

# Accompanying Learning in Dance Classes in Quebec Schools through Movement Observation-Analysis (MOA)

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## ABSTRACT

As a school discipline in Quebec, dance is heir to the Modern Educational Dance (MED) movement, founded by Rudolf Laban (1948, 1976), better known in Quebec as creative dance (Raymond, 2014, p. 22). About ten years ago, Movement Observation-Analysis (MOA) (Harbonnier, Dussault, Ferri, 2021) was introduced into the artistic and pedagogical training of school dance teachers in Quebec. With the aim of revising ministerial programs for teaching dance in Quebec schools, which are over twenty years old, we wondered how MOA concepts were useful to dance teachers in Quebec schools. To this end, we asked ten school dance teachers to describe their use of OAM in their teaching, using the technique of the explicitation interview (Vermersch, 1994). With regard to the pedagogical function of school dance teachers, the results of our research, through the case study of teacher Suzie, show that MOA provides an enriched and clarified conceptual framework and lexicon to refine movement observation activities (diagnostic function), improve pedagogical communication (physical demonstration and verbal instructions), and provide knowledge about movement to share with students, fostering their autonomy in learning (learning support function).

## 1. Introduction

The use of Laban's theory of Effort to teach dance in schools began in the 1970s and has since spread throughout the world. A number of studies have demonstrated its effectiveness, highlighting its accessibility to non-dancers, as it focuses on fundamental aspects of movement beyond styles and genres (Kim, Park, Baek, & Armstrong, 2019, p. 77; Mattsson & Larsson, 2021; Silvia Barnet-López, Mar Arbonés-García, Susana Pérez-Testor, & Myriam Guerra-Balic, 2017). Teaching dance in Quebec schools is part of this vision of

dance that is accessible to all and is also based on Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis (LBMA).

We point out that the latest version of the dance curriculum taught in Quebec schools dates to the early 2000s, and is a revision of the initial one, developed in the 1980s. However, knowledge about dance, particularly dance movement analysis fed by somatic practices has evolved, revealing some gaps and inconsistencies in the actual curriculum. More specifically, because now we understand better the interdependence between the functional and

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expressive dimensions of danced movement, it has the potential to deepen and enrich the curriculum, and therefore generate a richer and more precise communication between the dance teachers and their students. In addition, neuroscientific studies of perception reveal its fundamentally subjective dimension, combining embodiment and cognition (Berthoz, 2000), and observing movement turns out to be a more complex activity than we might think. These are the reasons why we felt the need to question the current use of LMA in teaching dance at school, and to propose a revisited approach to movement analysis that takes account of new knowledge.

We subscribe to the reflections of Davis and al (2021) who advocate an approach to movement analysis open to a plurality of perspectives in dialogue with the dancer's experience.

“We hold that LMA can be a profound way to deepen perception through embodied exploration and develop a clearer understanding of patterns of movement and modes of personal expression when in dialog with the varied perspectives and lived experiences of the mover(s).”

The present research, carried out with Quebec schools' dance teachers (2022-2023), is thus designed to bridge the gaps between the actual curriculum and new knowledge about perception and movement analysis. To this end, we propose a revised approach to movement analysis that aims to contribute to a future improved curriculum.

In this article, we begin by contextualizing dance programs in Quebec schools. We will then introduce the new conceptual proposal of Movement Observation-Analysis (MOA), developed at the University of Québec in Montreal (UQAM), which a future curriculum could be based on. We will then describe our research methodology. Finally, we will illustrate

some results using the case of Suzie, an elementary school dance teacher, trained in MOA.

## 2. Dance Curriculum in Quebec Schools

A school discipline in Quebec, dance is heir to the Modern Educational Dance (MED) movement, founded by Rudolf Laban (1948, 1976). Developed in the first half of the 20th century, Modern Educational Dance (MED) gained momentum at the turn of the 1970s in some Anglo-Saxon and Germanic education systems, then became established in Quebec schools ten years later. Centered on the spontaneous expression of the body in movement through the universal components of human movement, this avant-garde educational approach is better known in Quebec as creative dance (Raymond, 2014, p. 22).

In the Quebec curriculum for elementary schools (MEQ, 2001), essential knowledge is defined as “a repertoire of resources essential to the development and exercise of the competency. This does not preclude the student from calling on other resources. Nevertheless, mastery of this knowledge is essential to the development and exercise of competence” (p. 9). In dance, this essential knowledge is organized according to three disciplinary competencies: Creating, Interpreting and Appreciating dances.

