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Dancing Through the Harlem Renaissance:
An Inquiry-Based Unit Plan Exploring Movement and Culture

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Abstract

Incorporating movement and physical activity into the K-12, general education classroom has been on the rise. In a study done in 2019, Chloe Bedard deemed physical activity successful within the primary school setting and was determined to examine the benefits of movement integration into the secondary school setting (Bedard et al 2019, as cited in Romar, 2023). Additionally, dance scholars have researched the positive effects of incorporating dance history and movement into the classroom. With these two major advancements in mind, this study will provide a social studies unit that integrates dance movement. This unit aims to teach students about the Harlem Renaissance from the dance perspective, by inquiring, “How can dance be used to celebrate culture?” This research will serve as a resource for educators searching for innovative ways to teach the historical importance and impact of the Harlem Renaissance.
Introduction

Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, a pioneer of tap dance from the early 20th century said, “What success I achieved in the theatre is due to the fact that I have always worked just as hard when there were ten people in the room as when there were thousands” (Bill Robinson Quotes 2001). Alongside Robinson are many other prominent individuals whose careers flourished from this renaissance, including notable activist W.E.B. Du Bois. He believed that Black Americans should “embrace their African heritage even as they worked and lived in the United States” (Our History 2021). This conviction is what led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP, on February 12, 1909. As one of its founders, Du Bois, along with prominent figures such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell, spearheaded this movement of people and ideas.

This development would later become known as the Great Migration, the settling of Black families into the northern Manhattan neighborhood of Harlem. The attraction of civil rights activists, a handful of natural disasters in the southern region of America, and employment opportunities within the factories led to an estimated 300,000 African Americans moving into Harlem and its surrounding neighborhoods (History.com 2023). This time from about 1910 to 1930 has gone down in history as the Harlem Renaissance. It was a cultural movement that saw an explosion of artistic creativity amongst the African-American community of Harlem in New York City. Noteworthy African-American dancers such as Josephine Baker, Florence Mills, Earl Tucker, and Bill Robinson, influenced this “golden age” of the Africanist aesthetic (History.com 2023). While dancers and dance clubs, such as the Cotton Club and the Savoy, played a significant role in the entertainment industry, they also left an impactful mark on promoting self-expression and tenacity within the African-American communities of that era.
By integrating dance into the classroom, this research seeks to leverage the benefits of movement on cognitive function while also honoring the rich cultural heritage of the Harlem Renaissance. A study by Jan-Erik Romar shows that integrating movement-based practices into academic lessons increases students’ “energy levels, alertness, and concentration” (Romar 2023). This unit aims to boost student engagement by deepening their knowledge of this historic era. Through dance, students will have an opportunity to engage, peer to peer, in a collaborative and experiential learning process, while also gaining an enhanced appreciation for the contributions of artists during this era.

**Movement-based research**

The motivation behind this research proposal is multi-faceted, with a primary focus on promoting dance movement within the classroom. The benefits of movement integration in the classroom have been well-documented, with evidence showing that it improves cognitive function, memory retention, and attention span. John Ratey, a leading researcher in this field, has found that exercise produces proteins that travel to the brain, directly playing a vital role in various cognitive processes such as attention, memory, and learning (Ratey 2008). An increase in memory retention is a key indicator that students’ comprehension skills are improving. This correlates to a main struggle educators face, which is knowledge comprehension and retention. Additionally, a study done by the *Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* corroborates Ratey’s findings that integrating physical exercise results in increased attention span (Mullender-Wijnsma 2016). Even then, Stoepker and Dauenhauer (2020) found that an alarming 27.1% of high school students participate in the recommended amount of physical activity per week, with a 29.8% rate of students attending a daily physical education class. As the following proposed unit plan involves content that aligns with the typical ninth-grade social studies curriculum in
Ohio, the research is geared towards more secondary educational contexts. Without a doubt, these findings alone show the crucial need for a greater emphasis on physical activity throughout the school. Districts and educators should acknowledge this research, and the benefits of physical activity to drive their classroom planning.

