

MOVED TO LEARN CAPOEIRA AND THE ARTS OF EMBODIED EMPOWERMENT

by Nancy L. Watterson and Michael L. Murray

Body Studies, vol. 1, no. 3 (2019): 26-47



ABSTRACT

Scholar-practitioners dedicated to advancing the field of Body Studies do so in the context of pedagogies of interdisciplinarity, multiple genres and multiple intelligences. As teachers, ethnographers, and fellow learners, they are concerned with intersectionality, corporeality, first-person and third person accounts of lived experiences, culturally responsive pedagogies, public and political economies, institutionalized power, and the labor of (and discrediting of) particular human bodies to name but a few themes threading through this transdisciplinary field. In this essay, the authors share a multidisciplinary curriculum centering on capoeira—the 500+ year old Afro-Brazilian martial art. The article proceeds through a review of relevant scholarship on teaching and learning that spotlights classroom approaches to many

of these themes. They integrate critical reflection, ethnographic and contemplative studies revolving around physical action and interaction coupled with writing-to-learn models that weave in critical pedagogy around global issues. This essay models its message: offering ethnographic descriptions of workshops used with high school students, undergraduates, and graduate students in higher educational contexts, as well as with community-based youth programs. This essay is a reflection on innovative frameworks for what embodied teaching can look like—and also a searching out of ways to communicate that understanding. Our aim is to encourage educators in crafting lessons around body studies so that students take creative action and *embody* the wisdom of how change happens.



BODY STUDIES JOURNAL

A peer-reviewed open access journal for the interdisciplinary field of Body Studies

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Keywords: capoeira, movement arts, scholarship of teaching and learning, kinesesthetic and somatic learning, applied ethnography, phenomenology, disposition, critical pedagogy, mindfulness, social justice, body studies, bodylore, literacy.

“The body is capable of understanding more things at once than can be articulated in language.

One has no choice but to think with the body.”

– Barbara Browning (*Samba: Resistance in motion*, 1995)

“Du Bois said, begin with art, because art tries to take us outside ourselves. It is a matter of trying to create an atmosphere and context so conversation can flow back and forth and we can be influenced by each other.”

– Cornel West lecturing on W. E. B. Du Bois (Applebome 1996)

Introduction

Many educators today long for pedagogies that embrace diverse learning styles, address the need for differentiated instruction, and recognize the possibilities for universal design. In particular, they search for pedagogies applicable across disciplines, across genres, across multiple intelligences, and across the senses. In fact, such “sensational knowledge,” to reference ethnomusicologist Tomie Hahn’s (2007) outstanding text by that name, calls to mind emerging scholarship in teaching and learning, arts education, philosophy, ethics, and humanities (Wetzel, 2017; Cherniavsky, 2014; Mehling et al 2011; Roberts, 2011; Tuisku, 2010; Shapiro, 2008) as well as work in the fields of education, folklore, American Studies, dance research, anthropology of movement, critical race theory, engaged pedagogies, and interdisciplinary studies in this vein (Cohen 2011; Risner, 2010; Jackson & Shapiro-Phim, 2008; Davies & Devlin 2007; Rhoten, Boix Mansilla, Schmalzl et al, 2011; Markula, 2006; Ness, 2004; Morton & Enos, 2002; Csordas, 1994; Sklar, 1994). Across campuses, indeed around the world, faculty, administrators, students, student development personnel, community-partners, and engaged artist-activists are exploring ways to instill core values using innovative approaches for teaching and learning.

Given this broadly held quest for pedagogies that empower students to seek, find, and practice sensational knowledge, we begin with a question that also requires teacher and student alike to focus on the embodied nature of (in)justices. We ask, what attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviors may best assist us all in negotiating the complexities of living in a

pluralistic world where conditions of inequity abound and everyday life requires a range of strategies for negotiating differently situated positions of power? (Rendón, 2009; Eck 2006; Lardner, 2005). As we put forth here, by integrating body pedagogies and movement methods into our classrooms, educators may refine skills to help students develop a disposition, an orientation, a “positioning” of themselves that is open to issues of social justice—that is, an ethics of care, a sense of responsibility for civic engagement, a way of being in the world that revolves around “relational ways of knowing.” (Watterson, Rademacher, & Mace, 2011, p. 3). This compassionate, open-hearted positioning is at the root of the transformative, liberating potential of social justice education and its power as a developmental force. The multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary curriculum we share here creates spaces for students to articulate their emerging sense of self and community.

Against this backdrop, this article explores how embodied knowledge can be constituted both in and through various movement arts—particularly that of the Afro-Brazilian martial art known as capoeira—part fight, part dance, part game. For the past twelve years the authors have used capoeira workshops as an effective means to introduce social justice concepts, principles, and practices. We have used this traditional art with courses about the common good, with first-year students involved in a living and learning community, and with undergraduates and graduate students taking courses in community-based arts or the history of art and protest. Cast succinctly, the capoeira workshop is a type of bonding experience: a way to



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improve students' interactions with their peers and build confidence and comfort in taking risks, or what many today term "resilience." The curriculum's "innovation" is the way the hands-on workshop vivifies multiple components of diverse course design—underscoring various "literacies" (written, kinesthetic, cultural, civic, body-based, etc.) as it supports a growing sensational knowledge.

