# Teaching Elements of Choreography

*by Inez Rovegno and Dianna Bandhauer*

The elements of choreography are not often taught but are an important part of the dance curriculum. When children can understand and apply the elements of choreography, they can improve the quality of their dances, better express themselves, and acquire a deeper understanding of dance as an art form. A teacher cannot assume children will learn the concepts automatically; you have to teach them explicitly.

Two common misconceptions contribute to teachers de-emphasizing choreography: (a) One cannot teach "creativity" and (b) when children create their own dance sequences, one cannot critique these sequences without stifling creativity. Through choreography, teachers can help children develop their creative abilities through movement concepts and by providing feedback on their creative sequences. In the same way that providing feedback can help children learn skills, critiquing their creative performances can help children improve their ability to express ideas and design more effective sequences.

Feedback can come from the teacher or from other students in the class. We begin by having children offer only positive critiques of other children's sequences. We initially limit their comments to ideas they liked and presented as compliments such as: "I liked the part of the dance when they changed from fast to slow speed and then collapsed suddenly on the floor." When children are more experienced, they can offer each other suggestions for improving sequences.

In this article, we discuss five elements of choreography for beginners (teachers who are beginning to teach choreography and children who are beginning to learn how to choreograph dance sequences). These are: (a) originality, (b) transitions, (c) expressing ideas, (d) focus and clarity, and (e) contrasts and aesthetic highlights. The rubric in Table 1 describes these elements. This rubric is an assessment tool that describes each element and the criteria for assessing children's performances. The lower performance levels can give teachers a sense of the responses they can expect from beginners. In this article, we will briefly describe each element and give some suggestions for teaching these elements to children.

## Sequencing

Choreography can be taught in developmentally appropriate ways beginning in first grade. The first element we teach is originality. Although what we teach depends on the children's understanding, typically we teach originality in Grade 1; originality, transitions, and aesthetic highlights in Grade 2; and all five elements in Grades 3–5. In first and second grade, we teach them the terminology of the performance levels (e.g., plain, varied, original performance levels for the element of originality). In third through fifth grade, they can assess each other in class using the rubric.

## Teaching Originality

Originality means that the dance sequence has some shapes and movements that are varied, unusual, and interesting. There is no need for every movement to be different or unusual but, overall, a sequence that meets the criteria of originality is varied and interesting. Students sometimes label such sequences "creative."

To present the concept of originality, we compare dance to writing a story in the classroom. When you write a story, you can make the story plain, varied, or original. Plain, varied, and original are the three performance levels on the choreography rubric. A plain story about going to school would sound something like this: "I get up. I get dressed. I brush my teeth. I eat breakfast. I get on the bus. I go to school. I get out a pencil and do my work." A varied story is just a little bit better. A varied story might start like this: "Just like I do everyday, I got up at 7:30 and got ready for school. I ride bus 57. Everyday I sit next to Jane. Jane is my best friend. She has blonde hair. I like sitting next to Jane because she makes me laugh." Varied is different from plain because it adds some interesting detail, but it is still not very exciting. An original story might start like this: "The day started out to be just like an ordinary day. I got up at 7:30 and got ready for school. I got on bus 57 and sat next to my best friend Jane. All of a sudden the bus was no longer riding on the road. We were floating over the trees. Jane and I watched as our school disappeared from view. We had been abducted by aliens, and we had the most incredible lunch!" (At this point, you can see in the children's faces that they are imagining the rest of the story.) We ask them to describe how the story might end.

We then demonstrate the three performance levels in dance. We ask the children to stand and make plain shapes. They typically stand straight or stand with their arms out. To make the shape varied, we tell them to change one part of their shape such as bending or stretching a body part. Some children will bend an arm, some will bend a leg, and some will bend over. We have the children look at all the different shapes their classmates invented simply by changing one body part or two. Next, to make an original shape, we tell them to make a shape that no one else will think of by concentrating on changing levels and changing the position of many body parts. We spend the rest of the lesson having the children design a dance sequence using original shapes. To do this we have them:

## TABLE 1 — Rubric for the Elements of Choreography

### ORIGINALITY

**LEVEL 1: Plain**
Shapes are plain and mostly symmetrical; arms and legs are often straight and sticking out; body parts do not relate to each other.