Creating dances: The creation of various dances allows students to develop their creativity through the simultaneous action of creative imagination, divergent thinking, and convergent thinking, while gradually becoming familiar with the language, rules, and tools specific to the discipline (Government of Quebec, 2001a, p. 226).

Interpreting dances: To interpret dances is to express and communicate ideas, feelings, emotions, or sensations - one's own or those of others - using the language, rules, and tools

specific to the discipline (Government of Quebec, 2001, p. 228).

Appreciating dances: This competency is essential to the development of students' critical thinking and aesthetic sense. It is in line with the two practical competencies and emphasizes the processes of communication and choreographic appreciation (Quebec elementary schools dance training curriculum, p. 225).

The dance curriculum also includes seven categories of content:

1. Concepts
2. Technique
3. Choreographic principles
4. Strategies
5. Dance appreciation repertoire
6. Vocabulary
7. Culture references

This article focuses on the first two: concepts and technique.

Concepts are based on the principles of Rudolf Laban's theory of movement (Rudolf Laban, 1948), which revolves around the notions of the body as a working instrument, and of space, time, energy and relationships between partners as factors in the medium of movement. The knowledge in this category of content knowledge forms the foundation of creative dance, and naturally migrated to the second generation curriculum (Raymond, 2014, pp. 42-43).

Movement technique revolves around the fundamental principles that coordinate the efficiency of human movement, beyond codified dance vocabularies, and supports the development of the curriculum's two practical skills (disciplinary competencies), Creating and Interpreting dances. Knowledge of these principles stems from the contribution of somatic

approaches and kinesiology to the conception of dancer training. The principles included in the Quebec dance curriculum are breathing, body alignment, laterality, muscle tone, mobility and functions of body parts, weight transfer and gaze focus (Raymond, 2014, p. 43).

These movement technique's parameters are, of course, all relevant, but the fact that they are presented apart from Labanian concepts dealing with the expressive dimension of movement does not help developing a coherent conception of danced movement, which, in fact, combines expressiveness and functional efficiency. As a result, the pedagogical proposals put forward by dance teachers in schools might sometimes be more concerned with motor development than with genuine artistic education. Thus, our new conceptual proposal, named Movement observation-analysis (MOA), aims precisely to integrate both dimensions of expressivity and functionality. We assume that this integration deepens and clarifies the dance knowledge that dance teachers draw on to support student learning. In so doing, this proposal responds to Styrke's (2015) observation that dance as a field of knowledge might be problematic for school dance teachers.

### 3. Emergence of Movement Observation-Analysis (MOA)

Through our previous research, conducted between 2013 and 2016, we sought to merge two existing approaches to movement analysis used in dance, namely Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis (LBMA<sup>1</sup>) and Functional Analysis of the Dancing Body (AFCMD<sup>2</sup>), to integrate more explicitly the functional and expressive dimensions of movement and to better identify

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<sup>1</sup> <https://labaninstitute.org/about/labán-movement-analysis/>

<sup>2</sup> *Analyse fonctionnelle du corps dans le mouvement dansé*, <http://www.afcmd.com/>

and understand a person's body signature. Although studies have shown that Laban's theory of effort proves effective in identifying the parameters that characterize a person's movement qualities and transformations during dance training (Silvia Barnet-López et al., 2017), these parameters do not account for the way in which the person engages in his or her movement. We believe that the functional dimension is most likely to provide information on this issue.

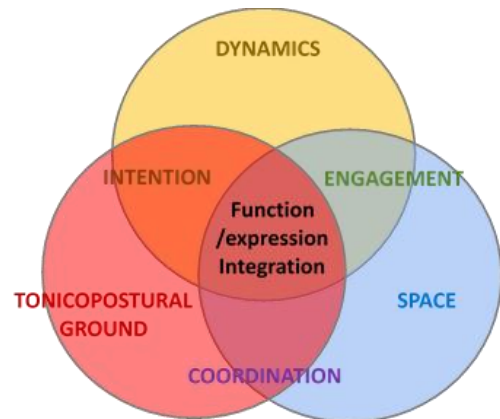
Very briefly, LBMA aims to develop, among other things, knowledge about the expressive qualities of dance movement. This approach is known and used throughout the world, particularly in dance, in dance therapy, as well as in other fields like theater and music, for example. We will not describe this approach here, since it has already been done by experts of the field (Rudolf Laban, 1948; Rudolf Laban, 1950; Rudolf Laban & Lawrence, 1969; Moore, 2014; Moore & Yamamoto, 2012).