As will be explored more fully below, students read and write about capoeira's history and aesthetic traditions as well as the socio-political systems and structural violence affecting various peoples and parties involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The sequence of assignments, incorporating personal reflection and bodily experience, requires students to play, if only briefly, at being capoeiristas (the word for those who engage in this martial arts practice). This moment of embodiment (one intensive and participatory workshop) is then placed in conversation with the literate experience of others. The students' lived experience of this art form, one that they previously have known primarily from a distance, through research and reading, now serves as a "bridge." The workshop (guided by professional capoeira instructors) provides a segue into discussions of historicized 'black bodies' and the types of conditions that gave rise to forms of resistance such as those embodied in capoeira. At the same time, it also sets the stage for analyses of contemporary issues worldwide: structural violence and rampant poverty in the *favelas* (slums) in Brazil; the economic causes and effects of modern-day enslavement and forced labor; the white-washing and appropriation of art forms such as capoeira as the martial art becomes merely another aerobic offering in some suburban North American gyms. Further lessons provide scaffolding around this first-hand exposure to the various components that make up this traditional art—its hand-made musical instruments, the chants sung in Portuguese language, diverse belief practices informing the mental-physical-spiritual components of the experience—towards the end of allowing students to come face-to-face with their own physical insecurities or abilities while also confronting social injustices that span out from their own, small circle of knowing to the larger circle of the capoeiristas. (See Image 1)

For several years now we have done phenomenological fieldwork, participant-observation, and bibliographic research across many disciplines about movement arts and somatic ways of knowing (Csordas, 1994). Recently, it has become clear that many of our colleagues' concerns for and about millennial students are united by the tools and methods we employ to initiate learners not into various dimensions of arts-education, community-engaged learning, or social justice education *per se*, but rather towards broader issues: namely, ways of being culturally aware and intellectually curious. Our scholarship on teaching and learning has therefore turned ever more toward building on the seeds of this "meta" level discussion—of how we communicate or convey what it is that we do when we talk about teaching, when we think about moving, when we move as a means of learning.

The methods employed in the curriculum described here can best be viewed as applied ethnography: detailing ways of thinking about how we learn, about how we move, about how we articulate to others knowledge gained through body and experience. Four guiding questions anchor our intent to foster critical consciousness coupled with creative action. We spotlight them here and weave their concerns in what follow, as four possible threads useful for expanding a vision for movement-based arts into Body Studies scholarship on teaching and learning:

1. How can our teaching methods cultivate interest among Body Studies educators around intentionally teaching somatic ways of knowing (that is, multiple literacies and competencies around voice, body, gesture, dance, performative identities, etc.) and implementing embodied participation?
2. What movement-based pedagogies and body-mind teaching strategies have worked particularly well to illuminate different ways of knowing, not only as skill-building (or aptitude) but indeed as an attitude, a *disposition*?
3. What are effective ways to infuse body-anchored experiential learning about critical pedagogical concepts such as *power, privilege, difference, equity, dignity*, and



solidarity beyond the classroom, so students can empower themselves and engage in broader community and global issues?

4. Finally, how can we encourage participation in diverse venues of educational research, such as this *Body Studies Journal*, to increase the exchange of viable (and tested) movement-based pedagogies?

The practices (contemplative, intellectual, somatic) outlined in this curriculum, are situated in relation to our own teaching strategies that employ embodied arts and interdisciplinary “literacies.” We hope these detailed explanations may prove useful for other Body Studies scholars who hail from an array of subject areas committed to fostering a “disposition” of helping students to cultivate discernment for the common good (Watterson, Rademacher & Mace, 2012). And we expect the teaching practices described here are highly transportable to contexts well beyond the experiential workshop setting or the teaching of this particular martial art.

Why Capoeira? — Spotighting Skill-building around Body-anchored Learning and Embodied Participation

The sheer physicality of trying out capoeira—the nearly 500-year-old Afro-Brazilian martial art—with its diverse kicks and movements both *impels and deepens* learning (Almeida, 1986; Capoeira, 2002). Students attempting capoeira (part fight, game, and dance) must move across the floor, try out unfamiliar positions, and literally step inside another person’s space and mindset, all the while improvising in the moment. Study of this traditional art, now spread across the globe and manifesting in many contemporary settings, can play a vital role in 21st century arts education by making explicit strategies for thinking about how we learn by thinking through how we move and reflecting on these thoughts in writing. In essence, students learning capoeira must comprehend with their bodies, minds, and spirits in order to occupy fully the interactive, “dialogic” space of the playful exchange between partners (See image 2). Students, regardless of real or assumed physical abilities, find the experiential learning component, or

learning by doing, particularly exciting. This is not surprising as capoeira is such a dynamic and multi-faceted art form (with music, instruments, physicality, collaborative play, and competition all rolled into one). It requires that a player adapt to new situations and apply learning as one goes—a form of “body chess,” as some people call it—in a way that expands many of the millennial students’ experiences of “college life.”

There is clearly much that is worth a closer look. First, the process of experiencing an unfamiliar movement-based art form can be simultaneously challenging and empowering. As in many new settings in which students try out movement arts, students enter as novices, and bring with them a range of attitudes, abilities, prior knowledge and different needs. Some come with intrinsic knowledge; others are disinterested. Some with open minds, some with fixed mentalities. Most fall somewhere in between. At the physical level, a novice has no foundation—literally. Legs shake from basic standing postures, arms collapse with unfamiliar positions that tax their resolve, heel kicks fall short of any mark, leg sweeps appear but wouldn’t hurt a fly, and cartwheels crumble mid-air. It is a kind of uncertainty or dissonance which world-class martial artist Paul Ralston speaks of: “One of the biggest barriers to effective movement is the way we think about our bodies. . . . One reason for this is that our ‘knowing’ seems like solid ground, while not-knowing appears to us as a negative, as ignorance or confusion. . . . You must change your state of being. You cannot change radically in the same state.” (Ralston & Ralston, 2006, p. 16). Still, this quality of being unsettled may, surprisingly, become the root of practice—an embodiment of resilience, a way to encourage our students to persist, to push through first stages, to grow in confidence, to cultivate potential.

