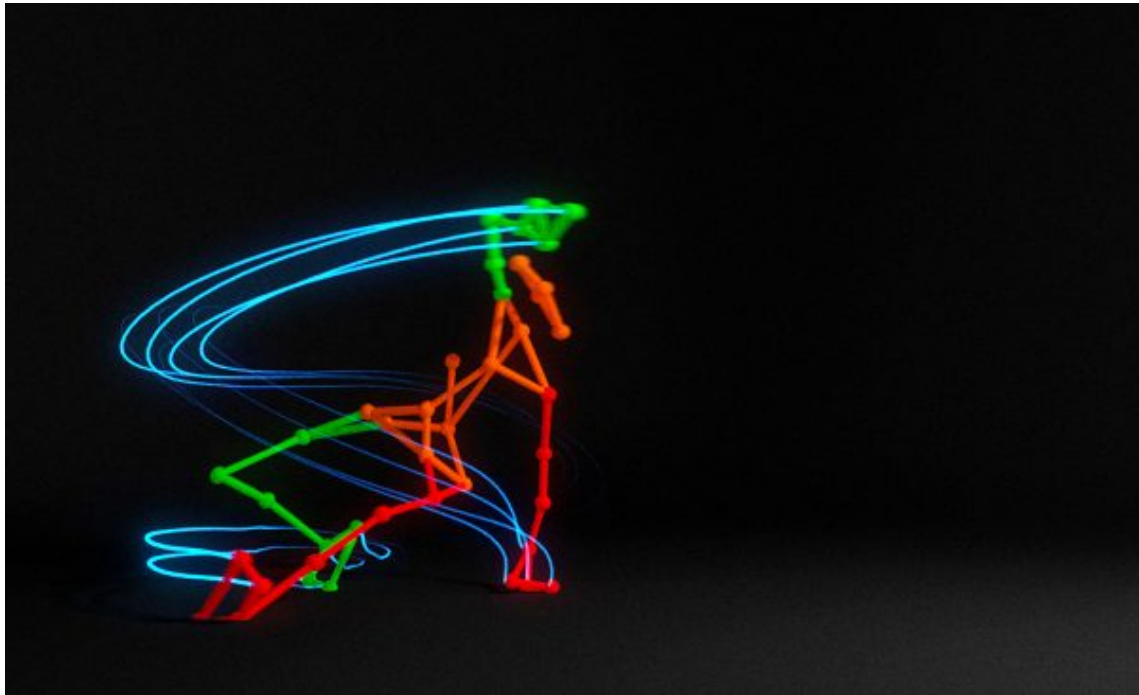


It Is Only a Draft: Envisioning Documenting in Education

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“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

— Antoine de Saint-Exupery

As a lecturer and director of a dance education I am used to having plenty to document, in relation to the teaching practices as well as to the administrative responsibilities. Sometimes the administrative documents required serve no logical function. Sometimes they are not even read by anyone after their submission. Sometimes the means: the forms, the questions and the options how to answer them do not serve the practice itself, or can even distort the substance to fit the shape of the given form. As frustrating as it can be, it has also lead me to understand how free we can be as artists to decide on the ways we want to document the work for ourselves.

Administrative work happens generally in predetermined annual cycles, demanding specific regular documentation usually taking place in unaltered forms, year in year out. These forms might be used by a vast, heterogenous audience where a generalized question formatting easily neglects some of the minor target groups amongst the users. These minorities are often from the cultural departments, such as a dance department.

While the regularity of such documentation practice might serve the outcome and give material for comparison, it can also be that the structure becomes more important than the contents. Documents can end up limiting rather than developing the subject matter, especially if the means of documenting has not critically been looked upon and altered when needed.

When initiating our own documentation work, rather than acting from request, we can primarily serve our personal interests and needs with such tools, lenses, and viewpoints that we find appropriate for the given situation. Although creating a documentation practice from scratch is undoubtedly demanding, the challenge includes tremendous potential. Recalling situations where we are forced to act under institutional structures, it should not be forgotten how great of a privilege it is being able and in charge of one's own practice.