AFCMD, a much more recent French approach, emerged in the early 1990s with the aim of equipping dance teachers in France with different fields of knowledge and practice (functional anatomy, neurophysiology of perception, psychology, somatic education) (Topin, 2001) in order to accompany future dancers towards an autonomy through optimal organization of their movement and injuries prevention (Harbonnier, Lyon, & Vuilleumier, 2023).

We present the MOA framework in the form of a Venn diagram, which structures the various observables of movement into meaningful categories divided into three spheres (Tonicopostural Ground, Space and Dynamics), integrating the mind-body dimension included in the two original approaches mentioned above. It also includes three intersection zones (Intention, Engagement and Coordination).

The most significant parameters, which distinguish the body signature of the person we

are analyzing, coming from any zone of the diagram, and combining functional and expressive dimensions, appear in the center of the diagram. For a more complete presentation of our proposal, the reader can find our article published in 2021 (Harbonnier, Dussault, & Ferri, 2021).



**Figure 1.** Movement Observation-Analysis (MOA) diagram

Our previous research has also clearly shown the interdependence of and circulation between perceptual and cognitive activities. The psychologist Alfred Binet, at the end of the 19th century, notes the continuity between perception and reasoning. He states that it would be impossible to draw “a line of demarcation between perception and observation on the one hand and inference on the other ...” (Binet, 2005)

“A perfect continuity exists between the simplest perceptions, as for example, the perception of a colour, and the complicated perceptions that verge upon logical and conscious reasoning; and in short a single act, in developing, in evolving, begins by being a simple perception and is transformed by degrees into a complex reasoning.” (Binet, 1998, p. 77)

As we wrote in our previous paper: “On the basis of Binet’s reflections, MOA seeks to avoid the dichotomy between processes and the results of those processes. In conclusion, by associating observation and analysis we consider the obvious complementarity and power of reciprocal influence between the two activities.” (Harbonnier et al., 2021, p. 77). This association led us to conceive of the observation activity as a research subject on its own right.

“It is implicit in both approaches, but we have noted that the phenomenological aspect of watching, which has significance for how we make sense of observed movement has rarely been considered as the object of research. Accordingly, the proposed framework below intends to bring to the fore the importance of the actual activity of observation, in itself. For this reason, we have entitled the framework “Movement Observation-Analysis” (MOA).” (Harbonnier et al., 2021, p. 73)

Making the observation process transparent means empowering everyone involved in this activity of observation-analysis of movement, whether choreographer, dancer, teacher or student. We will see in the results of our current research that it favors the dance teacher's reflexivity, a highly necessary skill in this profession (Barry, 2017)

#### 4. Methodology

About ten years ago, a MOA introduction was included in school-based dance teachers’ artistic and pedagogical training in Quebec. They can draw on it to design and conduct their activities with learners, for both formative and evaluative purposes. To find out how these dance teachers are currently using it, particularly in terms of knowledge mobilization and meaning construction, we conducted exploratory research

with a few dance teachers in the Montreal area (Quebec, Canada) with these questions in mind: How are MOA concepts useful to the dance teacher? How do the participating teachers mobilize the MOA? What impact does MOA knowledge have on their practices with regard to the three functions of assessment (diagnostic, learning support, skills assessment)? How effective is it toward student learning?

More specifically, we recruited five teachers from the school milieu, three at secondary level and two at elementary level, all trained in MOA as part of their training for teaching dance in schools, either for the master of Arts degree in art teaching or the master’s degree in dance at UQAM.

In a first stage of data collection, we interviewed them using the method of explicitation interviews (EI), whose aim is “to encourage, to help, to solicit the descriptive putting into words of the way in which a task has been carried out.” (Vermersch, 1994, 2007, 2012). This type of interview “is therefore primarily aimed at verbalizing the action (material, but also mental) as actually implemented in the execution of a precise task.” In this research, we sought to have the teachers describe, from their subjective point of view, a moment where they carried out learning assessment tasks in their dance class. This moment had to be experienced as significant by the dance teacher, in terms of their use of the MOA framework.

Conducting the interview, we followed the different stages of the explicitation interview:

- Establishing the communication agreement.
- Choosing the right moment.
- Focus on the moment and elucidate it by feeding the description.
- Accompany the teacher in the elucidation of his action and regulate him to maintain him in

conditions that allow the verbalization of the action.

- Closing the interview.

Sample wording to start the interview:

“If you agree, I invite you to recall a particular moment that took place in one of your dance classes. A moment that would have been significant for you, relating to your use of MOA to benefit student learning. Take your time. When you're ready, let me know.”