Discovering such potential strikes at the heart of empowerment: the idea of mastering one’s own body (mind/spirit) while also learning to relate with others in appropriate ways (Cruz, 2014; Chin 2006). Implicit in this idea is an ethos that offers a way of dealing with conflicts, change, and disruptions. It is the ideal of interacting harmonious-



ly with self and others, as Grandmaster Sam F.S. Chin explains the viewpoint behind many Asian martial arts, including his own pathway of Zhong Xin Dao / I Liq Chuan which is influenced by both Tao and Zen Buddhist philosophies. (Chin, 2018). To widen the application of these ethical concepts even more, we see that being in right relationships and interacting in respectful, mutually reciprocal ways are also central tenets of social justice teaching in many traditions, including Catholic Social Teaching (CST), as one example. The martial artist's ethical concepts resonate with accepted protocols for community engagement as well. Across diverse disciplines and traditions, we have found that body-based workshops with capoeira provide an apt framework to help students explore essential truths of the human condition: of how to enter into relationship, move artfully and with confidence and grace, and act in accordance with others. In these workshops, they do so while having a positive experience. (See image 3)

One particularly apt casting of the need to understand this interplay between self and others comes from Professor Deborah Foster, who long taught ethnography of dance in the Folklore and Mythology Program at Harvard University. She explains, "It is imperative for the human condition that we try to understand what we know with our moving bodies—how we move in space, make space, and make space inhabitable." (Foster, 2011) Indeed, examining how we know what we know—with our minds and brains, as well as our bodies—is part of one major trajectory of body-based studies; namely the turn toward integrating research from fields as seemingly diverse as contemplative science, mindfulness, psychology, neuro-anthropology, writing and the humanities, and mind-body therapies across the allied health and exercise sciences. (Wetzel 2017; Mehling et al 2011). To a great extent, it is the insistence on being in the moment that makes moving matter. Such attention to presence can be taught in exercises that call on students to center one's self and interrogate one's own ego. These are practices that may entail recognizing when one loses one's center; exercises to become aware of imbalance, dissonance, and attitudes or assumptions that may prove limiting; exercises to become attuned to emotions, reactions, thought patterns through listening

to our bodies; and exercise requiring one to stand in place or move in relationship to others. Each of these repeated practices shares an objective akin to Ralston's philosophy of effortless power and its twin pillars: consciousness and skill. He exhorts, "When all around is in an uproar, find the stillness that is always there. Calm is being motionless in motion. Clarity and freedom arise from being ..." (Ralston, 2006, p. 83). Clearly, embodied movement practices such as mindful capoeira include different kinds of movement—physical, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, individual, collective, intentional, improvisational, invitational, radical, dispositional—and support attempts at, if not something more, of experiencing effortless power.

Body-Mind Dispositions: Performing Art as Strategy for Teaching and Learning

Scholars such as Tomie Hahn, renowned ethnomusicologist, ethnographer and dancer, have argued convincingly about the need for institutions of higher education to explore not just what the movement arts can teach us, but how they teach us: how we learn with our eyes, ears, touch, use of space, feelings, breath. Focusing our intention and empathy on such lived experiences can help us not only to see but to explore shared sensibilities, changing our understanding of how we "orient" ourselves to go about being in the world. "If dance is a 'way of knowing,'" Hahn writes, "it is also a way of expressing what we know, what we embody, and who we are." (Sensational Knowledge, 2007, p. 167) This emphasis on articulating the experiential—including one's own body as an embodied field site (Hahn, 2007)—informs our conceptions of the pragmatic potential of capoeira and, indeed, other movement arts. Integrated fully into course design, body-anchored arts offer windows both into "how art is sensually transmitted within its cultural context" and the ways in which that awareness can reveal how the senses shape our understanding of what exists not only outside the body, but also within the interior body (Hahn, 2007, p. 10). Our multi-layered lessons in this way help to develop understanding of complex, multiple, worldviews. Other qualitative, phenomenological research around embodied practices, specifically with youth, can be found, for



example, in Tuisku's (2010) work, "Diving in: Adolescent Experiences of Physical Work in the Context of Theater Education" which looks at spontaneity and improvisation as developmental processes and finds the youth gain positively in several dimensions of personal growth. Our capoeira workshops similarly access the social dynamic of movement arts towards developing such skills.

What is distinctive, however, about capoeira as an empowerment strategy is that it is not only a lively martial art, but also a multi-dimensional and aesthetic form that must be played with music (the commanding percussive twang of the one-stringed bow instrument known as the *berimbau*; the *atabaque's* drum beats; the syncopation of the tambourine-like *pandeiro*; the scritch-scratch scrape of the *reco-reco*, the incisive chime of the commanding *agogô*, and the accompaniment of singing, in Portuguese, punctuated by collective hand-clapping). The drumming/ percussive involvement and the raising of voices in communal song both serve to impel participation. Something about the music being such an integral part of the art-form helps to bypass what Gabrielle Roth (1998) has called mental inertia, by focusing one on the moment. Indeed, it has been our experience that in moments of shared ineptitude, such as struggling to learn some of the basic capoeira stances, kicks, and escapes (e.g., the swaying *ginga*, the heel-kicking *bênção*, the cart-wheeling *au*, the crouching roll of an *esquiva rolé*, etc.), students may find a commonality; they place such intention on executing the movements that each one is often caught up in the moment while also working together musically. Thus ensues a type of solidarity, at least in the framed moment of the workshop.

To integrate the mental and the physical, we craft writing as an integral part of our capoeira workshops. We ask student to *read* and *write* and *think* about these lessons in and through their bodies. "Time, the body are our slow vehicles, our chariots without wheels," Hélène Cixous writes in her description of the physicality of writing. "Look, I've just 'seen' a book—now I'm going to need two years and two hundred pages in order to recount it with my hands, with my staggering feet, and my breath harnessed to my

chest," (Cixous, 1998, p. 30-31). We find a happy consonance among scholars of literature and performance who have entertained the notion that reading and writing are embodied acts, occurring not solely on the page, but also as a performance that can be traced from a writer's physical transformation of that page and on through its publication and consumption by a reader. This orientation of our pedagogy towards the act of writing as something physical and kinetic is intentional. We craft it as an integral part of our capoeira workshops to develop our students' conventional and bodily literacies, asking them to read and write and think about these lessons in and through their bodies. The English author and literary critic, Jeannette Winterson, argues that "[l]earning to read is a skill that marshals the entire resources of body and mind" (Winterson, 1996, p. 111). And when the reader successfully "marshals" these resources, the result is "the ability to engage with a text as you would another human being" (p. 111). Put differently, performances do not dwell within works of art, rather they exist between the performers of these texts and their audiences (Schechner, 2002, p. 30).