**LEVEL 2: Varied**
Shapes have variety. Arms and legs are in different shapes and positions. Some shapes are asymmetrical.

**LEVEL 3: Original**
Shapes and movements are very different and interesting. There are many asymmetrical shapes. The shapes of the arms, legs, and torso relate. Symmetrical shapes are used to make a statement. Something in the sequence is unusual.

### TRANSITIONS

**LEVEL 1: Stops and Steps**
Performers do one movement then stop. Many steps are taken between movements. Transitions are not planned. Performers seem to make it up as they go along.

**LEVEL 2: Planned/Sometimes Forgets**
Transitions between movements are planned but sometimes the performer hesitates or forgets what comes next.

**LEVEL 3: Smooth/Fluent**
Transitions are well planned (down to the last body part). The sequence is fluent and smooth. One movement leads to the next seamlessly. Each time the sequence is performed, the movements are exactly the same.

### EXPRESSING AN IDEA

**LEVEL 1: Imitates**
Group imitates or pantomimes but does not represent.

**LEVEL 2: Represents**
Sequence expresses and represents the idea. Shapes and movements represent but do not imitate or pantomime.

**LEVEL 3: Represents Powerfully**
Sequence makes a powerful statement about the idea or emotion of the dance. Sequence captures the essence of the idea.

### FOCUS AND CLARITY

**LEVEL 1: Lacks Clarity and Focus**
Shapes and movements are nondescript; shapes, body parts, and group members do not relate; observers' attention is drawn to too many places; group shapes lack focus.

**LEVEL 2: Clear**
Shapes are clear and well planned. The shapes of many body parts and individuals relate.

**LEVEL 3: Expressive**
Shapes and movements focus or direct the observers' attention. All body parts and all individuals contribute to the body line or group shape. The shape and movements of all body parts and individuals relate.

### CONTRASTS AND AESTHETIC HIGHLIGHTS

**LEVEL 1: Monotonous**
Sequence has no contrasts. There is a sameness from start to finish.

**LEVEL 2: Repetitive**
There are some good ideas, but they are repeated over and over. Everyone in the group repeats each idea. Movements tend to be done four times or to counts of eight. If a movement is done to the left, it is then done to the right. The sequence is predictable and seems to go on and on. The rhythm is steady with no changes.

**LEVEL 3: Contrasts/Interesting**
Sequence has contrasts in one of the following: speed, levels, pathways, or relationships. Sequence is interesting to watch. Repetition is used only to make a statement.

**LEVEL 4: Aesthetic Highlights**
Sequence has contrasts in more than one of the following: speed, levels, pathways, or relationships. Sequence has clear aesthetic highlights that capture the observers' attention.

*Based on Purcell (1994), Rovegno (1988), and Stinson (1982).*

1. Select an original shape as a starting position, then travel and make that same original shape. Repeat this several times.
2. Make the same original shape, travel back to the same spot, and make a new original shape. Repeat this several times.
3. Add a third original shape, and find ways to vary the traveling.
4. Practice and refine the sequence.

We review originality in subsequent dance lessons. We emphasize that during brainstorming, they need to generate many varied movements and some original movements. We ask them to critique their own sequences by telling us which shapes are plain, varied, or original. We pay careful attention to the beginning and ending shapes of sequences and help them refine these shapes to be original.

## Teaching Transitions

For beginners, transitions are the movements between skills, the movements between shapes or formations, and the movements between parts of a sequence. We find

students have problems with transitions in both dance and gymnastics and that it is easier to first present the idea of transitions in gymnastics.

To teach transitions in gymnastics, we first demonstrate performance level 1 of the transition element of the choreography rubric: "Steps and Stops" by doing a forward roll, standing up, taking several small steps, hesitating, and then doing a cartwheel. Next, we show them how to connect these skills smoothly by doing a forward roll and beginning the cartwheel from the squat position that is at the end of the roll. We then have them create short gymnastics sequences and refine the sequence until there are no stops, hesitations, or extra steps.

