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The Art of Language: American Sign Language and Dance

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The University of Akron

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Project Title**Abstract**

Dance and American Sign Language (ASL) are two separate entities which share a place in the world as communication through movement. For this project, I extended my knowledge and understanding of two disciplines, ASL and dance, through evidence-based research practices while integrating that research with my creative process and experience within a classroom-based setting. Through this framework of research, coursework, and experimentation, I drew relations between dance and ASL as communication. The results of my research are presented in this report as well as in a piece of choreography I created based on the integration of ASL with a choreographic voice in a piece entitled *For Emily*. This piece was presented at The University of Akron Terpsichore Dance Club's spring concert, Spring Into Dance, on April 25-27, 2019. A video of the work can be accessed using this link: <https://youtu.be/ifbebplKbwo>. This project is intentionally focused on the application of ASL into my choreographic voice for the purpose of extending my ability to create expressiveness and communicate through dance.

Introduction

Mary Wigman opens her text, *The Language of Dance*, with this statement: “The dance is a living language which speaks of man - an artistic message soaring above the ground of reality in order to speak, on a higher level, in images and allegories of man’s innermost emotions and need for communication.” (Wigman, 1966, p. 10). If dance, a human expression manifested from the movement of one’s body, can be explained as a deep form of communication, the connection of dance to American Sign Language is very clear. American Sign Language (ASL) is a language that was created based solely upon movement and expression through the use of conceptual codified signs in order for members of the deaf community to communicate in a language that is natural and native to them. Those who are fluent in ASL utilize signs to communicate across a spectrum of meaning from basic conversational elements to speaking in public. Dance is very much the same; choreographers use movement as a vehicle to communicate concepts or ideas to an audience. In this project, I explored the connections that could be drawn from two manifestations of communication through movement.

The motivation for this project came from my cousin Emily, which is how I decided the title for my piece: *For Emily*. Emily was in a car accident in 2010 that resulted in a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Emily is no longer able to communicate verbally, but prior to the accident, she had learned basic ASL. Emily miraculously retained her knowledge of ASL through her coma, TBI, and recovery, and now is able to communicate her basic needs and desires through signing. Because of my background in dance, I felt a connection to Emily through the use of movement communication, and a desire to learn more about ASL and the way it can provide access to a person in a situation even as difficult as Emily’s. The audio I used in *For Emily* was

predominately *Songbird* by Fleetwood Mac, a piece of music that had personal connections not only to Emily, but also the use of ASL. *For Emily* had a cast of 3 dancers. The choice of choreographing this piece on a trio of dancers was made for choreographic purposes of spacing, depth, and formations. The lighting for this piece was designed by Christopher Ha. The music, a section of a piece entitled *Il* by Jean-Michel Blais and *Songbird* by Fleetwood Mac were cut and edited by me.

Research

According to Charlotte Baker and Carol Padden in their text *American Sign Language: A Look at Its History, Structure, and Community* (1978), before the year 1817, there is not a tangible record of the deaf community in America (p. 2). It is likely that deaf people created “home signs” before a codified language was developed (Baker, Padden, 1978 p. 2). The reason for this lack of codified language was because of a lack of public transportation, education, and sense of community for the deaf. According to Baker and Padden, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet desired to study methods to educate deaf people, so he travelled to Europe. There, he studied French Sign Language (LSF). Because of his education in French Sign Language, LSF became the largest base structure for the subsequently developed American Sign Language. In France, Gallaudet met Laurent Clerc, a teacher of the deaf in Paris, and together they founded the first school in America for deaf people (gallaudet.edu). For the first time, deaf people could come together in a place where not only were they being educated to a level they were able to understand, but they were also able to develop a sense of community that they did not have before. From this point on, the deaf community in America became more visible.

The deaf community is how deaf people can share a common experience, values, and a way of interacting with each other through the handicap of deafness (Baker, Padden, 1978, p. 4).

“Attitudinal deafness” is the determining factor of a member of the deaf community.

“[Attitudinal deafness] occurs when a person identifies him/herself as a member of the deaf community and other members accept that person as part of the community” (Baker, Padden, 1978 p. 4). Members of the deaf community must know and practice ASL as their native language; ASL is a principle defining factor of the deaf community. Throughout my coursework in ASL, I have learned the importance of the deaf community and the use of ASL as their native language. When hearing people attempt to make deaf people communicate using anything other than their native language, deaf people are deprived of their experience and not given a fair chance in communicating.