Within the game of capoeira or the narrative that strives for embodiment, meaning is constructed and knowledge is transferred anew each time the spectator or the participant experiences the game. For our workshop participants, this experience has been framed within the ethnographic context of playing an unfamiliar game—the event of the capoeira *roda* itself. And, at the same time, the experience has also been framed in the context of a much more familiar game—the academic essay in which, characteristic of good 'writing to learn' practice (Elbow 1997), sensational knowledge is gathered, experience is reflected upon, and insights are articulated to an audience.

Body-Anchored Experiential Learning for Self, Communities and Global Understanding

The pedagogical questions that drive our unit on capoeira are ones that weave throughout much of contemporary higher education: How can we teach and learn from this generation of students in ways applicable to our times?



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What are the most effective practices to link active social justice learning about concepts such as compassion, harmony, balance, dignity, solidarity with others, to active engagement in service of the common good? What are some viable strategies to help students take initiative to raise respectful questions about diverse worldviews and inclusive interpretive methods? What creative strategies are readily available for helping young adults, and college students of all ages, to think imaginatively about core values and also experience them inter-personally at a formative stage in their academic life? What particular models of vernacular traditions—and body-anchored arts—are available to help inspire students through intentional pedagogies of social justice, applicable in and across the disciplines, in and across sectors? Answering such questions is part of the mission of multiple inter-locking resources: on contemplative anti-oppression pedagogy, critical race theory, transformational teaching, which catalyze educators committed to developing an ethics of care, a sense of responsibility for civic engagement, an orientation toward social justice—powerful tools for tackling public issues pertinent to local learning and global education. At stake in such an emphasis is what might be termed an inter-dispositional worldview: an ethos, a philosophy of life, a way of being that encompasses a proclivity toward peace-building in a complex world. Such deepened understanding is particularly needed when ideas of “cultural competency” may threaten to become static categories rather than ongoing processes for developing interpersonal skills and cultivating life-long learning. In this way, our epistemology—moving to learn, learning to move, writing to learn—shares much with the radical power of engaged pedagogies.

By creating a foundational framework with shared phenomenological vocabulary about moving-to-learn, educators can introduce various workshops to offer students a reference point: “experience-based” settings that encourage an expansive, holistic approach to understanding themselves, their own desires, their motivations, and their *raison d’être*. Viewed against this backdrop, capoeira is ideal as one such literal and metaphorical space: a gateway for teaching various interdisciplinary and transdis-

ciplinary concepts. It functions as a useful springboard, moreover, precisely because the very act of trying out the art-form goes a long way toward breaking down boundaries (i.e., initial stereotypes students may have about gender, age, athleticism, linguistic abilities, gaps in their grasp of diverse nationalities/ethnicities, etc.). Moreover, the use of a different mode of teaching (in this case kinesthetic, body-anchored pedagogies, neither ‘chalk and talk’ nor ‘sage on the stage’) is further aided by the universal appeal of rhythm. Students who are not physically able to do the acrobatic, swinging movements participate actively in the ethnographic role of participant-observers and attest to appreciating the music as central to the spectacle of capoeira. At every turn, capoeira provides a viable meta-cognitive means for experiencing empowerment and talking about it, specifically the mastery of Self, arguably a persistent learning objective for students making any transition—moving from high school to college, undergraduate studies to graduate school, and so on. Our students, by reading historical and contemporary accounts of how others negotiate such in-between spaces of liminality—moving from enslaved to free—begin to grasp in a visceral way how the ability of move (or not), to be still (or not), to engage (or not) are skills that can be generalized.

A Closer Look at One Example: Teaching through Capoeira—Moments from the Classroom

Such moving-to-reflect lessons are essential in the complex educational contexts of the 21st century; as our experiences point up, kinesthetic, body-based, somatic expression help students gain clarity, by interacting dialogically and understanding reciprocity through negotiated interactions. With these insights in mind, let us now examine how we have integrated this body pedagogy into several interdisciplinary courses while analyzing more closely how use of such movement arts aids in teaching both critical thinking and creative action. For many years the authors have used capoeira as the focus of an interactive workshop introducing traditional arts as a means for teaching inclusivity (formerly couched in terms of diversity and equity or before that as multi-cultural education).



Most recently we have used the experiential workshop in conjunction with first-year writing seminars, with courses on the history of art and protest, with undergraduates studying engaged ethnography, with social justice courses exploring dimensions of the common good, with first-year students involved in a living and learning community, with young adults still in high school but pursuing early-college “success” programs, and with undergraduates and graduate students alike taking courses in the relationship between liberal and public arts.

We incorporate capoeira into the curriculum through many avenues, often by blending traditional primary and secondary sources—including memoirs, histories, narratives, and songs. The readings model ways of digesting embodied experiences even as these texts complement the students’ own forays into capoeira. Typically, we may have students read about capoeira’s history, aesthetic traditions, and the sociology of the various peoples who took part in the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Cf. Taylor, 2005). Then, they experience the workshop. Next, we do additional research and analysis. While that order is not set in stone, we do try to keep the interdisciplinary pieces in each iteration of the capoeira arts unit. Doing so helps integrate our “moving to learn” pedagogy with multiple literacies and learning outcomes. For example, often we will introduce students to the concept of capoeira by first giving them a range of interdisciplinary sources: written and audio-visual resources such as ethnographic texts, video clips, capoeira song recordings, excerpts from personal experience narratives, and so on. To illustrate, we include here an introductory passage used in our classes; it comes from Greg Downey’s anthropological, phenomenological account *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*:

