

## ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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If I could say it in words, there would be no point in dancing  
Isadora Duncan

### **Praxis – Red Shoes and a bicycle**

In Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, *The Red Shoes*, a child disobeys her elderly guardian and slips her feet into a forbidden pair red shoes. Suddenly she is caught in a solitary uncontrollable dance, a dance beyond her making. She tries to remove the shoes but they are stuck fast. Only the desperate amputation of her feet breaks the spell of the red shoes. Anderson imagines a desultory ending—the girl becomes a servant, humbled, living in a danceless life, her repentance at last rewarded with death. 'Her soul flew on a sunbeam up to God; and up there no one asked her about the red shoes'. Is *The Red Shoes* a Cautionary Tale for vain little girls who want to dance? Or a warning of the dire consequences for disobeying our guardians, be they parents, schoolteachers or university professors? Who is afraid of the dance?

Our conversation of Academic Performance is an exploratory *pas de deux* between praxis and theory—an inquiry into theories of cognition, learning and performance. Disillusioned with conventional teaching methods of transmission and evaluation, we will, through interplay and conversation, investigate the possibilities of Academic Performance in the classroom.

In *The Red Shoes*, the child's punishment is the loss of the dance. And yet, it is through dance, theatre, music, that Isadora Duncan, Margie Gillis, Daniel Maclvor, Judith Thompson, k. d. Lang and others find voice. So two, two children, as they dance, jump, climb, explore, talk, sing, shout, whisper, wriggle, tumble, into their first year of school only to discover that, in the classroom, their dance is interrupted, their voices muted, their explorations halted. The red shoes are placed high on a forbidden shelf. In many of today's classrooms, 'knowledge' continues to be perceived through the lens of the positivist. Knowledge is understood as a noun— a container of facts to be deposited into the students brain. We cannot, argue these educators, dance our way into knowledge. How can a student learn calculus or history or chemistry through drama? How could a teacher possibly teach quantum physics through improvisational jazz? For the positivist, a correct answer written on an exam paper about the molecular behavior of water at specific temperatures is seen as proof positive of a student's understanding of H<sub>2</sub>O molecules. But what 'interstandings' become possible when students are invited to choreograph and perform a water molecule dance?

## **Cognition: an enactivist joins the conversation**

How do we learn? Are we human computers continually translating our world into representational bits of information? Is knowledge a now? Traditional cognition and science reflects an assumption of a subject–object dichotomy, a mind–body duality originating with Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Descartes, credited for creating ‘I’ as a subjective entity, suggests that the mind is separate from the body, indeed, from the world. Once detached from the body and the world, the self seeks to re-attach itself through knowledge, by manipulating symbols that represent features of the world. A positivist sees knowledge then as a transferable object from subject to subject (e.g. Teacher to student), the activity being largely a mental operation.

But where is the body, for example, in learning how to ride a bicycle? Consider the knowledge required —specific mastery of pedaling, steering, balancing, braking, a generic understanding of space, timing, appropriate motions, hand coordination... not to mention aptitude, confidence, and an understanding of the rules of the road. It is only when all these are in sync that the poor bicyclist can finally pedal off to fetch his Daisy.

The question is: where is this knowledge located—in the mind or in the body? Is balancing a bicycle knowledge that the mind acquires (how?) And then transmits to the body or is it? Who is in charge of riding the bicycle— the mind, the body or both? And if so, how is that knowledge is shared?

Challenging the dualism of Descartes’ mind–body is the ‘embodied mind’. As Varela and Maturana explain, ‘embodiment has this double sense: it encompasses both the body as a lived experiential structure and the body as the context or milieu of cognitive mechanism’. Knowledge is seen ‘not as a representation of the world’ “out there”, but rather as an ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself.<sup>i</sup> The enactivist Invites us to reconsider the interplay and interrelationships between the student and the teacher, between the mind and the body, between the learner, object and environment. The students and teacher are seen as bringing forth a world together: the teacher’s actions are determined by his or her own dynamic structure, but are also occasioned by the interactive dynamics with students as they bring forth (i.e. quite literally, helped to shape) the world’.<sup>ii</sup> Knowledge is an active verb—knowing, doing, being. Knowledge, as a noun is incomplete, unfinished but, as a verb, continuous, interactive, co-emerging, co-evolving.

Embodied Mind. We have nicely dismissed Descartes’ mind-body duality. But wait a minute! I must protest. Why is the body marginalized as an adjective? Is there not another term that better celebrates the knowing of the mind and body embedded in interaction? For that, we must consider the theory, and will, later in this chapter.

