

CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS IN GYMNASTICS FOR ALL

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Abstract

To transcend the idea of objectifying the body and its movements in gymnastics and its technique-based sessions and/or classes, we propose some reflection on the artistic and aesthetic aspects of gymnastics for the Gymnastics for All (GfA) program. Officially guided by FIG (Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique), it is common that GfA composition includes group performances in festivals, whether they are competitive or not. This article describes the journeys of two GfA teams that developed practitioner-centered, not coach-centered choreographies supported by the stages of creativity proposed by Kneller (1973). More than learning/doing or even learning/memorizing coded, standard sequences, it is essential to explore possibilities of dialogue between the individual and the various elements that surround him/her, by establishing a parallel between GfA features and the creative, collaborative choreographic process in the Arts (Dance and Theatre). The coach's egocentrism is redefined, and he/she is stripped of the choreographer's role. The choreography should be considered a sketch and should inspire constant change. It will be influenced by what spectators think of it, how it can inspire other artists, and how participants will feel fulfilled by it. There should be endless opportunities. Shaping movement and connecting actions gradually reveal the proposed theme and give rise to technique and aesthetics: that is the major challenge of the choreographic process.

Keywords: *Gymnastics for All; collaborative choreographic process; creative process.*

INTRODUCTION

In past decades, research studies have focused on understanding the body and its movements beyond biological and biomechanical conditions. Influenced by traditional educational theories in teaching-learning scenarios, we often observe sports situations where the practitioner is oblivious to the process and simply repeats the movements or follows the commands

determined by a teacher and/or coach. To transcend the idea of objectifying the body and its movements in sports (Brasileiro; Marcassa, 2008; Steinman, 1986), as well as in its technique-based practice sessions and/or classes, we propose some reflection on Gymnastics for All (GfA) practice that is filled with artistic and aesthetic aspects (Best, 1980), especially since one of its

ultimate goals is a choreographic performance.

This paper will focus mainly on the choreographic process, where phases of the creative process and the role of teachers/coaches in the so-called “collaborative process” is characterized by the collective and creative participation of everyone. We also assume that these processes will encourage a non-hierarchical system, in which the responsibility does not lie solely on the coach (Soares, 2007).

Gymnastics for All

Gymnastics for All (GfA) is one of the official activities of FIG (*Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique*) that encourages experimenting with new movements and forms of body expression based on the fundamentals of biomechanical movements (support, suspension, rotation, swinging, balance, landing) with fun, fitness, and friendship.

To become a discipline that encompasses all the aspects described above, its contents are organized as follows: Gymnastics and Dance –involve dance, theatre, modern dance, aerobics, folklore, jazz, rhythmic gymnastics, ballet, rock’n roll, fitness; Exercise with Apparatus – gymnastics with and on apparatus, such as trampoline, rings, balance beams, gymnastics wheels; Games –small games, social games, sports games, reaction games, and games to develop fitness(FIG, 1993, p.7). It can be noted that GfA was a pioneer in encouraging other disciplines to interact with gymnastics, focusing on pleasure and leisure.

Additionally, GfA appreciates all forms, styles, and trends influenced by the traditions and cultural values of various peoples and addresses a variety of contents. It is a discipline that allows for all-inclusive participation, not bound by restrictions and rules, such as gender, number of practitioners, or expertise, and can therefore foster personal and social growth, especially by respecting the

individual skills of each practitioner (Toledo; Tsukamoto; Carbinatto, 2016).

Public performances often take place in mostly non-competitive festivals, that highlight the cultural aspects of the groups and allow participants to celebrate the practice of sports without losing the specific aspects of their local, regional, or national cultures (Carbinatto; Soares; Bortoleto, 2016).

Creating a choreography is optional and depends on the goals of the group (whether it wants to participate in festivals or not, for example). However, researchers advocate that it is important to develop choreographies to foster aspects related to creativity, aesthetics, collective participation, which are essential elements of human development (Toledo; Tsukamoto; Carbinatto, 2016; Sborquia, 2008).

GfA choreographies should go beyond the mere physical, biomechanical performance of the choreography using expressive movements. In a choreography, we see formations in space, change of planes/levels, unexpected combinations that will spark the curiosity of both spectators and practitioners/performers about the theme.

In a paradoxical opposition to the freedom provided by the practice of GfA (regarding gymnastics disciplines, interactions between gymnastics and music/dance or other folklore expressions), the choreographic process will select options according to the group’s preferences. There are choices to be made: What movements will be performed? Will other cultural aspects be included? Will the group use apparatus? What is the most appropriate costume? Although GfA seems to be comprehensive, there comes a time when it narrows its focus: everything converges so that the group can effectively communicate the chosen theme to the audience.