Capoeira (pronounced “ka-pooH-AIR-ah”) is an Afro Brazilian art that combines dance, sport, and martial art. When it is played as a game (rather than used for self-defense or performed in folklore shows), two players, called capoeiristas, enter a round playing area, the “roda” (“HOE-dah”), formed by the bodies of other players and musicians. There, they attempt

to outmaneuver, trip, or strike each other while coordinating their movements to music that controls the tenor of the game. The legs and head are the principal weapons; the hands primarily distract opponents and support the body’s weight. Players defend themselves by avoiding impact rather than by blocking strikes. In the tight confines of the roda, capoeiristas evade each other by using an extraordinary repertoire of dodges, cartwheels, and other acrobatic movements, some of them inverted, the body turned upside down on the arms or head. A player strives to control space, to evidence malícia or “cunning,” to execute more difficult movements, to employ dramatic devices skillfully, and to show greater aesthetic sensitivity. At the same time, a player must avoid a sweep, trip, kick, or head butt that may knock him or her to the floor.

Capoeira training transforms practitioners’ comportment in everyday life so that the cunning they learn in the game orients them outside it as well. Like many people who study martial arts or bodily disciplines such as tai chi or yoga, capoeiristas believe that changing the way students walk, breathe, stand, and carry their bodies affects their emotional lives, social interactions, and perceptions. [This book] is dedicated to understanding how that might happen in capoeira, and what [we] might learn from this sort of life-transforming physical education. (Downey, 2005, p. 7)

Secondary sources such as Downey’s not only introduce the martial art, but also foreground the ethnographer’s methodology, his use of his own body as recording instrument. Thus, Downey’s thoroughgoing ethnography gives students the necessary cultural knowledge to then apply his theories and extend his insights into their own analyses.

We may also use a short autobiographical excerpt such as the following, which comes from Mestre Jelon Vieira, (NEA Heritage Fellow 2008). Vieira’s philosophy of capoeira as traditional art *and* way of life has been captured



well in an interview he did with the National Endowment for the Arts. Explains Vieira,

I started to believe at a very young age that capoeira is my life and capoeira is my strength. capoeira is my life philosophy. Capoeira is what's given me a base and a strength to see the world. It teaches me tolerance for things that I can't change. Capoeira gives me sensitivity, gives me love, gives me the understanding that people are people regardless their background, their gender, their race. We all should come together and that's the power of capoeira, bringing people together. (NEA Arts, 2009, para. 5-10)

The personal philosophy, passion, and family” sensibility that Vieira testifies to is mirrored for us locally through the wonderful capoeira workshops offered by Martell Oliver and Ron Wood. Their teaching is emblematic of embodied pedagogy. They connect successfully with college students, neighborhood residents, martial artists, and arts-supporters alike and is committed to collaborating on integrative activities that help shape a more just world. The lessons amplified through Oliver and Wood’s masterful teaching speak to the kinds of particular, theorized practice (and practical theorizing) used by folklorists, anthropologists, social workers, and educators the world over. What is particularly appealing about Oliver and Wood’s workshops is the way they take care to frame for the students the details of their own paths. They explain their process of “journeying inward” and also why we also undertake our intense quests collaboratively.

Many of us may recall inspirational moments: when learning moved outside the typical bounds of the lecture-style classrooms and gave us a new way of experiencing the world. It is this type of response that is part of what we hope our capoeira arts unit will help to accomplish. The actual integration of the capoeira workshop functions on several levels simultaneously. Typically, the workshop is framed by the guest *capoeiristas* (See Image 4); offering a philosophical / historical presentation, an introduction to the musical traditions (instruments, rhythms, songs—in Portuguese—and only then proceeds to learning the basic

components of the integrated arts involved. At session’s end, students apply what they have learned by participating in an actual capoeira *roda*, or circle of play. Here, the students form a ring and, impelled by capoeira songs, and take turns playing in pairs within the circle paired in a game with one of the experienced capoeira players. For those students who may not be able to participate in the physical activities, there is ample opportunity to observe the foundational components, the ritual, style, the music, and strategies of the art-form.

After the workshop, we pause for reflection. In our writing about capoeira, we ask students to at once consider the martial art and the very act of knowing a culture through bodily experience. A version of our prompt for first-year composition students reads:

Central to the study of performance is the assumption that as on the stage, much of the meaning and symbolic significance of a drama is conveyed bodily rather than merely textually. In order to study the body, ethnographers have adopted the use of their own physical selves as data-gathering instruments, describing the experience of cultural performances first-hand. As ethnographer Greg Downey writes, “taking seriously how different ways of standing, moving, and acting animate us, inform our perceptions, and enliven our sense of ourselves requires an emphatically embodied form of anthropology.” (21) Yet we might continue to ask, to what degree are we able to know the experiences of others by casting ourselves in supporting roles within their social dramas? Can, as folklorist Deirdre Sklar (1994) asks, we learn more about performance by doing than by the more detached research tools of observing and talking?

Following this set-up of the writer’s task as one that not only acknowledges the ethnographer’s endeavor to know culture via experience, we ask our students to essentially size-up these scholars and enter a figurative *roda* with them.

Pose for your reader a question that emerges out of this unit’s readings on capoeira and your experiences of the martial art then craft an answer to that question. You



may do this via a critical analysis of a particular ethnography and theory of how individuals and communities come to embody cultural knowledge, such as Downey or Sklar's approach to capoeira and Native American dance, respectively. Or you may place one ethnographer directly in conversation with another. For instance, do you think one text provides (or fails to provide) us with an important insight for the study of culture that the others don't (or do)? Be sure to tell your reader why this is an interesting question to consider and not only how you'd answer it based on both what you've read and what you've gathered in bodily ways, but also how you'd imagine the other scholar's we've read commenting on it.