## Academic Performance: on the edge of chaos

What is Academic Performance? A romp through the etymology allows us a creative perspective on our term 'Academic Performance'. The word 'academic' gets its name from a park near Athens which belonged to Academos, a Greek hero of the Trojan war. Play who is said to have taught under a tree in the park and given the word its association with schooling. DMH of learning outside in The fresh air under the swaying branches of a tree is an image towards which our hearts yearn. An ecological reading of 'academic', then, is a place of learning, without a specific location, 'having the nature of being' simultaneously a school and a grove, a space of learning both 'within and without'—in stark contrast to our 20<sup>th</sup>-century school where children are housed inside classrooms, separated physically and emotionally from the 'real world'.

The word 'performance' is a puzzle whose pieces may be taken apart and rejoined in a configuration of patterns and meanings. We are confronted with a number of possibilities. Do we place emphasis on 'form' or on 'action'? Dance is an action. And what do we do with the prefix 'per' which can mean 'utterly, through' but also do away to destruction as it relates to the word 'form'? Is 'performance' action—process within, through and without form? We are reminded of Shel Silverstein's poem, , in which he imagines that a solitary rain-soaked puzzle piece he has found on the sidewalk

...might be a bit of the cloak  
Of the Witch of the West  
As she melted to smoke.  
It might be a shadowing trace  
Of a tear that runs down an angel's face.  
...Nothing has more possibilities than one wet picture puzzle piece.<sup>iii</sup>

Returning to the words 'academic' and 'performance', what happens when we combine these puzzle pieces?

*Academic Performance: a space of learning both within and without through which action-process occurs utterly through form and simultaneously through the destruction of form.*

It seems we have danced into an unexpected space on the dance floor! A space which complexity theorists call the 'edge of chaos' where patterns of interrelations are continually created and recreated through what Mitchell Waldrop calls an 'endless dance of co-emergence'.<sup>iv</sup> The edge of chaos is the balancing point between order and chaos where the components of a system never quite lock into place, and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence, either... the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive. The edge of chaos is where life dances to action. And it is in this space, on the

edge of chaos, we suggest, that academic performance executes its glorious tangos.

### **Academic Performance in the classroom**

As today's scholars 'on the edge' recognize, knowing requires the active involvement of the student in relation to an inquiry and others within an interactive environment. Academic Performance encourages interdisciplinary exploration, and it is through exploration and communication in the interstices that Academic Performance draws on and reaches out to individual and collective experience.

In a postmodern world which engages in fragmentation, Academic Performance seeks to know the interrelations between existing spaces and, in the seeking, creates new spaces for exploration. There is no need to amputate our feet from our minds as Descartes did in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. If the red shoes are a metaphor for our education, then we, as educators must join our students in a space of learning on the 'edge of chaos' and together dance to 'interstanding' through Academic Performance. What quantum leaps of learning are possible through the interaction, the unexpected, the dance? Academic Performance is an invitation for teachers to re-imagine possible landscapes of learning—a re-imagining that entertains bodymind dancing on the edge of chaos. Academic Performance is an opportunity for students and teachers to blast free of those boxes of knowledge called textbooks, multiple-choice exams, subject disciplines and, in the 'interplay', to explore and celebrate the unknowing knowing potential within our classrooms and beyond. This is necessary for a future where, as futurologist Frank Ogden warns us, 'If you can't walk in quicksand and dance with electrons, you're going to be toast'.<sup>v</sup>

### **Theory—a bicycle built for two**

The bicycle is a human-powered invention in contrast to more technologically advanced transportation. It becomes a double-edged symbol both of technology and teleological disembodiment, as well as bodymind resistance. It contains an inherent binarism as a mind–body two–wheeler of cognitive learning. Academic Performance, on the other hand, is born of the post-modern dilemma, situated in the interstices of virtual and material reality. While Academic Performance is most certainly affirmative danced action, it is also negative and acrimonious bodymind counteraction.

Japanese philosopher Yuasa Yasuo talks of one of the states of Noh performance as

freedom in dancing without the consciousness of its performance... it is a state of where the movement of mind and body come indistinguishable... I'll self-forgetfulness, in which consciousness of oneself as the subject of

bodily movement disappears and becomes the movement itself that is dancing.<sup>vi</sup>

Yuasa translates the Japanese, *shinshin*, as bodymind, with 'body' preceding 'mind', in order to avoid the dualism implied in the hyphenated 'mind-body' in which the 'mind' is prioritized over the 'body'.

When applied to the process of theatrical training, the tradition of Japanese self-cultivation emphasizes the importance of entering the mind from the body or form. In other words, the mind is trained through a training of the body. Consequently, states Yuasa, 'the mind is not simply consciousness nor is it constant and unchangeable, but rather it is that which is **transformed** through training the body'.

