Crossing from the personal to the professional and back: Using 5Rhythms dance meditation to explore our teacher education practices

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5Rhythms transcends dance. The movement is the medicine, the meditation and the metaphor. Together we peel back layers, lay masks down, and dance till we disappear... Only to rediscover ourselves through it all.

https://www.5rhythms.com/gabrielle-roths-5rhythms/

We are teacher educators in universities on different continents who are interested in using 5Rhythms dance meditation as a vehicle for better understanding our teacher education practices. We have been working collaboratively for several years now, examining how teaching and learning are cognitive, emotional, and embodied acts. In order to conduct research collaboratively on embodied teacher education practices, we realized that it would be important for each of us to learn in our bodies in our personal lives as a means of reflection and meditation. For how could we ask or expect our students to participate in embodied learning, if we as the educators, had not experienced this sort of learning ourselves? Having both had past theatre and dance experience, 5Rhythms seemed like a natural place to begin and we were encouraged when we found classes near our homes.

Over the past three years, we have each practiced 5Rhythms on a regular basis and then through journaling, emails, and skype conversation, have attempted to document and analyze our experiences and the ways in which the meditative practice, and in particular our dances of the rhythms of staccato and chaos, help us to see the challenges we face in our teaching through new lenses. For this self-study, we used the lens of 5Rhythms as a reflective mirror to explore the tensions that emerge in our teaching practices between the ways in which we enact caring authority and order and our ability to let go of control, negotiate power with our students, and open up instructional spaces for our preservice teachers to experience creative chaos.
Chapter 13: Crossing from the personal to the professional and back

Our embodied self-study was twofold: we describe both the insights that we came to collaboratively through our use of 5Rhythms as a self-study reflective tool as well as the nuances of using an embodied method collaboratively to better understand our pedagogical beliefs and practices. Our focus was narrowed to the rhythms of staccato and chaos from a 5Rhythms wave as we believed these were the rhythms that emerged as most challenging either on the dance floor, in the classroom, or both.

**Theoretical framework**

I feel it all, I feel it all . . .
I know more than I knew before. (Feist, 2007)

We were drawn to 5Rhythms dance meditation practice because of our own interest in embodied teaching and learning and how it allows for “direct, experiential engagement as an alternative way to construct knowledge” (Freiler, 2008, p. 43). We understood that the body plays a significant role in knowledge construction (Nguyen & Larson, 2015) and we wanted to work within a space where “both the body and mind are being more holistically approached and valued” (Freiler, 2008, p. 45). We realized that in order to practice embodied teaching we needed to engage in embodied learning in a deliberate and reflectively methodical manner. This was especially important to us as we acknowledged that we work in institutional settings which privilege cognitive ways of knowing (Forgasz, 2015) and have explored the continuous challenge of walking our talk and living up to our commitments of embodied pedagogy (McDonough, Forgasz, Berry, Taylor, 2016). We wanted to experience embodied learning that “involves being attentive to the body and its experiences as a way of knowing” (Freiler, 2008, p. 40). We hoped that 5Rhythms would be a reflective mirror that used bodily sensations as a means of deepening self-knowledge and in turn our pedagogical knowledge as well. We believed that it would offer us “a different way of accessing, and expressing, self-understanding” (Forgasz, 2015, p. 128) rather than relying on cognitive and discursive forms of reflection.

Gabrielle Roth and the work of 5Rhythms dance meditation appealed to us because as we stated earlier, we both had some previous theatre and dance experience but also because we saw this practice as a realistic method of self-study. As Roth explains, the premise for 5Rhythms is that “your body is the ground metaphor of your life, the expression of your existence. . . Everything that happens to you is stored and reflected in your body” (Roth, 1998, p. 29). She contends that a wave of 5 rhythms exist in everything that we do—in our actions and emotions. These rhythms are: flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical, and stillness. Each rhythm has a positive and negative or a light and shadow side and is associated with a feeling, a life cycle, a mode of knowing, and an aspect of ourselves.