In dance, the problems with transitions are most obvious when the children are working on dances in which they change group formations, change their floor pattern, and change partner and group relationships. We use the sport tableaux lesson described in Table 2 to teach the children about transitions.

Another unit in which we teach transitions is our child-designed folk dance unit. (This unit is described in detail in Rovegno & Bandhauer, 1992.) In this unit we have children select a culture, country, state, or time-period they are studying in their classrooms and design a folk dance to represent aspects of that culture such as myths, rituals, stories, agriculture, geography, food, work, holidays, or celebrations. After children identify different parts of their folk dance (for example, volcanoes, leis, outrigger canoes, pineapples, and fishing, for Hawaii) and plan movements to represent each part, we focus on the transitions between parts. We teach the children how to move from one formation to the next as part of the dance rather than stopping and walking to the next formation. For example, this might mean following a leader to move from a line to a circle while making canoeing movements or varying the size of their steps to go from a line to a V while raising and opening their arms to represent a volcano.

**Figure 2**—Groups with one focus.

## Teaching the Expression of an Idea

Helping children to express an idea in dance means helping them learn how to represent an idea or emotion in a powerful way. When children first begin to create dances, they tend to imitate rather than represent an idea or emotion. We teach children how to express an idea using the sport tableaux lesson (see Table 2).

## Teaching Focus and Clarity

Focus and clarity mean the shapes of body parts and individuals relate to each other, are planned precisely, and direct or focus the observers' attention. To help children learn about focus and clarity, teachers can use simple techniques to focus the observers' attention using body lines and group shapes. First, teach the children how to make lines with their body parts that extend the observers' attention to a point in space (see Figure 1). We demonstrate a shape in which the arm and legs point to the same point in space. For example, sit in a straddle with the left knee bent in front and the right leg straight, lean to the right, and position both arms in a straight line pointing over the straight leg. We ask they can see the point in space and ho the lines made by the body parts extend to this point. We also move the arms so they can see better and worse ways to focus observers' attention. W do a second demon-stration with a partner in which the partners togethe have one focus created by making lin with different body parts (see Figure The children then work on a lesson th ends by creating short partner sequences. They begin apart in shapes that "point" to each other. They travel together and make shapes that point away from each other. They repeat thi several times. Then we have them trav together and make a partner shape wi one focus. We have them explore different ways to make partner shape with different foci. We end the lesson having them create a sequence where they meet and part, making different shapes with different foci.

We also help students learn about focus and clarity by teaching complementing shapes. We do this when we teach lessons on matching and contrasting shapes. First we teac children how to match and contrast each other's shapes. Then we teach complementing shapes. Complementing means that the shapes you and your partner make are similar b not identical. For example, some boc parts make similar lines that point tc common point in space, or the shape

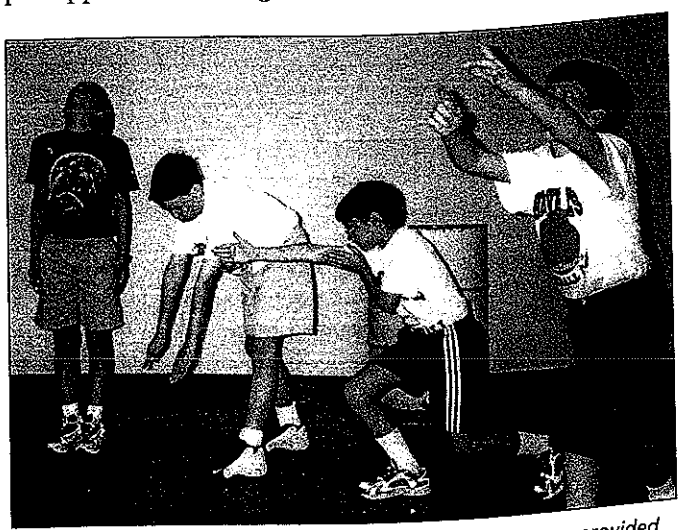

**Figure 1**—Making lines with body parts. *All photos provided by the authors.*

# TABLE 2 — Lesson Plan

## SPORT TABLEAUX (LIVING STATUES)

This lesson was designed to be taught, if necessary, in a small space or a classroom. This will enable teachers who do not have gymnasiums to work on important content on rainy days when they must teach in classrooms. You will need to be able to move the desks. Because the lesson relies on group work,[1] it is only appropriate for Grades 3 and higher. It was inspired by the opening ceremonies of the winter Olympics in Albertville, France.