This practice is contrary to the Western philosophical tradition with its dualistic mind-body pattern of thinking and acting, where the tendency is to train the body through conscious calculation. In our mimetic tradition, the schism between mind and body translates into a binarism between subject and object: and according to Platonic theory, the most representative objects are material objects. Bodies exist within this category of material substances. On the other hand, the subject is the host of conscious functions which cognize the object, and so the subject cannot become object.

In the state of 'bodymind oneness', however, the mind moves while unconsciously becoming one with the body. This state is referred to by Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro (1870 – 1945) as, 'pure experience (*junsui keiken*)' or 'acting intuition (*koiteki chokkan*)'.

Truly creative free will becomes purely objective as it transcends conceptual consciousness—that is, when it achieves the fusion of subject and object... Truly disinterested aesthetic feeling—that is, pure feeling—accompanies the unity of this kind of transconceptual individuality... The artist is attempting to express a unique reality. This is not a conceptual reality that becomes the object of cognition—it is a pre-conceptual (as he defines elsewhere, transcognitive), intuitive reality which cannot be expressed in concepts...<sup>vii</sup>

In Japanese Noh performance, the achievement of the *transcognitive* is centred in the voice, from which the entire action originates, which in the Noh implies danced action as opposed to the Aristotelian plot-based action. In his treatise, *A Mirror Held to the Flower (Kakyo)*, Zeami stresses the importance of pitch, breath Voice production in dance.

If what is expressed in the dance is not based on [what is] sung, no emotion will be engendered... [however, when] the voice is produced on the basis of [the] five [of the voice], the entire body begins to move, and

this movement itself becomes the genesis of the dance... the point to keep in mind is the fact that, if the musical strength of the chant is insufficiently powerful, a dance cannot give rise to any emotive stimulus...Indeed, dancing is truly impossible without the strength of sound behind it.<sup>viii</sup>

Yuasa employs the term 'affective feeling' rather than 'mimisis' to describe the process of emotive intensification in the Noh. Moreover, the state of 'bodymind oneness' in Noh performance is primarily achieved, I believe, through the interrelation of music and words expressed viscerally through the body medium.

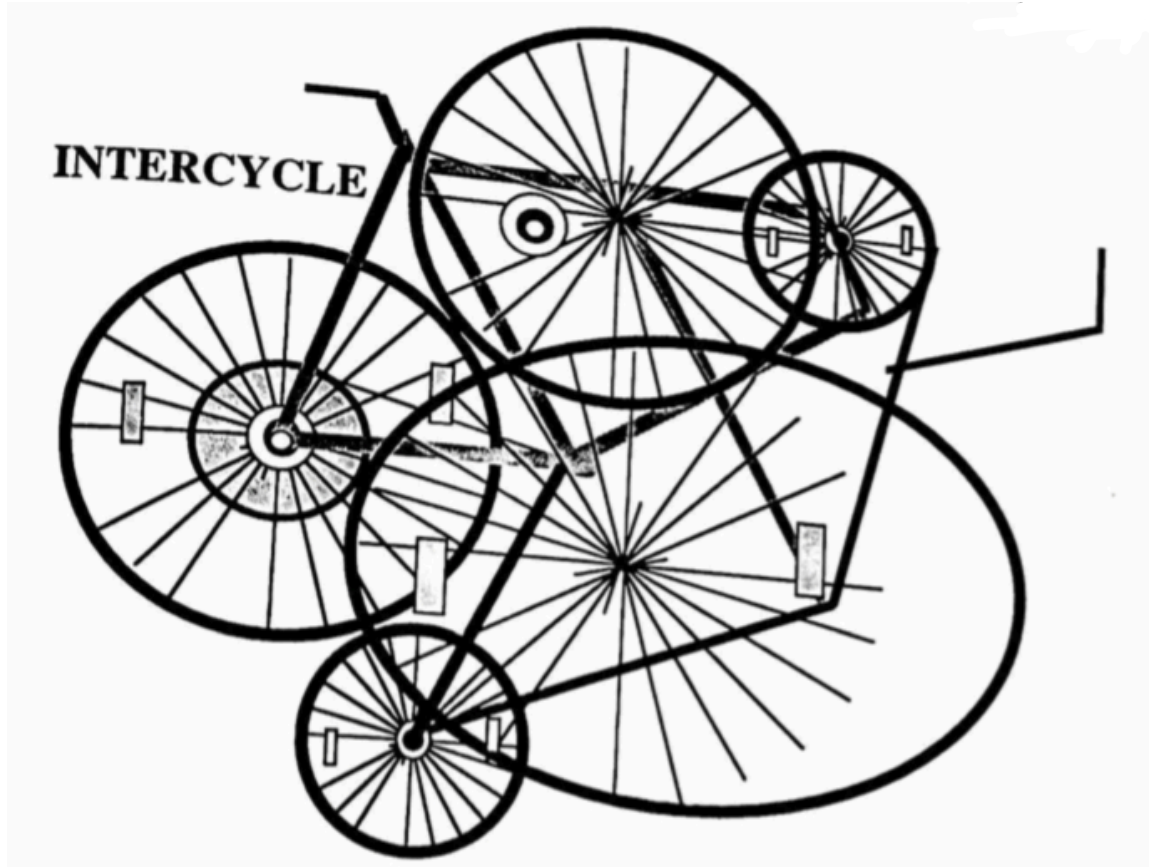
I would like to extend the Japanese bodymind notion within a less traditional context towards a definition of Academic Performance in terms of its theory and praxis. In their book, *Imagologies: Media Philosophy*, Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen explore the exciting implosion of possibilities inherent in current and future cyberspace technology. They are cautiously optimistic about our electronic technological world, while demanding that we retain control over it. However, in their highly innovative, non-linear, intertextual approach to 'image' and 'logos', they create space (literally, they leave blank space) within their 'mediatext' for pockets of resistance to this technology. Understandably, the body medium poses the most powerful movement of resistance.

