choreography with original intentions every time	Choreography is fully embodied with original intentions but not every time	Choreography is fully embodied with original intentions every time
Work is interesting and engaging for audience	No attempt	Dance is not engaging, but rather flat and lifeless	There is no sense of performing to be watched; The group exhibits a lack of audience awareness	Dance is engaging, but there is a lack of surprise or liveliness; The group exhibits an awareness of audience	Dance is lively and engaging, and conveys a topic that has come to life; The group exhibits a strong sense of audience; The dance shows moments of originality	Dance is lively and engaging, and conveys a topic that has come to life in a surprising way; The dance shows originality and a personal touch

**FIGURE 1** The choreographic rubric.

What did your *Eyes See* in this dance? How would you describe their use of the body, energy, space and time (B.E.S.T concepts)? What choreographic devices were used by the choreographer? How was the dance organized and/or the dancers grouped?

What did your *Mind See*, or what did you imagine was going on in this dance? Did your mind create a story? What was that story?

**FIGURE 2** *Eyes See/Mind Sees* was developed in 2007 by Kathryn Humphreys and Sinéad Kimbrell with former Hubbard Street Teaching Artist Janet Brooks.

<i>Mind Sees</i> : Pre-Residency	<i>Mind Sees</i> : Post-Residency
<i>I didn't really see anything because it didn't really make sense.</i>	<i>What my eyes saw were smooth movements which help me picture a bird. At first, all the dancers were in a group, dancing in unison. This helped me picture a flock of birds. Then, two soloists began to dance by themselves, and then joined together. This helped me picture a male and female bird finding each other after years of loneliness, and staying together for an eternity of happiness.</i>

**FIGURE 3** This example displays how the *Eyes See/ Mind Sees* process allows students to make and communicate sophisticated interpretations of what they observe.

**Part 1: Brainstorming**

1. What ideas do you want to communicate to the audience?
2. What movement ideas/structures/choreographic devices would you like to use?

**Part 2: Choreography intentions:**

1. How does your choreography **BEGIN**? (Examples: Onstage/at a low level/tempo/with locomotor or without) Why?
2. What happens in the **MIDDLE** of your dance (part 1)? Why?
3. What happens in the **MIDDLE** of your dance (part 2)? Why?
4. What happens in the **MIDDLE** of your dance (part 3)? Why?
5. How does your dance **END**? Why?

**Part 3: Self-reflection**

1. Read what you wrote for your **BEGINNING**. Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?
2. Read what you wrote for your **MIDDLE** (part 1). Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?
3. Read what you wrote for your **MIDDLE** (part 2). Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?
4. Read what you wrote for your **MIDDLE** (part 3). Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?
5. Read what you wrote for your **END**. Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?

**Part 4: Peer Reflection**

1. What feedback did you get back from your peers?
2. What do you need to do during your dance to feel good about your choreography and your performance?

**FIGURE 4** The choreographic process worksheet.

Moving forward with the students, teaching artists focus on these four areas from the rubric to help students think about and produce dance as choreographers. To ensure students are able to apply concepts and devices to their own choreography, and in collaboration with their peers, teaching artists spend half of the residency teaching through movement explorations such as structured improvisation. A quick warm-up—Anne Green Gilbert’s Brain Dance (Gilbert 2006), for example—prepares students for the concept of the day by expressing it multiple times through physical developmental patterns before instruction moves into the exploration portion of the class. The use of structured improvisation in lessons gives students both guidance (how to craft their dances) and freedom (choice among movements to express their ideas). A well-structured movement assignment focuses on the concept of the day, yet gives freedom to layer in other concepts. For example, the teaching artist might ask students to perform one locomotor movement for 16 counts across the space before creating a shape. The students must travel through the space to embody the concept of the day—locomotion—and find a frozen position (shape) after 16 counts. However, they have the freedom to choose the energies, tempos, directions, and levels of their movement phrases. Simple strategies such as these can be adopted by students when they proceed to create their own work.

**Prepare to Create**

In preparing students to become choreographers, we provide them with models for thinking about the choices they

are making as they create movements, setting the stage for more complex discussions later about choreographic choices. Starting the questioning process around improvisation prepares students for crafting their choreographic choices when they are asked to collaborate in group work: Why did you choose to glide on a low level, facing away from the audience? Was a slow tempo part of your intention? If so, why? When it comes to students producing choreography, they need to be aware that their movements relay meanings brought to life by their choices. Structured improvisations give them the space to play with these choices before purposefully constructing meaning. By using improvisation to explore movement choices, the teaching artists can set up the choreographer–audience relationship, having some students perform while others observe. Structured improvisations also provide students with a framework for creating and manipulating their own movement ideas as they evolve from pedestrian movements, creating a movement laboratory for learning.