In ASL, there are parameters that can be considered cornerstones of the language, and they each offer a unique characteristic. There are four parameters: handshapes, movements, palm orientation, and location. Along with these manual parameters, there are also non-manual cues that accompany the manual parameters of ASL. According to Marilyn Daniels in her text *Dancing With Words: Signing for Hearing Children’s Literacy* (2001) these non-manuals consist of facial expression, eyebrow movement, body posture, and the movement of eyes, mouth, and face in general (Daniels, 2001, p. 11). As a student of ASL, I have learned how crucial each of these parameters are. The difference between two completely contrasting signs might be a change as simple as the clockwise or counterclockwise rotation of the arm. Because of these critical details, learning correct ASL techniques and execution is imperative to the practice of ASL.

Throughout my experience in the course ASL I, I have learned that space is extremely relevant and a very important parameter in the practice of ASL. Physical space is a unique characteristic to ASL, and according to Daniels, “there is no analogous space aspect present in English,” or in any other verbally spoken language, for that matter. In verbal communication, the use of gestures and spatial references may add emphasis and clarity, but is not necessary to indicate specific grammatical structures, such as verb tense. But, in ASL, I have learned a persons “signing space” is a critical element that is necessary in order to communicate effectively. Daniels also notes, “In ASL, space is used for indicating various verb tenses and for indexing. The concept of tense is represented by an imaginary timeline from behind the signer’s body to the front of the signer’s body. The past is represented by the space in the back of the signer, the future is represented by the space in front of the signer, and the present by the space nearest to the signer’s torso.” As for indexing, “A referent, a person or object, is placed in space and then referred to by the conversational partners by *indexing*, pointing, or even glancing at the space where the referent has been placed” (Daniels, 2001, p. 11). So, in ASL, a person is able to set up a scene in the space around them using a gesture known as indexing. For example, if a person were telling a story about their brother and he was not present in the room, they could set the scene by signing “my brother”, and then point next to them to sign “he” or “his”. From this point on, when the person gestures next to them in the place where their brother has been indexed, they are able to easily reference him without needing to recount who he is. Indexing is one example of how the use of ones “signing space” is a critical element of ASL.

Sarah F. Taub, a professor in the department of ASL, Linguistics, and Interpretation at Gallaudet University, explains more about the use of space in her book *Language From the*

Body: Iconicity and Metaphor in American Sign Language. Taub lays out a scene in the opening pages of her book. “Imagine that you are taking part in a conversation using American Sign Language (ASL), the language of the American Deaf Community. You are about to see an integration of visual imagery with linguistic structure on a scale that no spoken language can equal.” These statements alone bring a powerful sense of visualization to a situation such as a conversation using ASL. She continues on, saying “The signer is telling you about her kitchen. She sketches the four walls in space, then quickly identifies the appliances and furnishings. As she names each one - refrigerator, sink, cabinets, and so on - she places it within the sketched outline of the kitchen, punctuating each placement with a special head nod. Before long, a virtual map of the room floats in the space between you,” (Taub, p. I). So, as one may see, the use of space is a very important parameter in ASL which can give context to tense as well as serve as a very important means of reference during conversation. Your conversation partner has quite literally laid out the picture of the room right in front of you. Without the specific use of space, would not have the same effect.

The concept of space is a very prominent factor not only in ASL, but in dance, as well. Dancers are taught (in technique classes as well as choreography classes) about 5 “elements” of dance: Body, Energy, Space, Time, and Relationship, or “BESTR.” Some dance educators teach slightly different versions, or interchange similar words, but the concept is the same. As for space, according to The Elements of Dance website, space for dancers can be used in a variety of ways. “Even when a dancer is dancing alone in a solo, the dancer is dynamically involved in the space of the performing area so that space might almost be considered a partner in the dance,” (elementsofdance.org). The space a dancer takes up can be used to translate a choreographer’s

message to an audience. For example, perhaps a dancer is performing big, slow, connected movement which takes up a lot of space. This may translate to an audience as a concept that might be warm, full, or very important to the idea the choreographer is portraying. For many forms of dance, taking up lots of space while travelling across the floor in a dance class is a very important concept. Dancers can also be challenged to share their space with several other dancers either in class or on the stage, which should create mindfulness of “wise” use of space.

Similar to ASL, space can also be used in dance to indicate and even “index” an idea or concept. In a classical story ballet especially, gestures and pantomime are used to portray concepts of a story line to an audience. In more contemporary work, gesture work can be more abstractly used to portray a concept to an audience. Although, in dance, sometimes that concept can be left up to interpretation by the audience. In ASL, the concept should be clear and concise, and each conversation partner should be able to clearly understand what the other person is explaining, asking, or stating. In dance, sometimes the concept is drawn clearly. This happens much of the time in the dance style, *lyrical*. In lyrical dance, choreographers create work based on a song’s lyrics. Because of this direct connection to the lyrics, it is easy to see what a dance may be portraying to an audience. In more modern and contemporary work, concepts are normally not as clearly depicted. Many choreographers have a goal of creating thought-provoking work that may stimulate many different interpretations.

