
A Case Study: Shall We Dance? Establishing an Inquiry-Based Partnership

By Barbara Watanabe Batton

“We learn from the company we keep,” says psychologist/educator Frank Smith.¹ This observation certainly applies to my relationship, which dates from 1999, with several ArtsConnection staff members regarding Community Elementary School 53 in the Bronx.

I came to the school as a teacher consultant of the Elementary Teachers Network (ETN), a teacher-education program of the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College of the City University of New York. I worked to improve students’ language and literacy competencies by first improving teacher practice, which was done through after-school study groups and classroom visits. Participants in the ETN study group used inquiry frameworks—including the Prospect descriptive processes developed at the Prospect School in North Bennington, Vermont—that delved into the nature of children’s work to inform teacher practice and helped plan curricula.

Meanwhile, ArtsConnection was providing dance- and theater-artist residencies for all 1,600 CES 53 students, and I discovered that ArtsConnection was starting on a parallel path of professional development to improve artists’ own teaching practices. Our collaboration began when two ArtsConnection staff members joined the ETN study group, wishing to learn more about the Prospect descriptive processes and how we used them. At the same time, I evaluated the work of teaching artists in residence at the school—observing and interviewing them, attending planning and reflection meetings, and becoming part of their ongoing conversation around professional development.

¹1998. *The Book of Learning and Forgetting*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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These reciprocal apprenticeships developed into a partnership whose most tangible product, the Video Description Process (VDP), was put into practice at CES 53 in 2001.

The Video Description Process

From the outset, ETN’s and ArtsConnection’s goals for the VDP were to:

- Foster collaborative inquiry and partnership among teachers, teaching artists, and ArtsConnection staff
- Study students in the act of learning in the arts
- Develop language to examine the intrinsic benefits of the arts.

The VDP is adapted from a Prospect descriptive process called the Description of Work, in which the study group (cohort) often begins by describing an object, such as a pine cone or a shell, rather than a person. In that way, participants observe and describe something for its own sake and practice setting aside any judgments or interpretations. This exercise lays the groundwork for further practice with observation and description of human beings.

Over the span of a school year, participants in the ETN-ArtsConnection partnership selected at least one student to observe and describe while the student made or did something. There was no predetermined format for collecting and recording observations—the purpose of the assignment was to cultivate a habit among teachers of watching students at work. Periodically, teacher participants shared their observations and samples of students’ work at study group sessions. These collaborative inquiry reviews followed set protocols, which we adapted for the VDP process [See “VDP Structure,” p. 28].

One VDP cohort met six times during a 20-week dance residency in a fourth- and fifth-grade special-education class. The cohort included two teaching artists from the Afro-Caribbean dance/music ensemble *Retumba!*, the classroom’s

teacher, another (fifth-grade) classroom teacher, the visual-arts teacher who also taught the class, three ArtsConnection staff members (including the videographer), and myself.

At the initial planning meeting, the special-education teacher selected three particular students to be videotaped during the VDP because she was curious to see what impact the dance residency would have on each of these individuals. One was a fifth-grade boy who had become more self-assured and physically comfortable in dance as a result of a residency with the same artists during the previous school year. The other students, a boy and a girl, were fourth-graders.

The girl was physically disabled but very self-confident, and she liked to dance. The boy had difficulty controlling his movements.

As a group, we developed a focusing question based on what the teacher told us. Its first iteration was: “What can we see about children using dance to express themselves?” We quickly realized, however, that this question did not include dance-specific language and would not have allowed us to examine the art form’s benefits to the students. An ArtsConnection staff member with a dance background reframed it, using dance vocabulary and an artistic lens. The focusing question ultimately became: “How are students

VDP Structure:

The cohort of participants in the VDP usually includes: the artist; the classroom teacher; one or two additional teachers who are working with the same grade or with the same age group; two co-facilitators (usually a member of ArtsConnection’s staff and a facilitator from the school); and, the videographer. Each group meets five times after school.

Meeting 1: Classroom teacher selects three or four children to focus on during the videotaping. In addition, she forms a focusing question based on her selection of students. The question may be refined over time with the support of other members in the residency cohort.

Meetings 2, 3 and 4: The group meets three more times to review videotaped sessions during the residency, usually the beginning, middle and final session. Depending on the length of the residency, the number of meetings of the cohort may be greater or fewer, but no less than two. The meetings are structured to allow everyone to participate equally in the process. The videotaped session is viewed in its entirety, and each person gives his/her general/first impressions of the whole session. After this “go-round,” the chair summarizes by pulling forward large themes and/or issues raised.