**Prepare to Respond**

Another learning objective is to prepare students to be engaged and communicative audience members. In addition, reflection is an important part of the journey to becoming an articulate choreographer. Although presented at the end here, Respond is not seen as a final step of the creative process, but as one that is embedded throughout, present during brainstorming and revising. Through reflective performing and viewing during improvisations,

students witness how the same concept is expressed by different bodies, how audience members gather meaning from movement, and what makes a dance interesting. The skills that work to create informed audiences are the same skills that create reflective choreographers, who are conscious of their choice-making and its impact on the audience. For example, if students want unison movement, they will need to think through what to say or show the performers to have their bodies look the same. If they want to make the audience feel excited, they have to recall which movements (e.g., low to the ground in slow motion, or flying through the air at a fast tempo) made them feel excited as a viewer. Connecting movement with intent supports students' ability to move away from what they already know as pedestrian movers to thinking and moving as dance artists.

## CREATE

As students learn to embody their new dance vocabulary, they also learn to make clear choices about how to use that vocabulary to express their ideas in this new language as previously outlined. As they teach students to choreograph, teaching artists must clearly break down the creative process for students, providing clear structures to choreograph within, such as rondo, canon, or forms like A-B-A, call-and-response, and theme and variation. During this time, students improvise (brainstorm), create a rough draft, and revise their work together several times. To provide a clear through line and assist these emerging choreographers, we continue to utilize the four criteria from the choreographic rubric (Figure 1) introduced during the pretest. Create is the most clearly cyclical of the processes, with respond/revise and perform necessary parts of effective creation. How those steps are used during creation with further explanation of their independent function later is noted later in the article.

### Creating with the End in Mind

Using the best practice strategy of backward design, students are provided with the rubric and descriptors so they clearly see from the beginning the challenges being asked of them. This rubric lets students see that to elicit *Yeabs*, their dances should be fully embodied, with all required material clearly articulated; be sequenced clearly and purposefully, with complete and considered transitions; be fully embodied as choreography with its original intentions intact during each performance; and be lively and engaging, to convey a topic and bring it to life with originality and personal touches. That is a lot to ask of any choreographer, particularly a young student, and yet we see students achieve this in their work, albeit not all of them and not all of the time. These are aspirational goals meant to inspire and engage students as they move forward.

## Create: In Practice

To help students begin their work, the teaching artist gives them The Choreographic Process Worksheet that states the four criteria from the rubric followed by a series of guiding questions:

### Part 1: Brainstorming

- What ideas do you want to communicate to the audience?
- What movement ideas, structures, or choreographic devices would you like to use?

Students are given time to work as soloists or in collaborative groups to analyze how they might use the required concepts to communicate an idea from their point of view. After spending time physicalizing their initial movement ideas, they answer the following questions to help them recall and clarify what they have shaped.

### Part 2: Choreographic intentions

1. How does your choreography start? (Examples: Onstage / At a low level / With locomotion or without) Why?
2. What happens in the middle of your dance (part 1)? Why?
3. What happens in the middle of your dance (part 2)? Why?
4. What happens in the middle of your dance (part 3)? Why?
5. How does your dance end? Why?

## Responding During Creation

After students have created a draft, they perform for their peers and use the reflective process, Eyes See/Mind Sees. This reflective method helps students critique and makes meaning of choreographed movement studies. The Eyes See/Mind Sees method links "inference and physical feats that satisfies the choreographer-audience relationship and gives both the choreographer and audience a structure and language with which to articulate their experience" (Kimbrell 2012, 89). This strategy asks the audience to recall what their "eyes" saw, such as which body parts drew their focus, what energy qualities they noticed, and how the choreography related to and made use of space and time. The choreographers and dancers hear, as well as chart, what was clear or stood out, and what was absent or unseen. The audience then states what their mind "saw," or in other words, the images and stories their minds concocted while watching the dance. This second step allows the choreographers to receive vital feedback about how their movement choices are being translated into meaning, and continues the growth in students' understanding that works of art, even their own, often have multiple interpretations. Eyes See/Mind Sees can be used as a peer share (between one soloist or group and another) or as a whole-group discussion. We encourage multiple occurrences of this type of feedback during the creation of a new work. Figure 2 shows the type of questions that can be included in this reflective process.