Of course, the above statements are not to gloss over the use of abstract communication in ASL. Sarah Taub explains metaphor and abstractness in sign language in her book previously referenced, *Language From the Body: Iconicity and Metaphor in American Sign Language*. She begins by defining the term *Conceptual Metaphor* as “the consistent use of one basic conceptual

area to describe another, perhaps less self-evident area” (Taub p. 3). Taub explains how in English, we use language that although may not be directly connected to a concept, we have created metaphorical connections. For example, “English consistently uses language about throwing and catching objects to describe communication of ideas (e.g., “I couldn’t catch what you said”; “we were tossing ideas back and forth”; “it went over my head”).” (Taub pp. 3-4). Similar metaphor exists in ASL. Taub explains that there are many signs in ASL that incorporate or are centered around imagery of concrete concepts. One example given in the text is the sign for think, which is described as “a visual depiction of communication as objects moving from one person to another” (Taub, p. 4). Another example is a sign for anger, which “can be shown as fire in the abdomen or as explosions” (Taub p. 4). ASL is very conceptual, and from what I have learned in ASL I, it is important not to think of English words for signs, but rather, the whole concept in itself. For example, the sign for the concept of color, tone, pigment, or hue, is the same for all four words. It is the concept that the sign is created from, not a specific word.

The communicative properties of ASL are evident in the presence of spatial placement of detailed gesture as practiced throughout an entire community of people as a native language. ASL allows a deaf person (or a hearing person) to express meaning with others on a level that is as equally developed as a verbally spoken language. The physical barrier of deafness can be broken down by the use of ASL. In my own experience, I have found that the barrier of a TBI can also be broken down through the use of ASL. As a visual form of expression, ASL has the ability to convey meaning to others without the need for verbalization. Dance, with similar properties, can also hold these communicative effects. In its many forms, dance holds such a vast place in society. Among other defining properties, dance can be seen as a social activity, a

physical discipline, an expression of emotion, and a medium for communicating concepts such as social action, personal desires or ideas, or, in my case, an exploration of research based practices.

Choreographic Process

Connecting the conceptual nature of ASL with dance gave me a theoretical framework to create my dance work. In contemporary dance, many times we create work based on an idea, a concept, or an emotion. For this piece, my concept was the idea of extending the communicative voice of ASL through the communicative medium of dance. I chose the music for my piece, *Songbird* by Fleetwood Mac, for some personal reasons as well as a conceptual connection of the words into ASL and dance. There is a video of my cousin Emily singing this song with a few of her friends during the summer before her car accident. This is one of the only recordings I have access to of Emily singing, which is something she is no longer able to do after the accident. After the accident, one of the friends from the video created an ASL interpretation of the song and posted it to Facebook specifically for Emily. Because of these connections, I knew I wanted to use the song for a portion of my work. The other sampling of music I have chosen is entitled *II* by Jean-Michel Blais. It is a short piano piece that appears in the first section of my dance work. I chose this music because I wanted to include a section of work that connected ASL with dance without using words to prompt movement. As a compliment to my musical and movement choices, I selected costume design from an everyday wardrobe and left lighting design up to Christopher J. Ha, a University of Akron student.

In the first section of my dance work, I chose several different signs in ASL that depict concepts that are relevant to my research. These signs are, “language,” “communicate,” “dance,” “song,” “speak,” and “signing.” I used these signs as motifs for my work. I modified some of them and choreographed the signs to flow into the movement. In order for the audience to understand what these signs mean and to be able to recognize them, I created a program insert that included photo references of the signs. Audience members were able to reference the insert to understand the interpretations of the signs, which hopefully gave them insight into the meaning of the first section. The purpose of choreographing the signs to simultaneously integrate with the dance movement was to show the communicative relationship signing and dancing can have. If the dancers were to be standing in one spot, not moving their feet, and signing these concepts, the meaning would have only the depth of the sign. What I hoped to achieve by adding choreographed movement of the feet, head, and torso to these signs was to add a layer of depth to the sign. My goal was to create an even deeper interpretive meaning for an audience member, not just the words “dance,” “language,” and so on.

The second section of my piece, *Songbird*, was choreographed very much around the lyrics of the song. Unlike the first section, I did not choreograph the ASL to simultaneously interact with the dance movement. The reason I made this choice was to show contrast between the voice of ASL and the voice of dance in the same work. For example, the first verse of the song is completely performed using ASL. The 3 dancers stand in the front of the stage facing the audience and interpret the lyrics by signing. As they complete the ASL interpretation of the first verse, they dive into choreographed dance movement. Throughout the duration of this section, the dancers switch back and forth between choreographed movement and ASL interpretations.