**Creative and Cultural Impact**

Utilizing dance as a vehicle to express creativity and encourage physical movement, will generate a new collaborative space that honors African-American achievements during the Harlem Renaissance and celebrates the impact of their culture. While this unit focuses on the performing dance perspective, students will observe other art forms such as music, poetry, and visual art. Overall, social studies teachers are tasked to teach many facets of history, with the ability to structure instruction to national and state standards and students’ needs. This is where multiple historical perspectives are important. Every moment in history will have at least two perspectives from which to draw, and concerning the topic, the Harlem Renaissance, one can draw from the perspective of each different artistic group (History.com 2023). Therefore, with this combination of this historic era and its contributions to the greater dance world, students will be exposed to a well-rounded outlook on the Harlem Renaissance.

Geraldine Dimondstein defines the art form of dance “as the interpretation of ideas, feelings, and sensory impressions expressed symbolically through the body.” This emphasizes that students will gain a deeper social-emotional understanding of this historic era. In this report, Dimondstein also emphasizes that “knowing about something is description,” but “knowing through doing is experiencing” (1985). For educators, who want students to become successful members of society, taking learning from merely describing into fully experiencing is an accomplishment. This unit’s structure will provide students will the descriptive history of the
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Harlem Renaissance, while jointly offering multi-media lessons for students to experience its cultural magnitude. As students are given opportunities to collaborate with their peers, educators can hope to foster a sense of community and promote essential leadership skills. Therefore, this unit has the potential to create a learning experience that is not only enjoyable and engaging but also highly effective in promoting both academic and personal growth. Ultimately, the successful implementation of this unit plan will enable students to develop a deep appreciation for different cultures, while also improving their cognitive function and social-emotional skills.

Methodology

As this research is designed to provide practical guidance on how to integrate dance and movement practice into academic content, it is fitting that the unit plan is also a research-based model. The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework was developed to bridge rigorous content with student curiosity and inquiry (Inquiry Design Model 2021). From the C3 framework came the Inquiry Design Model (IDM), which is used to structurally organize the principles of this inquiry-driven ideology (Inquiry Design Model 2021). IDM begins with an overall summarization of four dimensions of the C3 framework.

C3 - Dimension One

The first dimension focuses on developing questions and planning inquiries. The unit will guide students in developing an understanding of the important role dance played in the Harlem Renaissance, through the overarching compelling question (CQ), “How can dance be used to celebrate culture?” Students will read, watch, and write about dance, thus leading them to generate their movement, based on the research they have found. The goal of this unit is to have the students develop a deep understanding of the influence that dance culture had on the Harlem
Renaissance. Their comprehension will expand through the three supporting questions, which have branched from the CQ.

1. What was the Harlem Renaissance and how did dance movement enhance this era?
2. How did different people and places in Harlem create space for new dance vocabulary?
3. Where can the effects of the Harlem Renaissance be seen in dance today?

C3 - Dimension Two

Dimension Two identifies the standards to which the unit is aligned. This unit involves content standards from the Ohio Department of Education.

American History: Historical Thinking and Skills: Content Statement 1: The use of primary and secondary sources of information includes an examination of the credibility of each source.

American History: Prosperity, Depression, and the New Deal (1919-1941): Content Statement 18: Movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, African-American migration, women’s suffrage, and Prohibition all contributed to social change. (Ohio Learning Standards for Social Studies 2019)

Beginning 9-12: Perceiving/Knowing 4: Explain the impact of history and culture on dance as an art form.

Beginning 9-12: Producing/Performing 4: Explore interdisciplinary ideas to support and inspire the choreographic process. (Ohio Learning Standards for Dance 2012)

C3 - Dimension Three

The third dimension emphasizes the sources and evidence-based research that students will be exposed to in the unit. Learners will be encouraged to gather multi-media sources, pulling
from both primary and secondary sources. Utilizing videos, articles, photographs, and audio, the students will be able to investigate their materials to conclude the compelling and supporting questions. They will be given opportunities to discuss their findings with their peers and develop evidence-based arguments through writing prompts.

**C3 - Dimension Four**

The last dimension requests an outline of how students will communicate their comprehension and how they will take informed action from their knowledge. The learners will be introduced to the unit through a discussion-based activity. Through the first activity, they will be allowed to conclude what the Harlem Renaissance was, from a “big-picture” perspective, and how dance was influential. Then they will be able to communicate their ideas to their small groups through discussion and share those thoughts and ideas with the whole class. The second activity provides ample peer-to-peer discussion, as they will be traveling to various stations to conclude from primary and secondary sources. They will analyze the people in the photographs, read journal entries, and watch a dance performance, which will give the learners insight into the clothing, social life, and environment during the Harlem Renaissance. During the last activity, they switch gears. Students will evaluate a 21st century event, that is rooted in the cultural ideology Harlem Renaissance. Lastly, students will be taking informed action. On *C3 Teachers*, Craig Perrier explains three different perspectives that can be taken for this, taking informed action, section: going out, bringing in, and personal growth. Respectively, this can be expressed through a celebration or memorial, a community partnership, or a journal (Perrier 2019). For this unit, students will be sharing their findings in an accessible manner. This will include a combination of speaking, dancing, and writing to their audience about the relationship between dance and the Harlem Renaissance.
C3 – Staging the Compelling Question