## Revising During Creation

During the creative process, students need to learn that their first drafts, and even their second or third drafts, are often not their final drafts. Teaching artists record students' drafts (via video) to assist in thoughtful editing, as the ability to see themselves dancing is a greater prompt for revision than any audience feedback or worksheet. It is during this time that students revisit the choreographic rubric while viewing their own work and taking in feedback from their peers during the Eyes See/Mind Sees process. Parts 3 and 4 on The Choreographic Process Worksheet continue to embed Respond in the creating and revising of student choreography.

### Part 3: Self-reflection

- A. Read what you wrote for your BEGINNING.  
Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?
- B. Read what you wrote for your MIDDLE (part 1/A).  
Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?
- C. Read what you wrote for your MIDDLE (part 2/B).  
Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?
- D. Read what you wrote for your MIDDLE (part 3/C).  
Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?
- E. Read what you wrote for your END.  
Did you see the dancers doing this in the video? What needs to be clearer?

Students must decide where they are currently on the rubric after viewing their drafts, as well as what they need to do to move up the rubric toward a *Yeah!* At this time, students take their learning into their own hands, although the teaching artist supports each soloist's or group's artistic journey to fulfill the criteria set forth on the first day of the residency by checking in with them as they decide which choices to make next.

Before students share their work on a larger scale, described under Perform, they are given another opportunity to perform for their peers. There are no critics of student work taken more seriously than their peers; performing a final draft in front of their classmates for any last-minute tweaks helps students solidify their ideas and interpretive choices.

During check-ins, the teaching artist instills in students that interesting choreography does not equal using everything they know, but in thoughtfully crafting a message or idea for an audience that is engaging, surprising, and fully presented. It is important that their movements are connected to an artistic intention as well as connected to their "Whys" in Part 2, and suggestions of clarity in Part 3. The teaching artist guides these conversations using questions such as these: What makes a great dance? What makes an

okay dance? What was interesting? What was unexpected? For students just learning to choreograph and perform, engaging in these discussions as both a performer and an audience member allows them to reflect on how what they see in their peers' work applies to their own performance.

## Performing During Creation

It has been, and continues to be, a tricky balance in the short amount of time we have with students to find time to give them skills to create and edit dances while also giving them the skills to work toward performing those dances effectively. Even the most interesting choreography can be ruined for the audience if it is performed by students who have not rehearsed their movements, do not know what is next, or flail and talk through the performance. Practicing performance, as part of the peer-sharing process, enables students to move back and forth in their roles as choreographer and performer as the classroom experience requires that they be both.

After their final peer sharing, the student choreographers complete Part 4, the final section of the worksheet.

### Part 4: Peer reflection

- What feedback did you get back from your peers?
- What do you need to do during your dance to feel good about your choreography and your performance?

In addition to refining the physical performance of their dances, the Perform step in this cycle is an opportunity for students to express the ideas behind their movements. Clearly articulating the "why" offers insight for the audience and the teacher as to the students' intentions and can assist in the refining of their movement choices and subsequent performance.

## PERFORM

Dance is a performative art and exists fully only in the moment of performance. Even though focus is on teaching students to be engaged and reflective choreographers, we must also work on performance skills. The role of performer is a reflective one that allows students to think critically about how they are embodying their ideas: How will the audience interpret this choreography? What is the role of ambiguity in sharing my ideas? How will different cultures and experiences shape how my work is viewed? How can this be better? Learning to ask and explore such critical questions is, of course, useful far beyond simply improving one dance and frequently plays a role in a residency's inquiry questions.

Beyond that, being able to perform their dances with clarity and intention taps into larger learning skills. "The acquisition of critical thinking and learning skills, essential to education in any subject, is involved in learning a dance technique and performing creatively and, most productively, in making and analyzing dances that convey

thoughts, feelings or a perspective on movement itself” (e.g., Baum, Owen, and Oreck 1997; Heath, Soep, and Roach 1998; Seham 1997). To perform their dances successfully, students must be able to collaborate, understand the meaning and intent of their dances, rehearse their movements, create memory, be accountable to their coperformers and choreographers, and discover what it means to dance fully and with expression. These are difficult skills for experienced dancers, and yet a dance residency is not complete without introducing these ideas to students.