As the piece goes on, the duration of time between the change of language becomes shorter and shorter. For example, they may switch between choreographed dance and ASL between a matter of two words. By doing this, I hope to have achieved a work that brings together these two artistic and linguistic forms analogously. My goal is for the audience to see that although ASL and dance are two very different disciplines, that they may be able to work together to communicate a concept or story to an audience. By the end of the piece, I hoped that it was more difficult for the audience to see the stark differences between the two, and that they flow together to create an interpretation of lyrics that is meaningful in either way it is presented.

When it came to choreographing movement to lyrics without the element of ASL, I considered the idea of gesture work and lyrical interpretations of words. Because I wanted to show a contrast between ASL and dance choreography both as communicative disciplines, I spent a lot of time during the choreographic process of Songbird brainstorming ways that dance movement could translate a phrase or an idea. Because the language of contemporary dance is more subjective and is not a codified language like ASL, I felt that I had a realm of creative liberty in front of me. I still wanted the dancing to translate in a similar manner to that of ASL, so my plan was to choreograph steps that would complement the lyrics in a way that was abstract and could be subjective, but still clear.

My coursework in ASL I played a very important role in the development of my choreographic work. Because I was able to experience ASL firsthand, I felt my interpretation of the language utilized in *For Emily* was very authentic. Not only was I able to communicate with my ASL instructor, Lori Palmer, in order to be sure of my authenticity, but my newfound knowledge of the language gave me a personalized perspective of which I was able to relay to

the dancers in my piece. For example, with facial expression, eye contact, and head movement playing a large role in communication via ASL, I was able to instill in the dancers when they were to change their eye contact, when to shake their head in negation or affirmation, and when their facial expression was meant to match the emotion tied with the lyrics. Aside from important mechanical details, I feel that I was able to give the dancers in *For Emily* a general knowledge of deaf culture. I hope that my knowledge and extended empathy for deaf culture was able to be relayed to my dancers and audience alike as an authentic and accurate depiction of communication through movement.

Through the duration of the course, I learned the nature of many signs is derivative from historical significance or uses imagery that is directly connected with the concept of the sign. For example, the sign for dance uses the “number two” handshape turned upside down so the index and middle fingers are seen as “legs,” and the dominant hand moves in a sweeping motion across the palm of the non-dominant hand, as if it were the floor. Many of the signs I have learned make sense conceptually right away, and some of them take some explaining to understand the nature of the sign. When choreographing *Songbird*, I tried to embody the mindset of conceptual interpretation of movement. For example, when the word “wish” is sung, I choreographed a movement that derived from the first thing that came to mind when I hear the word wish: blowing on a dandelion that has gone to seed and letting the little white tufts float through the air. Utilizing metaphor and abstract movement to complement the song lyrics was the goal for this section of the piece.

Reflection & Conclusion

Throughout the duration of this project, I have seen developments of myself as a choreographer. My dance background that is heavily focused in ballet, so contemporary dance works are not something that has been in my repertoire for more than 4 years. This is only my third time creating a dance work that is not ballet. In my experience, choreographing and performing ballet has much to do with aesthetics or a storyline that is predisposed. Although other styles of dance such as contemporary also can be aesthetically driven, many times contemporary and modern dance works can be seen to have an emotional or educational derivative, and can even be used as works of social action. Because of this given nature of contemporary dance, I decided to choreograph my research-based dance work in a contemporary style.

Using ASL in connection with my choreographic voice was an experience that was both challenging and rewarding. Having a specific ASL sign such as “language” to use as a motif for movement, as well as being able to experiment with ways to modify the sign into choreographed dance steps was one of the most rewarding and interesting concepts for me while moving forward with this work. As a dancer and dance educator, a concept I try to instill in myself and my students is the idea of the “story” you are telling while you are dancing. I find it important for myself to use a narrative mindset while dancing because not only does it make the movement more rewarding for myself, but I find that assigning a purpose to movement can help to better translate that purpose to an audience. Because the ASL signs already had a concrete concept and purpose, I felt that my job was to stretch those meanings into fully developed thoughts through the aid of dance. I felt like this was well received by the audience, and when talking to friends and family after the show, I had a general consensus that audience members could see the story that was being told throughout the piece.

In conclusion, researching and connecting American Sign Language to dance choreography has been a rewarding experience and has helped me to grow not only as a choreographer and a dancer, but also as a member of society. Becoming educated about ASL and the deaf community has given me a sense of understanding and empathy for those who are not able to communicate in a way that a majority of the world is able to. But, with methods of communication such as ASL, deafness can be overcome as a handicap. Another conclusion that I have reached is that dance is much more than purely aesthetic or athletic. Dance is a language in itself. I am motivated after the completion of this project to take my knowledge of communication through movement even further and develop this concept into my future as a choreographer.

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Images



Image 1: "Language"



Image 2: "I love you"



Image 3: "It's alright"