Sample wording for describing the chosen moment:

- “If you agree, I invite you to explore this moment and describe it to me...”
- “Where are you positioned in the studio? What are you doing? Who's beside you, behind you or in front of you? Can you describe what you're feeling? What do you hear? What do you see? Where are the students?”

Once the precise moment has been pinpointed, the interviewer accompanies the teacher to refine his description with this type of wording:

“What are you doing at this moment? What are the students doing? How do you do what you do? How do you start doing what you're doing? How do you know you have to do it? What's present for you at that moment?”

What is important in an explication interview is not to induce anything, so that the action described is entirely the responsibility of the interviewee. He is the only one who knows what really happened. If the interviewee strays into considerations other than the action performed (intentions, judgments, knowledge, etc.) - what Vermersch calls “information satellite of action.” (Vermersch, 2007, p. 166)- the interviewer quietly brings him/her back to the description of

his/her action, using the prompts outlined above.

We analyzed the raw verbatim data considering the MOA parameters, and then produced condensed accounts of their teaching activities.

We illustrate our research findings with the example of the dance teacher Suzie, who was MOA trained while studying for a master's degree in dance at UQAM. For her explication interview, Suzie chose a moment involving a Grade 9 secondary school dance class, during which she tackles a creative activity on the theme of water.

## 5. Suzie's Account of her Dance Class

Here are the various parameters of the MOA (in bold) identified as Suzie recounts her moment with her Grade 9 dance class:

After getting close to fiery teenage energy of her students through the “fire” element, Suzie wants to help them discover all the facets of water by getting them to connect much more to their sensations, “to feel rather than to do”. Right from the warm-up, she knows she needs to encourage a state of relaxation. She directs their attention both to a feeling of weight through an imaginary beach (heat, heaviness, imprint in the sand), to a relationship with the environment through the skin (sun, breeze), a relationship that can encourage breathing, all three **TONICOPOSTURAL GROUND** parameters, and to a swing, a particular **DYNAMIC** phrasing that implies letting go of the weight.

During the warm-up sequence, Suzie notices that the students' movements lack overall amplitude, a **SPACE** parameter, and are not fluidly linked, a **COORDINATION** parameter, namely a lack of sequencing between the movements.



**Table 1.** Suzie's explicitation interview excerpt

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73- Interviewer (I): *What do you feel inside at that moment?*

Suzie (S): Well I feel that definitely, in the turn, there's a better grasp of space. In terms of memory, it's the second time, so there's a certain (bounces hands towards the ground, fingers together) confidence. But I feel that there's a fluidity in the turn, then in the spiral, there's a release that's more present. So these two movements, I already feel a better connection. Then I told them: "I feel and see much more the linkage of the two movements, rather than turning, I place myself to do the spiral. The word I used was continuity. Continuity in the turn up to the spiral."

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74-I: *And what do you see as the continuity of the turn and the spiral?*

S: Well, there's no stopping. There's no stopping, and, uh, that's it, there's a kind of confidence.

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75-I: *How do you see confidence? What makes you say there's confidence?*

S: Well, often, when you start a routine, if they're not sure, well, some of them are going to be a bit late or there's a sort of lag, but at that moment, I remember being impressed, because they all started at the same time. Then in the body, there was an impulse that was given, if you like.

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76-I: *When you see the impulse, what do you see?*

S: First, there's the foot that moves everyone forward at the same time. When I give the signal, we start at 5-6-7-8, and everyone puts their foot forward at 1. Then, in the turn, it's not just the legs that move, the whole body moves. So it's fluid and flows together in a continuity that's visible to the eye.

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Suzie begins by communicating her observation to the students, while telling them about breathing and weight. She exemplifies her request by dancing an excerpt from the water sequence, focusing on making amplitude, breathing and the sequencing of movements perceptible. She immediately asks the students to redo this excerpt with her, so that they can feel the two qualities she is trying to get them to integrate. Then, during the complete revision of the water sequence without music, she guides them verbally, immersing them in the imaginary world of water to nourish their INTENTION combined with dynamic qualities:

I tell them, "Think you're in a wave, then the wave takes you for the ride [...] then you hold back from falling here, then next you want to swim, you want to go to the surface of the water, so you pull your arms out of the water, then the leg follows." (EI70)

In addition, she shows the students images illustrating different states of water: the sinuous lines of a river in motion, a wave breaking on the sand, a waterfall with succession effects so that they can feel the qualities of amplitude and

fluidity even more deeply. She asks the students to tell, in one word, what they felt when looking at these images. She hears the words "sinuous", "curved", "fluid and continuous", and "heavy and light at the same time", which are SPACE, COORDINATION and DYNAMICS parameters.