Although the focus of this prompt is on an *etic* (or outsider's) point of view, we strive to orient students to an *emic* (or insider's) voice, too; namely, what it looks like, feels like, sounds like from the life-long practitioner's worldview. Such a lens has been useful in encouraging our students to be creative investigators with a critical eye towards *etic* perspectives and an attention to the *emic* narrative that leads to engagement with a diversity of ideas and seeking information from a range of sources. In her memoir, *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston defined research as "formalized curiosity" (Hurston, 2002, p. 143), acknowledging in one phrase how creativity and constraint may inform learning. Hurston's approach is particularly relevant for the teaching of an embodied, experiential, and justice-minded ethnography, for if *curiosity* is what research is, then *community* is why we research.

In engaged classes, teachers and students can be found doing something together: having deliberative dialogues about difficult issues, working toward consensus in a problem-based project, jotting down as-yet-unformed ideas in writing-to-learn discovery exercises. By working together, new aptitudes, and ineptitudes, emerge. As teachers who engage in reflexive practices, we look for similar moments of transcendence whenever some encounter with others (whether some unfamiliar lesson or some unexpected method for processing new information) may encourage our students to grow as participants in the community of our class, as well as in communities beyond academe.

Perhaps a glimpse into our own reflections—our ethnographic jottings on moving to learn—will underscore our point. Here (in an excerpt from our class fieldnotes), we give voice to our own experiences of capoeira as we, along with our students, likewise struggle through the martial art and the theory alike. We to must move into new postures, adapt to the moment, cultivate an unfamiliar point-of-view:

Reaching my right hand to the floor, I can feel the grime and dirt press into my palm as I let my left leg lift and my weight begins to shift into the cartwheel. Immediately as I plant my right foot and pop upright my momentum is swinging my body right again—right hand down, feet in the air, left hand down, feet down. Ron Wood, the capoeira instructor, and Mita Khrichenko, his assistant, have us cartwheeling the length of what now seems an impossibly long room. Each time I invert and pop back up I'm getting dizzier, but I work hard at keeping my eyes forward, my palms planted flat, and my legs in a fluid arc. Suddenly Ron's in front of me, gesturing with two fingers for me to keep my eyes locked on his. Obviously Ron's good at this, and I'm mesmerized by his grace. While I felt myself tumbling at breakneck speed, I watch as he swings his weight halfway through the cartwheel and then pauses, hanging in midair, to wait for me to catch up. When he gets his rhythm in time with the awkward stumble of my own cartwheels I feel as if I'm being hypnotized by his fluidity. All I can see are his steel-blue eyes, static while the room spins around us.

The following morning we're back around the seminar table and trying to make sense of our brief foray into participant ethnography. First, we're writing about, "How's capoeira class like Writing Sem?" When it's time to share, Erin starts with her thoughts on how the martial arts class was infinitely more physically demanding than writing essays. The laughter she's greeted with is surely because we're all glad to hear one of our class' varsity athletes admit to still being sore. But, as more students share, Erin's thoughts on the differences between physical and intellectual exertion become part of a growing consensus. As the



readings end and we transition to talking, we all admit to being overwhelmed by the fluency of some of the authors we encounter, just like our awe of Ron's flawless expertise. But the students are also looking back to the experience of sharing their writing with each other for the first time and feeling intimidated by the skill of some writers relative to their own. In our capoeira workshop, new or unexpected talents (as well as clumsiness) revealed themselves alongside a deeper realization of how our seminar is a community centered on learning. Who did we cheer when she finally made her handstand or whose feet did we glance at when we lost the rhythm or how many times did we track back to help a classmate falling behind? In the end, we posit, Writing Sem is like capoeira class because it's about challenging ourselves to try on new attitudes and experience the world differently with the support of community of like-minded peers—hopefully without the soreness.

Our capoeira workshop calls upon us to orient ourselves to each other, to the physical space of the room, to this foreign culture in new and potentially uncomfortable ways. The result, as it was in the moment in Murray's writing seminar, can be an illumination of the deep potential of individuals and groups alike to gather bodily knowledge and to process it in local as well as global ways. By semester's end, we come to realize anew that our shared classroom space, our actions in and beyond it, re-define higher education; that's what it means to continually create a community centered on learning. Exercises such as the body-anchored capoeira workshop magnify how learning and scholarship are both communal efforts.

Civic Literacy: Moving Toward Social Justice

Students attempting capoeira must move across the floor, try out unfamiliar positions, must literally step inside another person's space and mindset, all the while improvising in the moment with innovative ways of moving through the world. In the process, students learning capoeira must occupy fully the interactive, playful exchange. (See image 5). The "dialogic" space that is the ca-

poeira encounter resonates well with the visionary statement about art, attributed to W.E.B. Du Bois: "Art tries to take us outside ourselves. It is a matter of trying to create an atmosphere and context so conversation can flow back and forth and we can be influenced by each other." So, too, with the visionary potential of movement-centered arts education: of remaining open to possibilities that unfold in the moment, that "stay in conversation" with multiple constituencies, that adapt to new situations while drawing on embodied understanding, applying learning as one goes.

A curricular unit with a capoeira workshop may serve well in developing civic literacy, if educators emphasize the pertinent social justice issues. In capoeira, as with other martial arts and movement arts that involve competition (or even the negotiation of space or the desire to communicate a message, feeling, or idea), it is quite obvious that people move around in relation to one another. Those are the "rules of the game." Still, such ways of moving are not to be taken for granted. Indeed, Peter Ralston and Laura Ralston, drawing on a lifetime of expertise in martial arts, write in *Zen Body Being*, that "Most people are unaware that they have access to what's true about their own bodies" . . . that "how we perceive our bodies determines how effectively we use and relate to our bodies, and therefore how effectively we can relate to the world around us..." (Ralston & Ralston, 2006, p. 20) At the heart of such physicality, then, we find the recurrent theme: the interlocking ideas of Individual and Society, of positioning and positionality, of becoming aware of how one "stands one's ground", both literally and figuratively, as well as how one observes and interacts with others. Renowned educator and scholar on effective practices in learning communities, Emily Lardner discusses such positionality as being comprised of a sense of self and worldview which are essential to character formation (Beckham, 2004, as cited in Lardner, 2005, p. 17). Lardner's ideas resonate well with embodiment research, too, for relational ways of knowing have distinctly social dimensions and civic ramifications, and these both carry with them nuances of power, shifting dynamics, and power imbalances. This type of insight is something we have come to call partici-



patory modes of awareness; and it takes practice to cultivate. And with repeated practice—in reading, writing, moving, synthesizing, analyzing, reflecting, sharing, interacting—students do try on a plurality of ways to cultivate wisdom. Their creative action “toolkits” expand.