Because our self-study focused on the rhythms of staccato and chaos, we describe those in detail here. Staccato movement is percussive, angular, disciplined, defined, and ordered but can also be rigid, inflexible, and impenetrable. It is associated with anger, childhood, loving, and is driven by the heart. In our classes, staccato could manifest as an order or authority which is in place in a caring manner to support student understanding. It could potentially mirror what feminists call reciprocal authority—a kind of authority that comes from caring and responds to the need for boundaries and structure (Applebaum, 2000). On the other hand, the shadow side of staccato could look like strict disciplinary actions which control student bodies (where they sit, how they sit) limit student talk (who speaks, how often students speak, how often teachers talk), and even dictate what is considered knowledge, truth, and understanding.

In the dance, in chaos, we let go of the head, spine, hips, and feet and move faster than we think. Chaos is associated with full release of the mind and represents sadness, adolescence, knowing, creativity, and the mind. In our classes, we allow for chaos when we let go of control and invite our students to co-construct knowledge with us. This could come in the form of inquiry learning or negotiating the curriculum (Boomer, Onore, Lester, & Cook, 1992; Freire, 2000). It is a generative process where instructors and students partner as problem posers and problem solvers through
listening, dialogue, and action (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 2000). Inviting chaos in the classroom can be messy and unpredictable, and often uncomfortable for the teacher, and yet there is great potential in what can emerge from the chaos in the classroom (Coia & Taylor, 2013; 2014).

**Study aims**

In this self-study, we explored how practicing 5Rhythms as a dance meditation assisted our understanding of the tension between caring authority and chaos in our teaching practice. We examined how 5Rhythms was used as a reflective mirror and how the insights that came up about our personhood crossed into our teacher education practices. Specifically, we asked:

1. How does 5Rhythms dance work as an embodied method of self-study of teacher education practices? How can it be used as a mirror to deepen our understanding of our teaching?
2. How does practicing 5Rhythms facilitate our examination of the tensions between the staccato or caring authority in our teaching and the chaos or ability to let go in our teacher education practices?

**Methods**

Our collaborative 5Rhythms study clearly demonstrated the criteria of a self-study. It was self-initiated and self-focused as we examine the ways in which practicing 5Rhythms helps us to understand authority and chaos in our teacher education practices (LaBoskey, 2004). Interestingly our study began with an inventive method, dancing, rather than a burning question. We had begun practicing 5Rhythms and we wondered what insights it would bring to our teaching. We believed that our dance meditation would serve as a creative engagement that could offer us an alternative way of knowing or a new way of making meaning (Pithouse-Morgan, Coia, Taylor, & Samaras, 2016). 5Rhythms became an arts based research method for us (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2012; Weber, 2014), providing us with a bodily language for what Evans, Ka’Opua, and Freese (2015) call “the hard-to-put-into-words” (p. 25) and giving us an alternative way to examine what we were feeling in our teaching. Our dancing became “a way to express ourselves when words are insufficient” (Absolon, 2017, para 10). Dancing 5Rhythms was also an iterative process for us, as many arts-based methodologies are (Weber, 2014). Through reflection and discussion our provocation for the self-study emerged. We discovered what Hamilton and Pinnegar (2009) describe as: “a living contradiction or a puzzle or a wondering about where we want to be, what we know, and how we know it” (p. 105). We identified aspects of our teaching that mirrored some of our struggles on the dance floor and committed to examining them collaboratively. In particular, we focused on our 5Rhythms dance meditation practice in staccato and chaos as a vehicle to reflect on similar nuances in our teaching. Our interactions of sharing reflective journals, dancing together, and talking about our experiences in person and on skype enabled us to make meaning together through the deliberate and methodical documentation of our experiences on the dance floor and in our classes.

In some ways, we began this self-study three years ago. We started by practicing 5Rhythms on our own. We familiarized ourselves with 5Rhythms by reading Roth’s “Maps to Ecstasy” (1998) and “Sweat Your Prayers” (1997), and several academic articles that examined 5Rhythms (Boyd, 2015; McCormack, 2002; Tselikas, 2001). In the fall of 2015, we had the opportunity to dance 5Rhythms together for an entire week. Dancing each night together and then having a chance to debrief in person provided us with the necessary extended dialogue space which led us to our research questions. One of our last afternoons together, on a long walk through a park near Monica’s home, we began to brainstorm the sorts of tensions that emerge for us on the dance floor. We both honed in on the rhythms of staccato and chaos, thinking about the ways in which we embraced and resisted those rhythms on the floor as well as how they worked sequentially into one another, and how we responded to those rhythms when they manifested in our classrooms. Our research focus found us that day, and it doesn’t surprise us that we were in our bodies walking when it came to us.
Since then to generate data, we have written individual reflective narratives (about 20 in total) describing our dance floor insights and reflections about our teaching practices. Additionally, we have met on a regular basis whether face to face, via Skype, or through email to share experiences and consider common challenges, ideas, and themes (18 times total).

