2018

Chicago Butoh: Visioning Research Informed Dance and Theatre

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Assessing Arts-Based Inquiry

Symposium for the Arts-Based Educational Research Special Interest Group

AERA 2018
New York, New York

Paper 1: Performance
Chicago Butoh: Chicago Butoh: Visioning Research Informed Dance and Theatre
Charles Vanover, Bob Devin Jones, Jai Shanae, Erika Hand, Adrian Anguiano,
Teithis Miller & Kate Knobloch

Paper 2
Bringing the Body into the Conversation
Julia Grey

Paper 3
Assessment Guideposts
Graham W. Lea

Paper 4
Ethnodrama and the Assessment of Arts-Based Research
Sarah Hobson

Chair
Sarah Hobson

Discussant
Tabatha Dell’Angelo

Photo credits
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Abstract

This symposium seeks to create dialogue about quality and assessment in Arts Based Educational Research (ABER) by grounding discussion in performance. The session begins with the staging of a research informed dance and theatre piece: “Chicago Butoh”. This performance will then be critiqued by Julia Grey and Graham W. Lea using different approaches to assessing ABER. Tabatha Dell’Angelo then examines the dance and the critiques. Opportunities for audience interaction and dialogue are woven throughout the session.

By sharing multiple perspectives on quality assessment grounded in the physicality of live performance, we hope to help audience members envision "better" work and more powerful ABER practice.
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ASSESSING ARTS-BASED INQUIRY

Session Plan

ABER has no gold standard; different intentions require different performance practices and this diversity contributes to the worth of work in our field (Beck, Belliveau, Lea, & Wager, 2011; Eisner, 1995; Gray & Kontos, 2015; Parsons, Gladstone, Gray, & Kontos, in press; Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013). The range of practices in ABER, however, makes understanding the nature of quality and assessment complex. It is challenging to differentiate one work from another and to provide feedback that challenges and supports new work.

The goal of our session is to create dialogue about these issues and bring together a range of perspectives on excellence and assessment in ABER. We ask

- What is the nature of quality in ABER?
• How might we assess finished products in ways that 1) recognize the diversity of practices, expressions, forms, people, and issues that characterize our field and 2) provide feedback that might inspire “better” work?

A practice-based perspective on ABER (Leavy, 2015; Saldaña, 2011; Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005) locates dialogue around assessment not in abstract notions of the good or the beautiful, but in the intentions and qualities of a specific work. Criticism must be connected to practice and grounded in the piece’s actualized merits. Criticism must also take flight and contribute to better-intentioned and more skillful performances.

Following this logic, the session will begin with a performance that communicates the experience of a first year teacher in the Chicago Public Schools. Instead of talking about ABER, we do it. Performance focuses ephemerality, movement and emotion. Performed patterns of movement create a “theorization of identity […] that makes evident the ways in which dance articulates with social, aesthetic and political values” (Foster, 2010, pp. 4-5). We believe that an example of such embodied theorization provides ideal grounds for dialogue around quality and assessment.

Plan of the Symposium

The session is designed to generate audience dialogue that moves from concrete discussion of a work of art to abstract discussions of beneficial criticism in ABER. As the Session Plan in Table 1, in the appendixes, shows, opportunities for discussion are woven throughout the symposium. Audience members will see and respond to both the performance of “Chicago Butoh” and to the panelists’ criticism. Julia Grey will discuss “Chicago Butoh” from a perspective embedded in dance as inquiry using a framework developed by Parsons et al. (in press) for health research. Graham W. Lea will consider the performance through the perspective
of assessment guideposts. These guideposts seek to provide an approach to assessing academic and artistic elements of performance-based research in consideration of its unique intents of purpose and audience.

Tabitha Dell’Angelo’s comments will range across the event to discuss how the dialogue shared during the session reflects on contemporary efforts to theorize imagination, creativity, aesthetics, performance, and social change.
In a world filled with great possibility and great injustice, ABER must re-envision what is and change what might be (Barone, 2001; Bhattacharya & Payne, 2016; Bickel, 2005; Boydell,
2011b; Eisner, 1991; Harris & Sinclair, 2014). Successful pieces speak with aesthetic power and use performance practices appropriate for the artists’ intentions. These works are grounded in a rich analysis of the world of schools and are informed by disciplined-based investigations into the lives of teachers and students. ABER cannot exist for its own sake; the work must make the case for change (see Conquergood (2002) and Madison and Hamera (2006)).

“Chicago Butoh” is a research informed performance that combines words taken verbatim from an interview with a first year teacher in the Chicago Public Schools with movement inspired by Chicago Hip Hop and the Japanese dance form, Butoh. The show uses storytelling and movement to communicate moments of successful schoolwork that might beneficially alter the life of a young person. The piece also evokes moments that, in the teacher’s view, were not successful. Moving beyond the PowerPoint lectures that dominate research reporting in the U. S., “Chicago Butoh” weaves words and movement to speak to the heart. The show is designed to cut through the web of talk that binds teachers and students to the way things are.

As researchers from a wide range of perspectives and methodologies emphasize, there are few more important topics in the field of education than work of teachers in schools that serve poor and minority youth (e. g. Darling-Hammond, 2015; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2001). “Chicago Butoh” combines Charles Vanover’s years of studying schools, Bob Devin Jones work performing and directing theatre with the freshness of Erika Hand’s experience working with minority students in one of Florida’s premier high schools for the performing arts. We hope to move with the passion of life in the classroom and communicate deep from the soul.
The beginning teacher whose words are used as the basis for the dance was a committed educator who was thrown into a highly dysfunctional and disadvantaged school. First year teacher Keeler Kirkpatrick loved her students, but she was not able to connect to all of them. The sense of healing and trauma in Keeler’s narrative is so extreme, movement from Japanese Butoh and Chicago hip hop are used to evoke the joy of good day at school and the heartbreak Keeler experienced when her lessons shattered (see the movement pallet in Table 2 and excerpts from the script in Table 3, both in the appendixes).

“Chicago Butoh” has been funded by University of South Florida system creative scholarship grant and, as discussed in the vision statement in Table 4, the show was intended to have five planned performances in the 2017-2018 academic year. Hurricane Irma altered those plans and Charles Vanover and Bob Devin Jones transformed “Chicago Butoh” into a theatre-based performance that stared Jai Shanae. Jai then stared in the Studio@620 version of the show staged in October of 2018.

Jai Shanae Performing “Chicago Butoh” at AERA 2018: Image Credit Charles Vanover