Conclusion: Wider Implications for Transformative Learning

“What are the kinds of movement and qualities of transformation by which to develop both inner and outer phenomenological experiences?” Thus asks Arthur Zajonc (2009) in his work *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry* (p. 197). His inquiry resonates deeply with that of activist scholar John Paul Lederach, renowned for his work in conflict transformation through the arts:

To be a person is to be a vessel that receives and shares vibration and sound . . . [R]ecuperating a sense of being human...requires getting behind the mask to the sound, vibration and voice of something deep that touches the very essence of our humanity. (Lederach, as cited in Cohen, Gutiérrez Varea, & Walker, 2011, p. xviii).

Lederach penned the above statement in his compelling foreword to *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*. In that same volume Roberta Levitow, co-founder of Theatre Without Borders, pleads with us to think deeply about the ways in which we as citizens and artists conceive of the role of the arts in a world marred by conflict, trauma, and violence, inviting us all to see that “we have the potential to combine artistic excellence with a carefully honed sense of social purpose and responsibility.” (Levitow, as cited in Cohen, Gutiérrez Varea, & Walker, 2011a, p. xvii).

Assuming that many visionary educators may similarly wish to encourage in students a disposition for peace-building, conflict resolution, or commitment to projects that further the common good—that do the hard and necessary work of social justice—we educators do well to pause and reflect. How can we “teach to transgress,” to invoke feminist scholar bell hooks (1994), and do so in such a way that students are enticed to care about inequities

and power structures even as we help them question and critique the very theories and approaches that help bring about social change? What if such critical thinking and writing simply mire down in words at the expense of movement and action? Can we teach students about self-awareness through a wide range of tactics while also conveying the deep need for solidarity—of walking alongside and doing *with* not *for*?

Capoeira *can be used* successfully as one innovative, interdisciplinary approach for engaging students in issues of globalization, unequal power structures, as well as the appeal of self-discovery through playful pedagogy. For students learning the experiential, movement-based aspects of capoeira, they must learn with their bodies, minds, and spirits, in order to occupy fully the interactive, “dialogic” space of the exchange. (See Image 6) As the tradition of capoeira has evolved with the dynamics of political shifts in Brazil, so any introduction to the art necessarily must carry with it teachings of the strategies of resistance that evolved out of socio-historical realities and their contingent forces of oppression. Students at Cabrini University, for example, are offered as one reference point the media materials produced by Dr. Jerome Zurek, Chair of the Communications department at Cabrini, which highlight the efforts in Brazil of the Center for the Defense of Human Life and Rights (CDVDH) to use capoeira training with the youth of Acailandia, part of the organization’s advocacy against forced labor of youths throughout Brazil. (*Cabrini Connections* 2006). In this way, students are introduced to ways to explore international problems by approaching an issue through multiple modalities: the distanced is made immediate and the global local by literally embodying multicultural movements and trying on other’s worldviews. While the one conversation asks them to apply the introspective knowledge gained in a capoeira workshop to their current struggles as students, the stakes are then raised in a challenge to extend that knowledge further as they consider and confront the physical, as well as social, challenges of others.

The relationship between community engagement, multiple literacies, critical consciousness, creative action,



and social justice has clear ramifications for institutional change and for altering relations with wider publics as well. As students become well-versed in and skilled practitioners of social change they do well to understand themselves as empowered through a long legacy of cultural work and participatory action (Shor, 1997). The challenge of “doing social action,” moreover, of doing it well—with a certain grace and artistry—deserves our ongoing collective reflection, commitment to dialogue, the wisdom of many voices, and the work of many bodies:

a veritable movement of movement. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, those seasoned educator activists, offer us motivational words for continuing such action in their ever inspirational book, *We Make the Road by Walking*. Be resilient in the struggle for freedom and sustain commitment to justice, they extol, and do so by passing along to the next generation a worldview of compassion and sharing; the humble spirit of critical engagement; the skills for effective social change; and the will to stay focused. (See image 7)

About the Authors

Nancy Watterson is an Associate Professor of American Studies at Cabrini University and teaches courses that revolve around ethnography, folkloristic appreciation of diverse cultures, the history of art and protest, training in the mental-physical components of the martial art of awareness (*Zhong Xin Dao / I Liq Chuan*), Capoeira and the Arts of Resistance, and writing across the disciplines.

Michael L. Murray is senior associate in the Institute for Writing and Thinking, Bard College, and faculty in Language and Literature at the Bard High School Early College-Newark. His current research is on collaborative reading and writing pedagogies for secondary and tertiary classrooms.



BODY STUDIES JOURNAL

A peer-reviewed open access journal for the interdisciplinary field of Body Studies

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Cabrini University • ISSN-2642-9772

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Deep gratitude to the capoeira artist-educators with whom we have had the honor and pleasure to work, especially Martell Oliver, Ron Wood, Antonio Marcos Corrêa, and the many capoeiristas who have assisted in workshops at Cabrini University, Princeton University, and the University of Pennsylvania, and at community-based endeavors around the region, including the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP)—part of Cabrini University's partnership with Norristown, PA; the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP); the Community Education Center (CEC) and University City Arts League in Philadelphia; the Norristown Police Athletic League; and the Rockland County Folklife Festival. We would also like to thank KL Chan, Lisa Ratmansky and Darryl Mace for their suggestions on earlier drafts of this article and Mita Khrichenko for permission to use his photographs. Support for course development and research was provided in part through the Cabrini University Academic Affairs Office. Preliminary ideas for this paper were presented in a talk titled "Capoeira and the Arts of Empowerment: Embodying Community through Experiential Learning and Community-based Collaborative Research" at The 2007 International Symposium on Multi-Cultural and Ethnic Harmony, Taipei, Taiwan; and in presentations at the American Folklore Society (AFS) national conferences, 2010-2012.