Perform has two levels: (1) the role of performance in the creative process, which allows for feedback, rehearsal with an audience and critical reflection, and (2) performance as an end of unit sharing where a “finished” work is presented to share learning and ideas. As stated earlier, the program employs both of these performance strategies as ways of moving students’ understanding forward in this cyclical curriculum, but places far more emphasis on the former given the time constraints of most in-school residencies.

### Perform: In Practice

We begin using performance during the very first class to prepare students for understanding the performative nature of the dancer, choreographer, and audience conversation. All of these “performances” are quite informal in nature, but they work together to inform students’ understanding of the role of sharing in dance, that a dance exists only in the moment of performance. Additionally, an audience can be thought of as anything from the teacher or teaching artist to a small group of students to the entire class to parents and outside classes, depending on the goal of the sharing. We teach the skill of performance through a variety of methods: round-robin sharings, in-process sharings with structured audience feedback such as Eyes See/Mind Sees, peer-to-peer reflections, and in-process videoing. Each of these methods works to move students through the process of creating movement ideas to embody their ideas as dance. It is vital that students have numerous opportunities to share their movement studies or drafts, experiencing what it means to dance for a variety of audiences as well as gathering vital feedback, both from the experience of performing as they engage in self-reflection as well as from the more structured feedback from their audience.

### Reflective Performers

Informal student sharings help students become comfortable with the idea of dancing for others, as well as serving as a vital component in the choreographic process, but it is important for students to also learn to recognize when a work is “done.” End-of-residency sharings provide that endpoint to the students’ choreographic processes and allow students to experience performance in front of a larger audience. An end-of-residency sharing not only documents the “final” student choreography, but it also shares aspects

of the creative process, making student learning visible to parents and peers. As students share their short dances, they also share journal entries, sketches, ideas, and vocabulary that have been part of the residency, leading the audience through their thinking and learning processes.

### Creative Performers

As students work through the rehearsal process, encouraging them to stick with their dance pieces long enough to thoroughly understand them as performers can be challenging. Students are not often allowed the freedom of working on the same task and refining it in consecutive classes. Utilizing practices from professional dancers, such as exploring nuance in movement, connecting with the audience and finding their voices as dancers is an exciting part of this work, as it allows students to understand the role of the creative process in performance.

### RESPOND

Response to work is embedded in how the choreographic process is taught. In addition to becoming critical audiences for their peers, students are also asked to respond to the work of professional choreographers. Our students have two opportunities to see professional performances, which frequently showcase the work of multiple choreographers. Students attend concerts, once in a theater and once at their school. This experience of viewing clearly articulated and intentional performance assists students in realizing the wide array of choice-making available, as well as additional examples that are not presented in their classrooms. An example of this includes viewing dancers both onstage in a large theater as well as up close in the school’s cafeteria, gym, or auditorium. These performances allow students to compare and contrast the different aspects of performance. Furthermore, theater performances allow students to see how costumes, props, and lighting affect the crafting of a piece.

### Respond: In Practice

Constantly assessing whether or not the methods are effective in improving students’ abilities to think and produce dance as choreographers is necessary to this process. Just as a pretest is used to gauge student knowledge at the beginning of a residency, the final student performance is used as a postassessment. After scoring each piece of choreography at the beginning and end of the residency, the teaching artist and professional staff compare each student’s ability, before and after instruction, to assess trends and discuss possible curricular and instructional changes. For example, if no student work exhibits use of clear transitions, the amount of time or the way transitions were taught during the residency could receive modification to allow for more student success in this area.



## CONCLUSION

These methods for teaching the choreographic process construct best practices in dance education, as indicated by research in the field. Our current research, after year one of a three-year study, indicates that these methods produce improvements in students' group choreography within all rubric categories. Additionally, students increase their abilities to communicate ideas through dance (Smolin 2012). These emerging data are significant, as they indicate knowledge transfer as students take in diverse information and present it clearly in a new medium. Observing changes in students, hearing from teachers, engaging in ongoing conversations with teaching artists, and collecting measurable data contribute to how our work with schools moves forward, solidifying strategies and tools that help communicate goals and student learning.

The choreographic process is a powerful tool, both for creating new dance artists and for embedding critical thinking skills into the curriculum. Students who engage in this deeply reflective work emerge with better understandings of how they communicate ideas and how they interpret visual information (Smolin 2012). Viewing all students as artists, with the potential to create new and interesting movements and present ideas as dance, allows us, and the dance field, to nurture the next generation. We are creating dancers, choreographers, and audience members interested in and capable of engaging with each other in new and dynamic ways.

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