**Data analysis**

Our data analysis involved a combination of re-reading narratives and email communications, writing through themes, and then cross-checking with one another through discussion. Specifically, using a constant comparative approach (Creswell, 2014), we each read through our texts, examining for patterns and themes. Once we had determined a code, we wrote its description combining chunks for our narratives as well as text to strengthen and clarify the theme. We shared these more extensive code descriptions through email with one another to see if we had patterns in common as a means of triangulation and member checking. In addition to these traditional ways of demonstrating trustworthiness, we also attempted to craft our narratives in a credible and authentic manner so that they “evoke in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751). We hoped that the juxtaposition of retelling our experiences of the dance floor with those in the classroom would speak to the reader emotionally and intellectually (Richardson, 2000, p. 517). We attempted to represent the five rhythms in our descriptions of our findings, in order to give the reader insight into our experiences on the dance floor and in the classroom.

**Findings**

*The 5Rhythms of the pedagogic process*

We began this self-study with a belief that as Roth (1998) writes, “Your body knows; your body tells. The relationship of your self to your body is indivisible, inescapable, unavoidable” (p. 29). Once we established our research questions, each time we entered the 5Rhythms dance floor we tuned into our dancing bodies to give us new insights about ourselves as women and teacher educators. A core assumption of 5Rhythms is that each rhythm plays a necessary role in the wave of our development, whatever the context of its application. The poem below captures Rachel’s learning about how 5Rhythms wave can be applied as a framework for describing the process of a pedagogical encounter.

I Inertia

In Flowing/ Babyhood/Fear –
Mother nurtures
eases, nudges
students gently in

II Imitation
Staccato/Childhood/Anger –
It’s Father’s time to teach.
Clarity,
Discipline,
Structure,
Rules,
provide
Frameworks,
Safety -
ets
III Intuition
In Chaos/Adolescence/Sadness –
We let them go to teach themselves.
Watch them cascade, nosedive, fall
Into the depths
Of uncertainty’s abyss

IV Imagination
In Lyrical/Maturity/Joy –
We are one.
A community.
Teacher-
-learners
all,
sharing the building of knowledge.

V Inspiration
In Stillness/Death/Compassion –
The universe teaches all.
Ours, only to ask
new questions
design
new approaches
see
and respond
to an
ever
changing
world. (Rachel)

Stuck in Staccato

Stuck in Staccato, stuck in staccato, stuck in staccato.

“Stepping in a rhythm to a Kurtis Blow
Who needs to think when your feet just go
With a hippie-the-hip and a hippie-the-hop
Who needs to think when your feet just go.” (Tom Tom Club, 1980)

The doing.
Discipline.
Making decisions.
Taking charge.
I have power. I have control.
Setting boundaries. These are the lines. Don’t cross them.

Here comes staccato. The beat, the beat, the beat.
I know how this works.
Here we go.
It starts in my hips, knees, and feet, low, low, low to the ground.
Heart beat, heart beat, heart beat.
Auto staccato, staccato, staccato.
I am always stuck in staccato.
I have things to do. I am busy. I am taking care of business. 
It is serious, focused, and goal oriented.

The beat resides in me- it comes from within. 
I know staccato- it energizes. (Monica)

The above narrative expresses Monica’s sense of how she experiences staccato, how automatic and everyday a rhythm it can be for her, how much it drives her productivity, but at the same time can restrain and limit her creativity both personally and professionally as a teacher educator.