- The cohort discusses possible video clips that stood out, citing places where the focus children were visible and where something noteworthy occurred. During this time, several possible clips are often reviewed. A short segment (two to three minutes) is selected.

- The clip is reviewed (usually two more times), and participants describe what they notice a child was doing. A co-chair summarizes all or most of these go-rounds. As the clips are re-seen, the group generally begins to build a jointly constructed description of a child at work. It has also proved useful, where possible, to review the selected clip without sound, making the child’s physical presence and gestures even more visible.
- At the end of each meeting, time permitting, each person responds to and critically reviews the group’s work during the meeting, a procedure known as the “process talk.”

Meeting 5: The participants choose a two-minute video clip segment from each videotaped session that addresses the focusing question. At the end of the four meetings, the videographer splices the selected clips together, creating a six- to eight-minute tape for viewing at a fifth and final meeting which includes additional teachers, artists, and staff—not more than 15 people. This larger body serves as an audience to whom the cohort “reports” the results of their collective work. The participants follow an inquiry process that is structured by go-rounds of description, intermittent summaries, and a final process talk. The VDP is a collaborative effort. Participants must monitor their own use of time, and be open to varied points of view.

Resources:

Margaret Himley and Patricia F. Carini (Eds.). 2000. *From Another Angle: Children’s Strengths and School Standards*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Patricia F. Carini. 2001. *Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, Schools and Standards*. New York: Teachers College Press.

learning to express themselves through dance in terms of physicality, movement, energy, and control?"

Taking our cues from someone trained in dance helped to focus the group. Thus at each of four subsequent meetings during the dance residency, the cohort reviewed the session videotaped that day in its entirety and then selected and described a short video clip from the session that revealed something noteworthy about the students in terms of physicality, movement, energy, and control.

A premise of the Prospect descriptive processes is: "We learn to see a thing by learning to describe it." In their four meetings, the cohort members

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therefore practiced attention and careful description; and speaking for myself, I certainly needed that practice. As a chair, I was experienced in facilitating descriptive reviews, but as a participant-observer of dance I was a novice at describing it. Actually, the dance artists themselves, not

accustomed to describing dance in words, were not especially articulate about identifying learning in their art form. But we all learned to attend to each other's observations and pool our knowledge. At times I drew upon my own prior experience with print literacy, making analogies between these two kinds of learning to help decode dance steps and the quality of their execution.

During the residency, each of the three students demonstrated progress in learning dance. The boy with prior dance experience became a model for the others in his class, adding expression in solos and incorporating his own dance vocabulary with that of the teacher's. But he told the teacher that keeping in mind the basic dance, as originally learned, helped him to focus. The physically challenged girl was stiff at first and relied on another girl for acceptance; by the end of the residency, she combined the known and the new, integrating her own body shakes with teacher-taught dance steps. The other boy, who had difficulty controlling his body in the classroom, was initially timid in his attempts to learn dance steps. But he steadily became more comfortable and confident, sometimes taking risks by adding break dancing to his solo movements.

All three of the students showed enthusiasm from having learned something new and become part of a supportive community. And, according to



PHOTO BY BRENDA KENNEALLY

Students design regalia for a performance based on their Native American studies.

their teacher, what they learned through the dance experience about physicality, movement, energy, and control transferred over to positive learning behaviors within the classroom.

At its final meeting—merged with a larger forum called the VDP Meeting—the cohort presented the video clips selected in our previous meetings. We described the clips and addressed our focusing question, and we noted visible changes over time in the three students. Having closely watched them try to master steps, we could report how they transitioned from being stiff and non-inventive to putting movement phrases together bit by bit, adding flair, and making the dance their own.

Course Promotes Learning Across Disciplines

In the 2002-03 school year, those of us co-leading the ETN study group decided to include dance and theater as part of an inquiry into arts and literacy connections. The focusing question for this inquiry was: “How can the arts experiences in ArtsConnection residencies be extended and broadened for children in ways that promote their learning across subject disciplines?”

That same year, ETN offered a new credit-bearing course at CES 53, “Exploring Writing and Learning Alongside the Arts.” Its aim was to introduce successful writing and art-making strategies to teachers, who in turn would



PHOTO BY BARRY ORECK

Students from PS 282k perform at ArtsConnection's annual gala.