**Objectives**—As a result of this lesson children will improve their ability to:

1. Create group shapes that represent rather than imitate an idea.
2. Relate individual shape to the shape of other individuals at different levels.
3. Relate individual shape to the group shape.
4. Express and represent an idea, story, or event by selecting a critical movement that captures the idea, story, or event.
5. Design different transitions between group shapes that are well-planned, smooth, and fluent without hesitations or extra steps.

## INTRODUCTION SEGMENT

A tableau is a living statue or group scene that depicts a moment in time. It is not the same as a photograph because in a photograph you see everything in the scene. In a tableau, you will see only some of what is in a photograph—you will see the most significant parts. A sport tableau is more like an expressionist painting of a moment in sports rather than a photograph. When you design a sport tableau, you will be trying to represent an important moment in a sport by capturing what was significant about the event and the feelings associated with the event.

## DEVELOPMENT SEGMENT

**1.0** We will begin by creating individual statues. Get in a shape that is exactly like me. [Demonstrate the starting position for a standing broad jump.] Be very relaxed. Now slowly start to tighten your muscles until you can feel tension, but you are not completely rigid. Feel the tension in your legs, tummy, and arms. Still doing what I do, change your shape [demonstrate a free throw position] and think about the feeling in your muscles. Keep tension in your muscles. Be tight so that if I came and touched you, you would not lose your shape. Continue to follow me. [Demonstrate a follow through for a basketball shot, preparation for discus, single leg take-off for high jump, gymnastics landing, preparation for baseball hit.] Can you tell me what sports we are representing?

**2.0** Now, explore making your own individual sport statues.

**2.1** Get with a partner and show that partner your best four sport statues. Ask your partner to guess what sport you are representing.

**2.2** Working on your own again, select one of your sport movements. Make three shapes—one that represents the beginning phase of the movement, one for the middle phase, and one for the end phase. Do that with all three of your sport statues (see Figure 4).

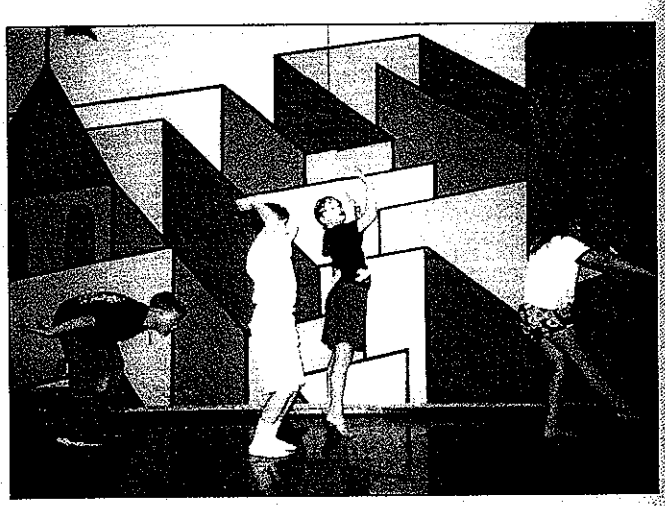

**Figure 4**—Three phases of the standing long jump.

**2.2** Now we are going to work on the quality of your representations with your partner. Show your partner three different ways to represent one sport action. Discuss which of the three is the best representation of that action and why. For example, in the photograph of the standing long jump, which shape represented the jump in the most powerful way? Which was most aesthetic? Which was most exciting? There will not always be one best representation, and you and your partner can have different opinions. For example, one of you might like the representation of the beginning phase of a running race because it shows the excitement you feel when you anticipate the start of action. The other person might prefer a representation of the end of the race, as one runner breaks the tape to win, because it represents triumph, or relief , or joy.