To engage students in the staging of the compelling question, “How can dance be used to celebrate culture?”, the educator may begin an initial discussion on dance and movement in their personal lives with a set of historical inquiry questions.

1. What types of photographs or videos have you seen on social media that explore movement and/or dance?

Educators can facilitate this conversation as an individual, peer-to-peer, or whole-class inquiry-based discussion. Students might share that they have seen dance trends online, follow professional dance companies, NFL or NBA dance teams, or traditional folk dancing. The students will watch a YouTube video that depicts the social dance scene from the movie Titanic (Titanic dance scene full 2016). Students will share immediate observations of the video with the whole class. They may reflect on the music, people, environment, movement, etc. Students will engage in this discussion by investigating these follow-up questions.

2. What did this movement look like?
3. Are you curious about the movement?
4. Does it make you question anything?
5. What, if any, feelings arise from watching that movement?

Students will then proceed to watch videos depicting other cultural dance scenarios. Educators are encouraged to use their knowledge of student demographics to inform this decision. For example, if the district is comprised of many Ukrainian students, one may feel called to display a clip of the Hopak, a traditional dance. The last video educators share is of Earl “Snakehips” Tucker (JazzMAD London, 2016 https://youtu.be/vGxYSWb1sro?si=QFaGjbpZIxsLk1).

Directly following each video, students will reflect on their observations. Then in small groups,
students will discuss various dance styles that they are familiar with or have observed. Educators may prompt students to utilize these questions to spark notions.

6. Do any of you participate in trending or viral dances?

7. Do any of you participate in a dance troupe?

After this inaugural discussion of movement and dance in their daily lives and seeing a few video examples, students will elaborate on how each style connects with the community of people who perform it. Additionally, students are encouraged to demonstrate their discussed dance style for the class. When the students return to whole-class discussion, they will create an idea web to connect the various cultural dances they discussed. This web will consist of the compelling question in the center, and all observations around movement and dance branched off.

**C3 - Supporting Question 1 “What was the Harlem Renaissance and how did dance movement enhance this era?”**

In this portion of the unit, students will be introduced to the Harlem Renaissance and complete an initial investigation of the dance perspective. The class will watch a video published by *Black History in Two Minutes or So* entitled, “The Harlem Renaissance” (2020). As they watch and listen, students will individually complete a worksheet that has them reflect on four new pieces of information, four important people, and an overall reflection of what is the Harlem Renaissance. Students will work in groups to share initial observations and points that stuck out to them. They will then be prompted to access the webpage, *Drop Me Off in Harlem* (https://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/interactives/harlem/). They will choose one person from each category (artists, musicians, actors, dancers, writers, and supporters/activists) of the “Faces of the Harlem Renaissance” tab (ARTSEDGE). While students will be working individually, it will engage them to reflect on individuals that they choose based on their academic curiosity.
Their exit ticket from class will be to write an explanation answering, “How did the dance movement enhance the Harlem Renaissance?” Possible student response.

The dance movement played a crucial role in enhancing the Harlem Renaissance by providing a platform for African-American self-expression and cultural celebration. It served as a form of resistance against racial injustice. Movements such as the Lindy Hop, were created out of the melting pot of ideas within Harlem. For example, dance clubs such as the Savoy and Cotton Club became spaces where African Americans could be empowered in the face of discrimination. Overall, the vibrant and diverse dance forms of the Harlem Renaissance left a lasting impact on the cultural and artistic legacy of this influential era.

This conclusion to the first part of the unit provides a smooth transition to the next lesson, which is dance perspective-focused.

C3 – Supporting Question 2 “How did different people and places in Harlem create space for new dance vocabulary?”