Once a document is created, its life should just be beginning. A document is not made to sit in an archive until the end of its days. At best, the documentation practice itself already serves us. Consider for example automatic writing, where the process of writing¹ without stopping to edit can already launch the practitioner forward in the creative process without ever returning to the created text. However even after this, there is endless and often underused potential in our documents. Some of this material gets recycled and reshaped into artistic work on stage. Some of it develops into a class plan and gets transmitted to students. Some of it evolves into a work that will become a shared document. Thus, the documentation practices serve not merely ourselves, but by enabling us to maintain and develop our practice, they bring the whole field of dance forward as a practice. It is then a political statement to document. To give weight to one's individual work helps us to also give value for various artistic practices. It is crucial for transmitting legacy and bringing the work to academic discussion, to the field of research, and in relationship to other practices. **To have documentation practice is to give value and to create dialogue** – with oneself and with others.

The outcome of any document is shaped by the tool it was made with. Becoming aware of how we document is important, but it is paramount to be alert on the ways we ask or teach other people to document. For teaching documentation I would suggest giving reasoned proposals for starting points and options that create trust and allow space for creative freedom. Working with limitations can be beneficial, but putting creative processes in checkboxes rarely is. Pre-given multiple choices are not necessarily offering a real choice. Take for example a general form that a dance student needs to fill prior to starting their studies: they are asked for their gender, age, previous education, hometown, and nationality. The document created from this information tells specific facts, but it might not be that useful or even reliable: it might not tell the gender this person perceives themselves to be, or the culture they are from, the language they prefer to express themselves with, or their current interest in relation to their previous educations and experiences. Besides, in this example, it definitely does not tell anything that is actually relevant for the students' studies! A documentation form serving the self-actualization and empowerment of the student would offer space for self expression and support also choices that fall in the gaps between the boxes, for people who do not identify with any of the given options.

If the study path of a student starts with such categorizing experience and most likely is supported with a continuous classifying that generally is taking place in our society, it can be quite a jump to create a documentation of another sort. Proposing to film a work-in-progress, to share a draft, to write with stream of consciousness without editing, to aim not to label things too early, to give permission to oneself to be confused, to not know, to be in search of, to be unfinished; all might mean to break apart a value system and a documentation structure that a person has gotten used to. All of these ways can be related to writing a diary, which can be a wonderful way of documenting. However, as the patterns of previous educations and lifestyles seep in, it can be a challenge to link a diary

as something valuable and beneficial for the work itself – to use it as a professional tool rather than only a dump of otherwise unexpressed emotions: to learn to bridge the private and the public; navigate the personal and the factual; organize, cluster, select thoughts, emotions, and ideas that are to be saved and savoured; and consider what is there to be shared, in what form and with whom.

Learning something means that we must allow incompleteness. Since we are, hopefully, learning throughout our whole lives, we are constantly challenged in growing and developing ourselves. We are never complete. As we stay in motion, our identity can also be in a state of flux. To allow space for rawness and inexperience when facing new information, both as students as well as teachers, is elementary. There, not knowing and even error is allowed. It can be very hard for a student – for any of us, that is – to show something that is still a work in progress, or admit our flaws. But, without feedbacking and documenting where we are on our journey we will never be able to create the map of where we want to go. And to find the way: to dare to document, to share, and to witness something still raw will make it much easier.²

Rawness does not exclude readiness. Cultivating alertness and curiosity will help us to be prepared to take in information needed for developing our work and learning. But as nobody can be forced to learn anything, nobody can either be asked to be curious. That can be supported, but the initiative must come from within. Everyone might not be curious to document by nature. However, as humans we always leave traces and it is in our nature to want to. Maybe each individual can be supported to become aware of the marks, trails, and imprints they already make; and how, from that place, they could practice documentation – be it then in spoken words, in pictures, in writing, in the body, i.e. in the abstraction of the art itself.