**2.3** Go work with your partner. Discuss with your partner which shape depicts the "best" shape for that sport movement and why. You will end up with your four best shapes. When you have selected your four best statues, watch the other person and help them select the best of their statues. In your discussion, try to give reasons for your opinions.

*(continued)*

[1] We need to note that to design partner and group dance sequences, students must work cooperatively with other children. If you have problems teaching choreography, this may be due to the students' inability to work cooperatively rather than due to problems learning the choreographic elements. You might need to explicitly teach students how to share ideas, listen to others, seek ideas from other group members, and remain on task without direct supervision (Cohen, 1994). Students need to be taught how to work in groups; this will not happen automatically.

## SPORT TABLEAUX DANCE

**3.0** Get in groups of 4–6. You will create five sport tableaux. I will demonstrate a tableau with this group. This tableau is called "The Hit" (see Figure 5). Notice we left out the pitcher, umpire, and other players, and we included three fans. After selecting a moment in a sport for your tableau, try to figure out the best way to represent and express the main idea or main feeling. Do not imitate—do not try to make the group statue include everything that you would see in a photograph.

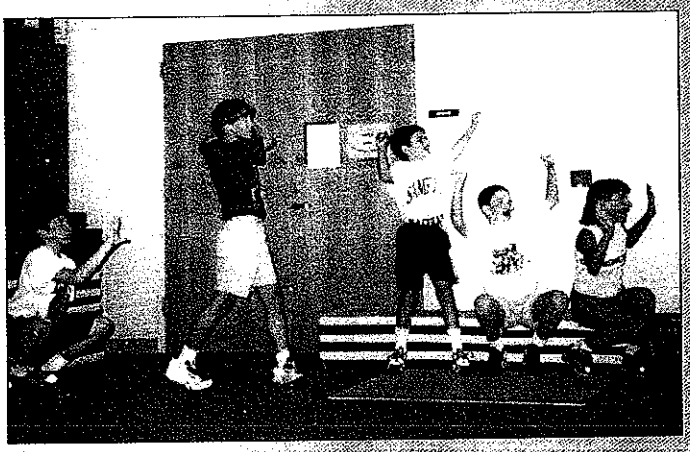

**Figure 5**—"The Hit."

**3.1** Now as a group, critique each of your tableau based on these elements.

1. Does every person contribute in an important way to the message or focus you are trying to express in your tableau?
2. Are there any people you can eliminate from the scene who distract the audience's attention or distract from the focus?
3. Is there some message or shape that is so important that you need to have more people making the same or similar shape to make the statement stronger?
4. Do the shapes of each individual relate?
5. Is your tableau an imitation (i.e., a photograph) or is it a representation of a moment in sport?
6. Will the audience's attention be drawn to too many places?
7. Is what you are trying to express *clear*? Is it POWERFUL?

**4.0** Now we will combine the five tableaux into one dance. First you need to practice all five in order. Then we will add transitions. All groups, when I say "1," make your first tableau. "1." Now your second tableau. "2." Now "3." now "4," now "5." [Repeat the entire sequence until all groups quickly and confidently perform all five in a row without talking.]

**5.0** We will take your five tableaux and turn them into a dance by adding transitions. First we will experiment with a variety of ways to move from one tableau to the next. Get in your first tableau. For the first transition, all move at the same time. Go. [Repeat for all five tableaux.] The second type of transition is that one person moves at a time. Do your first tableau. Now the first person move, now the second, third, fourth, and fifth. [Repeat for all five tableaux.] The third type of transition is when you all move to a neutral position (like standing in a group) and then make the new tableau in one group motion. The fourth type of transition is sending a signal movement through your group. For example, each individual successively and quickly turns her or his head and after the last head turns, the entire group moves. Try this for all five tableaux.

**5.1** Put the whole dance together. Select a neutral beginning shape so you must move to your first tableaux. Select a different transition to move to all five tableaux. Try to vary your transitions. Practice your dance until it is perfected and you can perform the whole dance without talking or cueing each other.