Students will spend this entire portion investigating what dance in Harlem during the 1920s and 30s encompassed. There are five stations that students will visit. The first station has students read the article, “Lindy Hop in Harlem: The Role of Social Dancing” (ARTSEDGE https://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/interactives/harlem/). The second station requires students to analyze five photographs. They can form a discussion and report their conclusions to the class, using the following inquiry questions to guide their conversation. Students will answer these five questions for each of the five images, therefore they will have a total of twenty-five responses. Possible student responses are written beside each inquiry question.
1. Who is in the image? *The person or group of people in the image can be found in the title of the photograph.*

2. What are they doing/How are they presented? *The individual/s are dancing or posing.*

   *They are presenting as feeling happy because they are smiling. They are professional because they are dressed in either nice streetwear or performance attire.*

3. What is in the background? *Most of the backgrounds are man-made backdrops. In Figure 2, the dancers are seen in a public space. The viewer knows this because people are standing in the back. In Figure 4, the group of individuals is on what looks to be a roof. This is because the tops of buildings are seen in the background.*

4. How is color used? *All of the images are in black and white. Some of the images are faded, therefore they have a yellowish undertone to them.*

5. What are the most important elements of the image? *In Figure 1, the dancer’s eyes are very specific and are boldly looking to the left side of the image. In Figure 2, the female dancer is being held up in the air by the male dancer, thus portraying strength. In Figure 3, Adelaide Hall is posing with a cane and her entire body is slanting with that cane. Lastly, in Figure 5, the man in the front row seems to be of importance. The color of his clothes is greatly contrasting with the light clothing of the five women surrounding him.*
Figure 1: Josephine Baker (Walery 1926)

Figure 2: Americans doing the Lindy Hop (Archive Photos 1947)
Figure 3: Adelaide Hall (Walery 1930)

Figure 4: Blackbirds of 1926 (General Photographic Agency 1926)
At station three, students will read the primary source titled, “Savoy Ballroom.” This is a journal entry from the dance club, Savoy, that gives the students a viewpoint of what these individuals day to day resembled (Savoy Ballroom). Students will write a journal entry, answering the prompt, “Imagine you worked at the Savoy Ballroom during the Harlem Renaissance. Write a journal entry of a day in the life, based on observations from the provided primary source reading.” Below is a sample student journal entry.

*Every time I walk into the Savoy, it is like entering an alternate reality that is always filled with life and rhythm. On weekdays I see the regulars who come in after a long day of work to enjoy a break from everyday stagnation. These members come in for an evening of jazz and ballroom dancing. As the week unfolds, the crowd grows into a bustling room of infectious*
energy, cultural exchange, and community bonding. It is days like today that excite me, there is a special going on, “FREE entry for those who bring a dancing partner!” My friends all want to go together to see what new movements people come up with this time. Right now, the Lindy Hop is trending everywhere, I can’t seem to escape a conversation without it being brought up. It is this innovative dance step that has united people. Also, I heard that a new jazz band is playing at Savoy tonight, I cannot wait to see the talent!

The fourth station is a video of the show, “Shuffle Along” from the year 1921 (Shuffle Along 2011). After watching the video, students will fill out a table that asks for the title, date, location, and five elements that they deem most important. Below is a possible student sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Shuffle Along</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>1921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Debuted in New York City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element #1</td>
<td>Written, produced, and performed by all African Americans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element #2</td>
<td>First time rhythms of jazz were seen on the main stage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element #3</td>
<td>Prominent figures involved included Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element #4</td>
<td>Broke down racial barriers, as many white and black individuals went to watch.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fifth and final station is from the Kennedy Center’s resource entitled, “Five(ish) Minute Dance Lessons” (Bodensteiner 2019). In this station, students will display the videos (https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/dance/five-ish-minute-dance-lessons/fiveish-minute-dance-lessons/swing-dance/), teaching them how to swing dance, Charleston, and lindy hop. Students will follow along with the step-by-step tutorial, engaging them in a movement-based activity. Students will write a description of each dance step and then submit a video clip of them doing
one of the dances. This portion of the unit will engage students immensely, as it has a learning activity for each style of learning. Students will read, look at images, listen to videos, and physically learn three dance steps. As students are taking in the knowledge multiple times, but in various formats, their comprehension will positively grow because they are using multiple learning techniques.

C3 – Supporting Question 3 “Where can the effects of the Harlem Renaissance be seen in dance today?”