The culture of the simulacrum is, paradoxically, both an anorexic culture and a culture of the body. As the real disappears into the hyper-real, the body becomes an obsessive preoccupation. Never has the concern with body image been greater. Concentration on the body can lead either to its excessive denial or its excessive affirmation. Self-denial and self-decoration are contrasting styles of make-up. And make-up is always a make-over that transforms nature into culture.

... In virtual worlds, the body disappears or is displaced. As the materiality of experience vanishes, the need to reaffirm it grows intense.<sup>ix</sup>

In the academy, or **university**, both marginal voices within feminist discourse and current trends are witnessing the growth of a phenomenology of body. This materialist movement of bodymind resistance to cyberspace disembodiment is, we believe, inevitable and necessary. However, we can say we have been **unicycling** towards a kind of **multi-university** (though it seems some educators are still riding around on **tricycles**...). As we propose Academic Performance, we would also like to announce the invention of the **intercycle**. This has been around for awhile but, due to its lightning speed and silent performativity, it has been rendered non-existent and invisible. The latest mode of cyberspace performance technology, it is the little human-powered vehicle of the future, capable of both **body-** and **tele-**communication. We situate Academic Performance at this vacillation point– between bodymind resistance to technology and cyberspace disembodiment. Here, praxis precedes theory and theory informs praxis, intercyclically.

As we time-travel past the Year 2000, our challenge as post-navigators of the spaceship Odyssey 2001– interactive, multilingual, intercultural. This will require an interdisciplinary, interrelational and interactive praxis as well as multifarious – even negative – theoretical **interstanding**. Lifelong learners and ‘bodymind’ doers, we will ‘intercycle’ through experience, perception and imagination. Academic Performance is an invitation for students and teachers (human beings) alike to blast through the cognitive roof into the spaces and absences beyond.



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<sup>i</sup> Varela, F.J., Thompson E. and Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, p.xxvi.

and

Maturana, H.R. and Varela, F.J. (1992). *The tree of knowledge*. Boston: Shambhala, p.11.

<sup>ii</sup> Davis, B., Sumara, D., & Kieren, T. (1996). Co-emergence, cognition, curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum studies*, 28, 151-169.

<sup>iii</sup> Silverstein, S. (1974). *A light in the attic*. New York: Harper & Row, p.21.

<sup>iv</sup> Waldrop, M. (1992). *Complexity: the emerging science at the edge of order and chaos*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>v</sup> Ogden, F. (1995). As quoted in "The Globe and Mail", March 25.

<sup>vi</sup> Yasuo, Y. (1993). *The body, self-cultivation, and ki-energy* Albany: State University of New York Press.

<sup>vii</sup> In Yoshihiro, N. and Tatematsu, H. (Ed.). (1979). *Japanese phenomenology: phenomenology as the trans-cultural philosophical approach*. Boston: D. Reidel, p.32.

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- <sup>viii</sup> Rimer, T. and Masakazu, Y. (1984). *On the art of the Noh drama: the major treatises of Zeami*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp.77-79.
- <sup>ix</sup> Taylor, M. and Saarinen. (1994). Bodysnatchers. In *Imagologies: media philosophy*. New York: Routledge, p.8.