The problem at hand deals with “how” these choices are made. Pérez-Gallardo (2008), for example, shows that, groups of

competitive gymnastics disciplines may use GfA festivals as another opportunity to perform, but they ignore the pedagogical aspects that are inherent to this discipline. They focus on the product, not on the process, which could be so enriching to the personal growth of participants.

When participants reflection artistic elements that go beyond the acquired physical skills, they reach a higher level of understanding and performance. Such reflective work includes issues that permeate sports in society, such as the rights of children and adolescents, gender issues, the popularization of sports by the media, the rules of various sports disciplines and their influence in societal rules.

We believe it is essential that teachers/coaches/coordinators of GfA groups take the choreographic process into consideration but should not restrict their focus to it. The work methodology should reflect the pedagogical basis so that GfA can provide opportunities of inclusion and social interaction, where everyone can contribute with their experiences and can become active players in the moments they share (Paoliello, 2008).

To reinforce the pedagogical purpose of GfA, we have analyzed studies on creative and collaborative processes and found principles that helped us confirm the importance of cooperation and the effective engagement of participants during the choreographic process.

Creative Process

Studies on creativity argue and especially refute the mythological paradigm that inspiration - often considered divine - is responsible for showing what is unexpected, new, or original (Sternberg, 1999). Discussions on this topic also involve sports in general and not only choreographic performances (Samulski; Noce; Costa, 2001).

Traditionally, practicing gymnastics has been determined by a set of rules involving body patterns capable of

performing some movements, usually ruled by the scoring system of gymnastics disciplines. But even scoring systems foster originality: new elements or combinations of elements can be added to the choreography and this is appreciated by experts (technical committees or judges in general) (FIG, 2018a; FIG, 2018b).

There are several disputable concepts about creativity. Nowadays, theorists confirm that the definition assumes its dynamic process. Briefly, creativity requires originality and effectiveness and includes novelty, utility, aesthetics and authenticity (Nanni, 1998), since it is aligned with the methods adopted by professionals who work with GfA, like us.

In GfA, participants' movements are often determined by external evaluation criteria (Fortin, 2004), which prevents them from discovering innovative ways to move, for example.

In Dance, the opposite could be observed in the modern German school of dance (Louie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth Saint-Denis), which allowed the combination of the roles of choreographer and practitioner, especially with individuality and subjectivity as inspiration and theme (Kleinubing; Saraiva; Melo, 2011).

The term "creation lab," used in research studies about artistic composition, has become more prevalent in dance (Soares, 2007; Costa, 1997), music (Coulangeon, 2004), theatre (Silva, 2008; Pavis, 2001; Garcia, 1990) and circus (Cozer, 2006). In a creation lab, the development of a choreography requires negotiation and compromise. Choreographies take shape in the lab.

For Miller (2007), the early processes of choreographic creation are called "in-action" and they report some "powerlessness," since improvisations arise, but still lack structure. To the choreographer, these labs should involve a state of "readiness", because one needs to be alert to be able to connect and align the technique with the creative process and

with the theme. Silva (2008) describes these moments as territories, -- not territories in the sense of a “geographical location,”-- but rather as a “zone of experimentation” where the composition is a work-in-process.

The choreography is created in alignment with the individual and collective interests and requires knowing

how to deal with and respect different ideas and opinions. It fosters situations of self-knowledge and knowledge of others. So why not use these labs in GfA?

Here are some examples of the diversity we want to represent in the choreographies, such as the use of alternative apparatus and movements to enrich them.

Table 1

Alternative use of materials, themes, and movements in a choreography

Apparatus	Official apparatus from competitive gymnastics disciplines (ball, hoop, ribbon, balance beam, parallel bars); complementary apparatus that are typically used in gymnastics (plinth, step, fitness trampoline, Pilates ball); other apparatus adapted to the practice of gymnastics (water bottle jug, buckets, ladders, tires); apparatus built for the practice of gymnastics (plastic tubes; giant foam tangram).
Movement	Displacement (with or without); positions (standing, kneeling, sitting, lying); action verbs (walking, running, hopping, jumping, spinning, balancing, pushing, extending, bending, crawling); rhythm (beat, time/duration, pace, emphasis); dynamics (swinging, leading, pushing, holding); space (lines: vertical, horizontal, intermediate/ direction: forward, backward, right, left / Plane: frontal, horizontal and sagittal/ Trajectory: line, curve, combined)
Theme	Children’s story; sci-fi book; folklore tale; holidays; a country’s political situation; celebrity; historical fact; something that happened in the life of one of the group members; folk dance; food; toy; among others.

Source: Adapted from Nanni (1998); Bratfische; Carbinatto (2016); Silva (2016).