Suzie then tells the students to release their weight into the ground and breathe, carrying air and water into every part of their bodies, indication of Shape qualities, and an INTENTION parameter. She talks about momentum created by body weight on the way down, and about using weight transfer to go from standing to ground (ENGAGEMENT parameters). She tells them that they do not have to follow the music, but that they must use their weight and reach out to the maximum range of motion in their kinesphere, a SPACE parameter.

Following the viewing of these images, Suzie very precisely identifies several improvements in the students' second performance of the water sequence, notably in terms of tone level (TONICOPOSTURAL GROUND) and COORDINATION involving movement initiation and gaze:

“The body is not held upwards at this point, it's the whole-body weight that follows. The foot starts, the body follows, then the arms accompany the movement, then the focus, the eyes follow the movement too” (EI79-80).

The indication about the foot that starts and then drives the whole body corresponds to the “gesture to posture”, an INTENTION parameter.

Before starting the water sequence to music, Suzie suggests a moment of visualization, during which she asks the students to work “in their bubble” while aware of the group's “bubble”, to close their eyes, and then go through their sequence feeling the moments that need more weight towards the ground and those that require momentum to turn. When repeating the water sequence to music, she reminds students to breathe,

“Calm the shoulders and feel the weight on the feet, then find the same fluidity you have just experienced” (EI84).

She also talks about

“Anchoring themselves in the floor, using their weight and reaching out to the maximum range of motion in their kinesphere, the momentum created by the body weight in the descent and using the weight transfer to move from floor to standing” (EI146).

Finally, during the last repetition of the water sequence to music, Suzie observes, once again, that the students have succeeded in integrating more amplitude into their movements by releasing the weight on the descents and the momentum of the arms to turn. She also senses in some of them.

“Momentum in the transition from floor to standing, through the dynamics of the legs unfolding in a wave-like energy” (EI156)

Those are observables belonging to the ENGAGEMENT category.

In this teaching sequence, Suzie clearly understands the interdependence between the amplitude of movement (SPACE), the fluidity of

the sequence of movements (COORDINATION and DYNAMICS) and the surrender to gravity associated with breathing (TONICOPOSTURAL GROUND). She focuses her communication precisely on these last parameters, knowing that they constitute a necessary and unavoidable condition for the emergence of the desired qualities.

This example suggests that the use of MOA:

1. Refines or regulates the dance teacher's observation activities;
2. Enhances her pedagogical communication: precision of her dance movement demonstration, relevant verbal instructions such as functional support, movement qualities and metaphors;
3. Provides knowledge about movement to be shared with students, fostering their autonomy in learning.

## 6. Conclusion

This research collected dance teachers' explication of their use of MOA in their teaching practice in Quebec schools. In this article, Suzie's example illustrated how a secondary school dance teacher seems to benefit from her MOA training, as it contributes to her observation practice, her pedagogical communication, and her knowledge about movement.

Moreover, regarding the three functions of evaluation in teaching (diagnostic, learning support and skills assessment), the MOA proposes an enriched and clarified conceptual set and lexicon to refine movement observation (diagnostic), clarify pedagogical communication (learning support), and nuance evaluative judgment (skills assessment) without artificially separating the functional and expressive dimensions of movement.

Suzie is effectively able to identify what's missing in the students' performances to



incorporate the dynamic qualities of water (amplitude, fluidity), then guide them through various means - her own movement, verbal indications relating to the functionality of the movement (breathing, weight, tone level, momentum, anchoring), metaphors, visual media, visualization - so that they transform their movements towards the desired qualities. Her dance expertise, informed by her MOA training, enables her to adapt quickly to what's really going on in the situation. In this way, as Davis et al. (2021) suggest, she remains in dialogue with her students' dance experience. By the way, the speed with which Suzie "reads" the student's movement and then suggests a solution is something all the teacher-participants of our research agreed on. What's more, the instructions Suzie gives her students seem to function more as avenues for somatic exploration than as arbitrary truths about movement exerting a constraining power over the students' activity.

We emphasize that the movement parameters Suzie addresses in her course are relatively subtle and complex for non-dancers. This enables her to lead them towards a real artistic dimension of dance, going beyond the motor aspect of movement, one of the risks we raised at the beginning of this paper.

Considering these research findings, we advocate the integration of MOA into the initial training of school dance teachers and, as already mentioned, the updating of the content of dance curricula in Quebec's primary and secondary schools.

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