Each meeting ended with “process talk,” an opportunity for participants to share thoughts and comments about the experience. One cohort member saw it as an opportunity to “learn how children learn dance, in particular, because it is not verbal.” The classroom teacher said: “It reconfirmed my beliefs that children learn differently [from each other] and that there is a need to watch and process individual learning styles and [figure out] how to incorporate it in teaching.”

introduce them to students. The course explored the similarities and differences between reading, writing, and art; for example, it compared the processes of engagement in reading written texts and “reading” visual “texts.”

In this curriculum-design workshop, participants read a variety of texts (including photographs, reproductions of artwork, and videotapes of children’s work in the performing arts), at times

using descriptive inquiry processes. In addition to studying at least one student, participants designed and implemented a curriculum project incorporating writing and art.

What We Learned

All of the meetings held during VDP cohorts were audiotaped, and those selected for study were transcribed. This allowed a VDP research team, composed of ArtsConnection staff, school staff, and myself, to conduct a collaborative inquiry during developmental stages of the VDP. (More generally, this team was integral to the partnership between the school, ETN, and ArtsConnection.)

At this writing, we are still in the process of analyzing our research on VDP cohorts. However, some tentative findings can be shared:

- The VDP enabled teachers, teaching artists, and arts-education staff to focus a descriptive-inquiry lens on students in the act of learning in the arts. Interviews conducted with teachers and teaching artists demonstrate the power of “kidwatching” (a term popularized by Yetta Goodman).
- The VDP provided a “third space” for teachers and artists to become partners in a meaningful knowledge-making endeavor. Ordinarily, teachers at CES 53 have few opportunities to regularly convene, except for grade groups and monthly faculty meetings, which allow little time for shared inquiry or collaborative learning. All of the participants in the VDP cohorts, however, felt that this experience served to combat teacher isolation and created meaningful partnerships between teachers and teaching artists.
- Building a culture of inquiry among staff in a school and within an arts-education organization requires time, perseverance, sustained funding, and supportive leadership. The partnership between the school, ETN, and ArtsConnection was five years in the making—an eternity by the standards of most schools under pressure to provide quick answers to complex problems.
- There is a growing consensus among researchers that “professional development yields the best results when it is long-term, school-based, collaborative, focused on students’ learning,

and linked to curricula.”² The VDP has shown itself to be an effective model for manifesting these criteria.

The presence of performing-arts residencies in the school over a span of years was an invitation to dance, so to speak. It inspired the leaders of the ETN study groups to transform study-group sessions into art-making ateliers where teachers imagined and invented new classroom contexts for learning through play and experimentation. As a result, teachers began to: 1) expand their notions of literacy, recognizing that arts and aesthetic education is also literacy education; 2) offer time and space for play, choice, and art-making in classrooms; and 3) develop skills, strategies, knowledge, and understanding to engage students in classroom-based projects that connect arts and literacy education.

A kindergarten teacher, who participated both in the ETN study group and two VDP cohorts, provides an example of how one teacher’s thinking and practice specifically changed in response to working with the arts and descriptive inquiry. The VDP project “lets you see teaching from the child’s point of view,” she said. “Now, if I have the opportunity to observe a child, I’m more careful and more focused because I realize that a teacher can glean a lot of information just by watching a child’s reactions.”

Inspired not only by the VDP project but more generally by the ETN study group and arts residencies, this teacher has introduced several classroom-based projects linking art and literacy: a dramatic rendering of the storybook *Rainbow Fish* to which parents were invited; outdoor sketching in different seasons of trees that stand in front of the school; and a classroom picture book chronicling what happened when each of her students took home a stuffed replica of Curious George. The teacher will also begin to incorporate movement into her teaching. “We are doing an inquiry at the moment, called Shadows, in which I take the kids outside and ask them to move, watch their shadows, and note the shapes that they make,” she said. “Every year I’ve been here I’ve had a dance teacher, and although I hadn’t thought that I could do it myself, I think I will try to do a little of the shape work that the dance teachers did.” ■

²James Heibert, Ronald Gallimore, and James W. Stigler. 2002 (June/July). “A Knowledge Base for the Teaching Profession: What Would It Look Like and How Can We Get One?” *Educational Researcher*, 31 (5): 3-15, p.3.