

dynamics and movement qualities^{i ii}

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Dance is the controlled use of the body in reference to meaningful experience. Its ultimate purpose is to communicate. Human movement is a language that can convey its own meanings, define abstract lines and shapes, reveal thoughts, images, moods and events which have motivated the dancer to transfer these into action. The illusion of motion plays an important aesthetic role in the choreographer's obligation as designer, the dancer's role as the doer, and the audience's role as the perceiver. Dance in the art setting is a function of motion, not gross motor movement. Manipulation of one's raw material in accordance with well-tested principles helps bring the point of communication into a distinct focus for both the performer and the viewer.

Movements and movement sequences become shaped into meaningful wholes, into compositions. Preparation for learning to shape movement into motion comes as a result of the student becoming sensitive to the general characteristics of movement quality and the shading of quality through the use of dynamics (i.e., through an interchanging play of kinetic forces).

For practical purposes movements possessing similar characteristics have been grouped together into six broad classifications. These *qualities* result from the mechanical application and release of energy to the various moving parts of the body. All movement exists between the two poles of action and inaction, of tension and release, of contraction and relaxation, of fall and recovery, of inhalation and exhalation. When a muscle contracts completely it is incapable of movement; when it is fully relaxed it also is motionless. Movement takes place only as energy is applied and withdrawn, only when there is an interplay between tensions and releases of tensions. A constant, steady application of energy will produce a smooth movement, a *sustained* quality; an intermittent application of force or energy results in either a *percussive* or a *vibratory* quality; a movement having the quality of a *swing* gives way to the downward pull of gravity following an initial application of energy. In the study of movement qualities it is a common practice to examine each quality in isolation. In actual usage, however, most movements combine several qualities and are given even greater subtlety of expression through the application of dynamics.

To treat movement dynamically is to impart to it various shadings of intensity, to provide for contrasts and more implicit subtleties of reference. It involves the control of energies imparted to movements, to the duration of the gesture and the distance it travels in space. A single movement such as the lifting of an arm can be changed dynamically when it is varied from weak to strong, from slow to fast, from moving upward a small distance only to extending it to its fullest reach. When the dynamics of a movement are changed the entire feeling tone of the movement is altered. In the initial phase of study, dynamics should be studied for their contrasts - weak, strong; slow, fast; short, long; wide, narrow, for then the difference in effect can be readily perceived. Later there will be the need to work with more subtle changes, to shade movements by slight changes of force, speed and dimension, or to develop skill in effecting changes by gradual means.

Each characteristic movement quality invokes a different general feeling or state of being. As each is experienced the student should become aware of the impact of moving according to a certain quality in order to consciously note the form of inner response to it, for motion and emotion are closely linked. The student should also be conscious of the way in which the dynamics more specifically pinpoint the sensations that are aroused. A swing, performed lazily and describing small arcs of movement will not feel the same as the same motion done with a greater application of force and extended into a wide dimension. Dynamics in the treatment of movement qualities are not, however, intended to produce a literal meaning for the modern dancer deals with the abstract and avoids the pantomimic imitation of reality. But dynamics and movement

qualities do contain overtones of meaning, feeling, sensation, that are considered later on when ideas are shaped into compositions.

In introducing students to the analysis of movement qualities and the application of dynamics, the dance instructor should use word imagery. Essential differences frequently can be quickly grasped if ways can be found to form associations with past sensory experiences. The mind can picture drifting clouds in a summer sky, or recall the sound of a window shade that has been released suddenly, or the taste of honey, the scent of pine, the sound of hail on a tin roof or of ice cubes tinkling in a glass, the sensation of a slowly melting icicle or a rock falling from a cliff. The teacher should select images that are appropriate and involve all the senses, or make an attempt to draw image responses from the students after they have experienced the movement. Memory has a storehouse of sensations that can be applied. A note of caution should be mentioned, however. Creative imagination is the basis of true invention. Reliance only upon the conscious past should be avoided. Inspiration should not be restricted by limitations of one's own life experiences. The imagination is an unfailing resource if the dancer approaches problems honestly and openly.

**Another way to talk; about the quality of movements (how energy is expended):

SIX QUALITIES OF MOVEMENT:

- SWINGING: a slight impulse, a giving away to gravity, an unchecked follow through along the path of an arc, and a momentary pause before repetition.
- SUSTAINING: smooth and even, the result of a steady equalized release of energy that excludes any perceptible accent, sharp initiation, or sudden cessation.
- PERCUSSING: a sharp, aggressive movement in which the energy is applied with sudden force and then quickly checked.
- SUSPENDING: when the full of two opposing forces is even ... the brief time when the energy has run out, the moment before the body succumbs to gravity.
- VIBRATING: a quick recurring succession of small percussive movements. Energy is applied in brief intermittent spurts.
- COLLAPSING: gravity is permitted to take over. The collapse may be gradual and controlled as in a slow fall, or it may be sudden, as in fainting.

ⁱ Taken from *Modern Dance, Building and Teaching Lessons*, by Aileen S. Lockhart and Ester E. Pease, Dubuque, Iowa, Wm. C. Brown Company, 1996, p.119 ff.

ⁱⁱ Handout provided by Kimm Mahoney-Watson, Portland Community College, Department of Physical Education and Dance, Professional Activities class Winter 2003.