NOTES

1. The authors have collaborated on capoeira workshops in many and varied contexts of higher education, undergraduate and graduate alike. We have shared lessons and insights, curricular materials, participatory fieldwork and collaborative research.
2. For but one of many examples of social justice principles, namely those known as Catholic Social Teaching (CST), see the one-page handout provided by the Catholic Charities Office for Social Justice and available at www.cctwincities.org.
3. For an overview of principles for successful CBR partnerships, see Community Based Research Network. Retrieved from National CBRNetwork Wiki <http://cbrnet.pbworks.com/w/page/6418818/What%20is%20Community-Based%20Research>.
4. Granted, capoeira is not all sweetness and light, nor do we intend to romanticize the art form here; it is after all, a martial art and punches, kicks, and destruction can—and do—take place. Nonetheless, the very process of acquiring the martial skill necessary to adapt to spontaneous situations that may arise—street-fighting among them—have a long heritage. In capoeira's case vernacular, pragmatic forms of localized martial learning can be found in traditions across Africa and likewise emergent in Brazil. As but one timely North American-based example that discusses this dimension of fusing aggression and art, "energy and decorum", "style and substance," "play, performance, and pugilism," See Thomas Green's 2012 article, "Sick Hands and Sweet Moves: Aesthetic Dimensions of a Vernacular Martial Art."
5. While such phenomenological sources are indeed instructive, we highlight Greg Downey, for his work, (along with texts by J. Lowell Lewis, Nestor Capoeira, Gerard Taylor, Bira Almeida, and Stephens & Delamont) has proved most accessible to our first-year undergraduates and high school students alike. What we emphasize here is our interdisciplinary approach to integrating various "literacies," particularly reading, writing, cultural, and social justice-based.
6. This basic premise is part of Cabrini University's core curriculum, *Justice Matters*, specifically its "Engagements in the Common Good series," a sequence of courses that aims to build students' level of participation in social



issues by asking them to reflect on themselves the first year, get involved directly through service the second year, and, in the third year, to engage in meaningful research projects determined by those who live in communities where social inequities persist because of differences in race, class, unequal access to education, etc. By their final year students will undertake some form of engaged advocacy and social action, and write a culminating “Capstone” that synthesizes these multi-layered experiences and prior knowledge.

7. For this paper we focus primarily on the most recent workshops, namely those presented by Martell Oliver, founder of Martell Oliver School of Capoeira as well as the *Philly Art Collective*; and Ron Wood (founder of *Não Compreendo Capoeira*). Earlier workshops were taught by Antonio Marcos Corrêa (Professor Canguru of *Grupo de Capoeira Arte Colonial*). Oliver and Wood are well-known Philadelphia-based teachers of capoeira, who, for the past decade have taught workshops at for a variety of academic classes interested in linking mind/body experiences to diverse academic subjects. Martell’s outstanding commitment to teaching movement arts has served as a catalyst for encouraging new generations of students in diverse ethnic communities to step more fully into their artistic forms of expression. Each instructor brings years of training, deep commitment to the art form, and stellar teaching methods. Their generosity of time and open-handed sharing of their talents is immeasurable. Each of them brings years of training, deep commitment to the art form, and stellar teaching methods.

8. These themes intersect with wider public dialogues about how collaborative, expressive arts vivify the kind of arts-based dialogue that has been highlighted by Pam Korza et al in the *Animating Democracy* projects, part of the conversations in higher education about expanding the definition of engaged scholarship and outreach across the disciplines.

Appendix



Image 1: Two rodas (or circles of competition) at the first batizado organized by Professor Martell Oliver (Philadelphia, PA) April 2014. Photo by Mita Khrichenko. Permission granted to use. Contact: phillyrock09@gmail.com



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Image 2. To enter into the roda is to play an improvised kind of “body chess,” where you have a moving “dialogue” with your partner—and the roda is open to any who wish to play—quite a democratic ring. One’s kills and abilities (physical, musical, mental) will be tested with trickery, physical force, and mental agility alike. April 2014. Photo by Mita Khrichenko. Permission granted to use. Contact: phillyrock09@gmail.com



Image 3. Two Capoeiristas (Capoeira players) prepare to enter the “roda” or circle of play, beginning the game in ritual and respectful fashion, by crouching at the foot of the one-stringed “berimbau”—and entire ‘band’ (or bateria). Here the players cross several generations in the A.S.C.A.B. group’s lineage. Mestre Corisco (dressed in white) and Contra-mestre Parda (Ron Wood), in green t-shirt and white pants) will play each other. April 2014. Photo by Mita Khrichenko. Permission granted to use. Contact: phillyrock09@gmail.com





Image 4. Guest Capoeiristas. Practicing the rhythms of capoeira: clapping hands, singing in Portuguese at Cabrini capoeira workshop (Martell Oliver, Derek and Michael Reaves, Ron Wood). Photo by authors.



Image 5. Cabrini University first-year students try out a capoeira arts workshop, the movement component. MitaKhrichenko at left on pandeiro, Martell Oliver at right on berimbau, Ron Wood in roda. Photo by authors. Permission to use.





Image 6. Collage of community-based workshops – building civic engagement through the ‘give-and-take’ of capoeira play. Youth workshops. Photos compiled by Martell Oliver. Permission to use.



7. Capoeira instructor Martell Oliver demonstrates the sheer physicality and utter freedom that unfettered movement can express—as well as the mindfulness skills required to keep oneself “oriented” in space even when upside down. Philadelphia Water Works/Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo by Mita Khrichenko. *Permission granted to use. Contact: phillyrock09@gmail.com



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