**5.2** Show your dance to the class. Observers be prepared to say what you liked about each dance.

## MODIFICATIONS AND EXTENSIONS FOR ADDITIONAL LESSONS

This lesson can be modified or expanded to deal with other cultural content and to integrate physical education with other classroom subjects. Classes studying Greek mythology have developed a series of tableaux about Hercules, Icarus, Narcissus and Echo, and Persephone and Demeter. Tableaux lessons can also be developed around more abstract themes such as power, community, isolation, togetherness, support, caring, confusion, unity, curiosity, individuality, justice, and freedom.

are almost the same, but one person is at a low level while the other is at a high or medium level (see Figure 3). We demonstrate and then have children make complementing shapes. We then add complementing shapes to the lesson on matching and contrasting shapes. We end the lesson by having children choreograph a sequence showing matching, contrasting, and complementing shapes. Children assess these sequences using the rubric for focus and clarity.

# Contrast and Aesthetic Highlights

### Teaching Contrast

Contrast keeps dance sequences interesting. We work on contrast as an element of choreography when we have children refine dance or gymnastics sequences. For beginning students, contrast means having a clear change in movement concepts such as speed, levels, pathways, partner relationships, and/or group formations. These concepts are part of the dance and gymnastics curriculum, and we teach children many lessons and learning experiences with each concept. Once children understand the concepts of speed, levels, pathways, partner relationships, and group formations, we explain the importance of adding contrasts in these concepts to

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make a sequence more interesting. We then work on adding contrasts whenever students are creating and refining dance and gymnastics sequences. We observe their sequence practice and reinforce any contrasts that they included, or we ask them where they might add a change in speed, level, pathway, partner relationship, or group formation. During class performances, we ask the children to look for and comment on any contrasts.

## Teaching Aesthetic Highlights

Like contrasts, we teach the idea of aesthetic highlights when observing and discussing children's choreography. We explain that an aesthetic highlight is a moment in the sequence that captures your attention and is special, distinctive, or exceptional. It might be a very slow, dramatic movement in the midst of a fast dance. It might be an unexpected movement—something that takes you by surprise. An aesthetic highlight can be a beautiful, dramatic, or amazing movement or an exciting idea. It is the highlight of the sequence.

Even the youngest grades can learn to recognize an aesthetic highlight. After we explain an aesthetic highlight, in grade appropriate language, we ask the children to look for these highlights in the sequences of their classmates. It is our experience that when a dance has an aesthetic highlight, children will identify it. In other words, they know it when they see it. With more experienced classes, we ask them to explain why they selected a part of the sequence as an aesthetic highlight. We find beginners often know what they like but not why. They typically say, "It was good, I liked it." To help them be more specific we ask: "What was good about it?" We discuss the aesthetic highlight helping them identify and label what they liked and why. Our aim is to have children be more specific and say, for example, "The aesthetic highlight to me was when they all jumped apart and threw their scarves up. It was exciting. It was sudden and the scarves floated down like autumn leaves." After children understand movement concepts and the elements of choreography, they will better be able to say why they enjoyed a particular sequence, and they will better understand dance as an art form.

We highly recommend teaching choreography to children. We find that the children's sequences improve, and they enjoy the choreographic process.

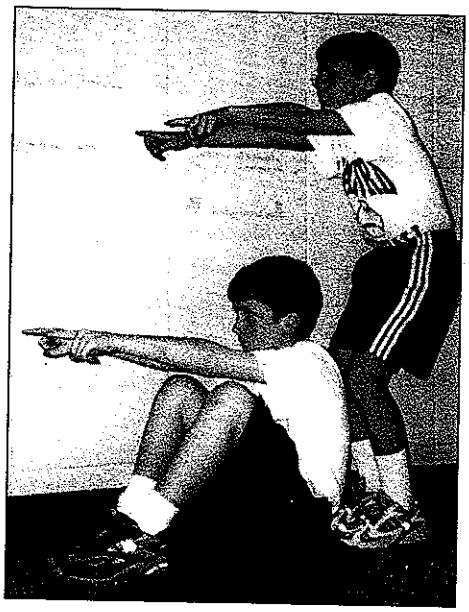

**Figure 3**—Complementing shapes.

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