All in all, I find it vital to develop practices of documentation for dance students.³ Learning to verbalize, to take notes, to capture on video⁴ are all practical tools for the daily work as dancer, dance teacher or choreographer. While academic writing is relevant in certain contexts, in the end, it is much more important to learn to note down information for oneself in a way that one can understand returning to that note in a year or ten years (like with one's own diary): in order to be able to transmit an idea to a colleague, or define a movement quality to a dancer, or present a light map for the light designers, or capture a dance sequence for possible later use, or demonstrate one's motif and skill for a grant or a work opportunity. We are beings in relationships and to express ourselves and exchange ideas we often rely on – consciously or not – our documentation practices.

Why are we so afraid of incompleteness? – In writing CV's, it is often suggested to avoid having gaps, not showing any 'inactive' or 'unproductive' phases of one's life. We are taught to hide our flaws, to show the better side, to be efficient in the use of time: to present our lives through the successes. But shouldn't we especially become aware and train the weaker muscles? Documentation can, and should, show all the sides of life and art can definitely harness all for creative use! In documentation practices for learning, it is necessary to embrace incompleteness and not write only as one would make a CV – a polished facade of oneself. **Look into what you do to find progress, not to get stuck in the fault.** Learn to watch yourself on the video, to be able to see your own work. It might not be what you imagined or wished it to be. In order to find the path towards reality, being closer to your image, you need to work constructively. In feedback – for yourself as well as others – remember to be compassionate and supportive; nevertheless, fierce when necessary.

Having a successful life requires us to believe in ourselves. Instead of focusing on the flaws, my suggestion is to look at what works, what gives you the spark, what makes you happy. Harness this positive energy when you review your documents, and you can use this momentum of inspiration to bring you to where you want to be. Looking at a video: find the things that you want to work on, see them as a positive challenge and appreciate yourself on what works well. Every time you define yourself you change, becoming closer to that image you have created. So choose your words wisely, because they become reality. **We are all only drafts – constantly changing, constantly rewriting ourselves. So don't resist incompleteness. It is what keeps us in motion.**

In dance education, in my experience, there is often a prevailing attitude of judgmental, competitive, and negative criticism. In many occasions, it could be actually more beneficial to dig in to find more of the positive things one has experienced or witnessed. I believe that a positive and supporting attitude in educations would build self esteem in individuals and help everyone's personal growth towards whatever they would like to become. This, naturally, should be spread by teachers who trust and believe in themselves to start with. Too often, I see motivated and talented young students wanting to stop their career before it even really started, because they look at themselves extremely critically. Could our ways of facilitating documentation and attitudes towards it help making people more self confident and flourish in following their dreams? Documentation in an art form, such as dance, can give something concrete: something to return to, something to be shared even through distances of space and time. It can then also be a tool to help us realize the potential of our own skills – if we use it wisely.

As a conclusion: **Be fearless of given forms, but do not let them, unconsciously, format you. Whenever possible, take responsibility of creating inclusive and forthbringing proposals in the interest of documentation for yourself, your students, colleagues and any community you are involved with. Practice sharing works-in-progress and feedbacking constructively. Propose positive dialogue, especially with yourself. Recycle. Discover. Uncover. Publish. And love yourself in all what you do – it might just be that the way you document yourself dictates what you will become.**

NOTES

1. For more information on "Automatic Writing," see Sabina Holzer's contribution Tracing the Invisible: Writing as a Trace.
2. For practical scores that may help you to utilise personal documentation towards the work of art see Defne Erdur's contribution Hunting, Gathering, Cultivating – Practical Scores.
3. Considering that our roles keep continuously changing; I now assume that you, as a reader, can see yourself both as a student and as a teacher, professional as well as beginner – depending not on the situation but on the perspective. However, as we most likely start off being more of a student, obviously it would be ideal to already encounter healthy, empowering and supportive ways to document early on in our lives.
4. For tips and guidelines towards video documentation see Andrea Keiz's Manual for Video Documentation of a Dance Class and Martin Streit's Video Tech.