This final supporting question seeks to investigate how the ideas of the Harlem Renaissance are seen in dance culture today. Students will examine Matthew Rushing’s iteration of Uptown (https://youtu.be/mARDDW61i0Y?si=GhVrjc6bb2Y0uLGC). This show was performed for the time 2009 by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (AAADT). AAADT is a world-renowned dance theatre that began in the 1950s to uplift and amplify African-Americans artists (Explore our History). The teacher will open the class with a background on AAADT, thus making sure all students begin the assignment with the same prior knowledge. Students may work in partners or individually to review this modern-day tribute to the Harlem Renaissance. Students will listen to an audio of Rushing explaining the inspiration behind this ballet (Rushing, 2020 https://www.alvinailey.org/performances/repertory/uptown). a video showcasing clips from the performance (Alvin Ailey 2009), and a news article, (https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/11/arts/dance/11uptown.html) from the New York Times (Kourlas 2009). After this three-part investigation, students will argue how Rushing’s work and other possible examples, answer the supporting question, “Where can the effects of the Harlem Renaissance be seen in dance today?” Below is a possible student sample.
The effects of the Harlem Renaissance continue to resonate in contemporary dance, influencing various styles and aspects of the art form. A prominent reflection of the Harlem Renaissance in today’s dance scene is found in the continued popularity and evolution of swing dances, such as the Lindy Hop and Charleston. The emphasis on cultural expression resonates in today’s choreographic world. Many professionals today draw inspiration from this period in African American history, by infusing their works with themes of identity, resilience, and community strength. These energetic and rhythmic styles originated during the Harlem Renaissance and have endured, with modern swing dance communities worldwide. For example, Matthew Rushing developed the piece, “Uptown,” as a direct reflection of the Harlem Renaissance’s achievements. This piece premiered in 2009 in New York City, where this renaissance originated, and was performed by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, a prominently African American dance company that promotes black pride and resilience. In essence, the effects of the Harlem Renaissance are visible in the vibrancy of today’s dance world, from the legacy of swing dance to the diverse and collaborative nature of today’s choreographic pieces, showcasing a continued celebration of African American culture and artistic contribution.

C3 – Summative Performance Task

For this unit’s summative performance task, students will examine and answer the compelling question, “How can dance be used to celebrate culture?” They will use all their prior knowledge, utilizing resources they have reviewed to support their claim in an essay response format. Then, students will be randomly grouped to create a dance exhibition. Combining various opinions from each student they will create a visual aid and present their argument verbally and with a dance performance. Students must choose a song that connects to the Harlem
Renaissance in two to three ways, with sources provided, to create a short one-minute choreographic demonstration. Following this display of artistic reflection, students will explain the elements of their performance and the reasoning behind their choices. Groups may extend this performance task by adding individualized accessories to their performance.

**C3 – Taking Informed Action**

Students will use the presentation they created for the class to create an informative video. They will pull the most important aspects from their research to form a video that can be used for educational purposes. Educators may provide examples of videos posted on respective social media outlets, such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, etc., to motivate and inspire creativity in the class. The goal of this activity is for students to share their knowledge with their community. Students are living in a technology-saturated era; therefore, it is an educator’s job to guide them in safely and positively navigating the online world. As students are developing these videos, educators can inquire if their schools have social media pages and if the video with the highest votes could be posted on that page. Thus, truly engaging this content on a local, national, and possibly even international level.

**Conclusion**

Beginning with the end in mind, the goal was for students’ attention span and overall comprehension to have a positive growth rate. Thus, by utilizing the Harlem Renaissance as our academic topic and dance movement integration as our catalyst, an engaging unit was generated. This unit embarked students on a journey to see the Harlem Renaissance through the dancer’s perspective. Students analyzed significant figures, dance steps, professional shows, and primary source writings to gain a deep understanding of this point in history. By employing dance as a vehicle to express creativity and encourage physical movement, this research hopes to provoke a
collaborative space that honors African-Americans of the Harlem Renaissance and celebrates the impact of their cultural contribution. The overall research behind the movement in the classroom is reason enough to encourage teachers to innovate their teaching structure for physical activity. Developing this interdisciplinary unit combines rigid, academic knowledge with creative, artistic knowledge; that when combined builds a beautifully intertwined unit that provokes student thinking and choice. For students to draw the connection between the dance culture of the Harlem Renaissance, they will discover just how much this relationship celebrates the prosperous culture of African Americans.
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