



# Teaching as dance: A case-study for teacher practice analysis



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## ABSTRACT

Identify and describe the characteristics of the teacher's professional practice is not easy. Recent researches on work and the influence of the concept of practice have contributed to the budding of studies aimed at explaining and clarifying aspects of teachers' work. Starting from the assumption that work is a performance, the article illustrates a conceptual way of analysing teaching practice and reports results of a single case-study. Despite the research limitations, the present paper draws attention to a particular category of analysis, the dance, and tries to read teaching as a practical and situated activity. Several suggestions are discussed for further improvements in teaching research.

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## 1. Introduction

The role and the function of the body, like its recognition, both in collective imagery and in the costumes and values, had since long “made” the passage to a somatic society (Turner, 1996; Turner & Rojek, 2001). The body has always represented an essential aspect in the human society:

- during the Middle Ages it was an instrument to recharge the sense of dichotomous representation between body (tension, corruption, disorder) and spirit (Galimberti, 2003);
- in Renaissance, there were different visions; a disowned and omitted body on one hand, and an idealized, exalted, contemplated body, on the other hand;
- in the Enlightenment period the dualism mind-body was overcome through the idea of “body subject”;
- since XIX century until now, there is the acknowledgement to the close connection between body experience and identity.

Anthropology, sociology, psychology, art research, have driven studies on body language understood as an index of social and gender differentiation (Gamelli, 2007; O'Loughlin, 1998). The gestures and movements become symbolic sources that give meaning to the experience. “Within a cultural perspective, the body is often described as a cultural representation of social organization and power relations” (Turner, 2006).

The redemption of the body in its modern sense has been reached in phenomenological, sociological, anthropological studies. In this perspective the body assumed an essential role for social change (Mauss, 1979). Our own way of being is built

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in: we learn practices and behaviours that are within our body. This assumption has been taken up by P. Bourdieu to distinguish between *hexis* (a person's behaviour, made up of gestures, gait and posture) and *habitus* (rules through to express attitudes and the usual way of doing things). This distinction has inspired research in an ethnographic perspective on the relationship between the body and society (Bourdieu, 1977). The body thus becomes essential to understand social change: for example the strong impulse that since the 1930s, phenomenology has exercised focusing not only on its possible theories, but also practices relating to it and the ideology that inspired them (Motterle, 2009).

Practical knowledge is embodied and embedded. It is a sensitive and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1958), produced and mediated by the body (Fenwick, 2003). It represents a requisite for a professional vision and a guarantee for an effective job performance. Similar considerations have marked a real turning in studies of society, knowledge and meaning, and have profoundly modified analytical-interpretative categories (the theatre, the performance, the choreography).

The relationship between body and mind and body and action can be also matched in psychological and educational researches. Several studies have showed how important are action and culture in human practices (Eraut, 2000): the recognition of cognitive activities within different contexts and the role of practical think in action (Scribner, 1984) have inspired several researches realized in a cognitive and sociocultural perspective.

In the light of socially situated nature of knowing (Engeström, 1999; Hutchins, 1995; Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Suchman, 1987) "the activities individuals engage in and though which their cognition is shaped, are held to have historical and cultural geneses (Cole, 1998; Rogoff, 1990; Scribner, 1984)" (Billett, 2003: 4). Everyday practices and the activities of persons acting cannot be studied in isolation "from socially material world of activity" (Lave, 1996: 5).

According to Hutchins (1995), the structure of cognition is widely distributed across the environment both social and physical.

In her ethnomethodological and symbolic interactionism approach, Suchman further uncovers the ways that humans depend upon their physical and social environment to create a reliable cognitive system.

Those studies have shifted research interests in knowledge epistemology from objects to modalities of knowledge considered now as relational practices and not yet as "ideal world, locked into people mind" (Schön, 1983; Wenger, 1998).

Similarly this assumption can be found also in Engeström neovygotskian studies in workplace. Analysing expertise, Engeström points out how a single performance cannot be considered as representative of a expert competency. To this aim is proper to study specific workplace contexts within persons act, use profession instruments and interact with colleagues.

In this perspective Eraut (2000) outlines how:

- community are belongs to represents the system within a person acts. Relational system and social roles are important because they structure professional practices;
- mediation process between a subject and an object makes use of rules and conventions (implicit and/or explicit);
- the division of labour is relevant inside the organization (work setting, status and power system).

Drawing on a review of several researches on practical learning, performance and workplace, anthropological studies (Henze, 1992), studies on practical thinking (Scribner, 1984) distributed cognition (Salomon, 1995) and situated learning, feature as follows:

- learning happens both in classroom and outside classroom boundaries;
- informal and incidental learning are important in the professional development;
- professional learning matched as a learning community;
- knowledge, activities, social relationship, physical context and body are interwoven.

Body and action categories become critical aspects in the learning processes: the main problem is now to investigate knowledge epistemologies and forms of knowledge (Scribner, 1985).

Four steps that have marked our reflection:

- a review of the studies that thematize the work through the body;
- an overview of models for dance analysis with a focus on methods of coding of movement (Labanotation);
- a presentation of results of a first case study aimed to identify and describe teachers' professional practice;
- the identification of future research path.

## 2. The body at work: the performance

Nowadays, technological, social, and scientific innovations have significantly changed the concept of work and modified how we think and live it. More specifically, the sociology of work abandoning traditional interpretative categories has tried to find new research itineraries marked out by the strength influence of symbolic interactionism and by ethnomethodology. The pervasive diffusion of the concept of practice (Schatzi, Knorr-Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001; Shilling, 2003) has changed the concept of work that is intended now as a context in which specific abilities and competencies are created, transmitted and preserved.

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