By thinking about the role of staccato in her coursework design, Rachel also saw that she placed a lot of importance on providing theory, structure, clarity, and frameworks (staccato) so that during their practicum, preservice teachers could apply this learning in order to develop their own unique approach (chaos) to planning and teaching. She realized that with limited class time, she tended to get stuck in staccato, undervaluing the importance of letting preservice teachers explore and apply new ideas during their coursework studies in order to confidently apply those ideas to practicum teaching. More significantly, she saw how this created a mismatch between the explicit and implicit messages she hoped to give preservice teachers (Berry, 2009) about the structure and agency when learning to teach. If their class experience emphasized learning theories of how to teach over practicing them, how could she expect them to trust her encouragement that powerful practicum learning would require them to move beyond imitating the style of their mentors (staccato) and to experiment with their own ideas (chaos). Like others (Bullock, 2017; Thomas, 2017), she was prompted through 5Rhythms to imagine ways to better support preservice teachers’ practicum learning by rethinking her teacher education practices in the coursework component of their initial teacher education. We ask the readers to consider what staccato may feel like in their lives, where does it manifest, and how is it taken up, embraced, or resisted.

**Chaos: Letting go and giving in to feminist pedagogy**

How do I help my students to let go? 
No---we will construct the curriculum together. No--I won’t tell you what to do. No. No. No. (staccato creeping back in)

What do we know? What do we want to know? How will we learn? 
What is our agenda for the day? 
How should we discuss the readings?

Whispering: be free, be free, I trust you, trust yourself.
Inviting chaos into my classroom I go into auto. Listen, listen, feel, feel.

IT CAN Be LOUD, this CHAOS in the classroom. IT CAN BE LOUD this SPEAKING TRUTH. 
Emotions like smoke implode around the words. ANGER! SADNESS! FRUSTRATION! 
Shut down, rise up, resistance, silence, invisibility, screaming!!!!!!!

Students speaking over each other, emotions 
Stomach knotting, I feel it in my gut, listening to students, struggle, speaking truth, silencing themselves, their frustration manifested in LOUD or quiet ways!

I hear you. I do, I do, I do. 
What I hear you saying is . . . yes, yes, yes.

Trust the process, ask questions, listen to each other, make meaning, reflect, repeat. 
We are in this together. (Monica)
The rhythm of chaos is daunting whether in day to day life or the classroom. It takes an act of radical trust on the part of both the teacher educator and the student to surrender to chaos, and yet without chaos in the classroom much creative engagement and learning are missed. Because of its riskiness, inviting and supporting chaos in the classroom involves a faith in the possibility of what it can bring in the context of a community of learners. This is particularly important when exploring issues of social justice, of power, oppression, and invisibility, in teacher education.

Resistance to chaos

I wanna let go. I'm gonna to strip back. Trade in stuff for space. Conversation for chaos. Exploration, discovery, experimentation, application, trying things out, getting things wrong, making things mean what they mean to you. I'm gonna give you more choice to follow your hunches, pursue your interests, make your case for what and how and why. But you can't go there. Won't go there. Don't go there. Except kicking and screaming and freaking out. You want me to tell you the stuff, but only enough so that you can show that you know and you're ready to go Out Into The Real World. You are afraid of getting it wrong and you are right to have that fright, to mistrust being thrust into freedom in The Real World of the here and now. But some way, somehow, we will take that plunge together. (Rachel)

As Rachel discovered, the risk of invoking chaos as a pedagogy for teacher education is exacerbated for teacher educators and students alike within the contextual realities of standards-based program accreditation and teacher registration processes. In such times, balancing the tension between telling preservice teachers about teaching and providing pedagogical experiences that encourage growth (Berry, 2009) becomes an even more important, and delicate matter.

Conclusions

Our embodied collaborative self-study using 5Rhythms has really just begun. It has offered us a chance to begin to explore how “we learn in and through our bodies and, yet, we tend to neglect the body as a source of knowledge in our teaching” (McDonough, Forgasz, Berry, Taylor, 2016). The dance floor has become a mirror for us to examine who we are personally and professionally through the body as a way of knowing. We have appreciated applying 5Rhythms as a critical framework to examine pedagogical encounters and gain a better sense of the phases of our students’ learning, and our changing roles in how we support their learning as teacher educators. Finally, we realize that in order to create real, open spaces in our classes, which support potential truth telling and hold, honor, and give voice to the emotions that emerge, we must rely on the rhythms of staccato and chaos for structure and freedom.

References


5Rhythms. https://www.5rhythms.com/gabrielle-roths-5rhythms/


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