We advocate that there is not one but countless ways to create a choreography. If we want to consider GfA as a means to develop autonomous, critical, and creative people, it is crucial to allow gymnastics practitioners to let their creative and expressive skills flourish. Like sound and its resonant waves, a choreography should create a stir in the audience, and those who are directly or indirectly engaged in the choreographic experience should experience intangible dimensions of perception (Soares, 2007; Miller, 2007). The most important take-home message is that creativity is present not only in the product but also in the journey!

Collaborative process

When we watch a choreography, it is impossible to determine if it is the result of the work of one person or many, since the way a choreography is developed does not lead to a specific aesthetic outcome. Therefore, there is no direct relationship between a good or bad choreography and the way it was created.

It is risky to assume that a collaborative process is a methodology if it is seen as a recipe or formula. We intend to propose concepts that foster collective participation in agreement with the specific context and goals of the choreography.

Additionally, we believe it is too early to say that there is a new paradigm in the coach-practitioner relationship in GfA, or

even in other environments, but it is a fact that current teaching-learning methodologies have opposed the traditional, centralizing-unifying model as to how a group or class should be conducted.

Evidence shared by GfA groups in Brazil – especially university-based groups - have used small choreographic groups that, after experimenting and organizing a choreography, perform for each other in a class session (Paoliello et al, 2014). This methodology aims at expanding possibilities since each part that was created separately can be added to the final piece.

In this process, the dominance of one gymnast gives way to the relationship among practitioners and how they use the apparatus (Sborquia, 2008). That is, in the collaborative process, a choreography is collectively created, and practitioners have significant participation in the process. Therefore, like in dance movements (Costa, 1997) and in the theatre (Silva, 2008), the collective creation system in GfA is based on a shared, cooperative, and democratic process of doing gymnastics.

The processes of performing and creating a choreography are intertwined. Moreover, performing and creating sessions/classes/meetings are encouraged. The role of the coach is not eliminated but rearranged to become a catalyst and a trigger for the creative polyphony (Silva, 2008).

The words of the Colombian playwright and director, Carlos José Reyes, clarify the collaborative process and the role of the director in the theatre, when he explains that the collaborative method “does not imply eliminating the director, but rather destroying his omnipotence. The director no longer controls movements mechanically, according to his aesthetic tastes or whims” (Rizk, 1987, p. 69). All members are free to suggest ideas, which grants them agency and sparks their curiosity, fosters respect and critical thinking. The goal is to not

suppress individual personalities; it is to liberate the strict relationships that are traditionally established (Pianca, 1990).

Together with the aforementioned creation lab, the group should experiment when faced with new ideas and should test all suggestions. Everyone is responsible for the activities; participants are not inhibited by the presence of experts, and there is no fixed hierarchy. Although the coach plays a less emblematic role, in fact, he has more influence and his opinions end up having more weight on the decisions made and directions taken for the choreography.

As the result of a collective development process, the choreography is not created in a peaceful and organized setting. It is characterized by asymmetries, bursts, an overflow of opinions, conflicts, and instabilities (Silva, 2008). To minimize the effects of conflicts (which are inherent to the process), decisions should ideally be justified based on concrete aspects, as much as possible. After all, we expect individual wishes to be turned into group decisions.

The collaborative process should not be restricted to the choreography. The organization and management of the group should also be a collective effort (organizational structure, management, financial control, etc.) to be evaluated by everyone.

The coach/teacher in GfA is committed to allowing participants to become more tolerant and empathetic; fostering values that will make society more just and caring; to experiencing those values in the class and making it an environment that allows participants to reflect on and challenge the world they live in.

Please note that coaches/teachers are required to have an attitude that allows them to understand “the creative ability of other participants, the in-depth knowledge of characteristics and skills of your peers, as well as the limitations and insecurities that prevent them from unleashing their creative potential. By encouraging a

creative attitude – and not just a reactive one - coaches are committed to a creation process that involves more risks and that challenges his own centralizing, leading role” (Silva, 2008, p. 2).

METHODS

This research addresses the experience of the two authors conducting a GfA choreographic composition focusing on creative and collaborative process. To analyze that, we focused on studies conducted by Kneller (1973) that shed some light on this topic.

Kneller (1973) indicates that several theories acknowledge the existence of stages that systematize collaborative creativity. According to the author, these theories are organized as follows: **a. the early moment** or first insight related to raising interest that will set the tone for the **b. preparation stage**, or collection of data through a literary, musical, photographic, or sports study, among others. The larger the collection, the higher the likelihood of exploring skills in the group. **c. The incubation period** is variable and allows for a time of reflection on the collected survey material, thus improving the next step, **d. an epiphany**. In this stage, the group is in the “hands-on” mode, so the movements, combinations and elements suggested by each member of the group start to take shape. Finally, there is the **e. polishing stage**- choosing the elements to be kept. After this phase, the choreography is completed. Our question was: Did our GfA groups employ these steps?

The Gymnastics for All Group of the University of São Paulo (Gymnusp) has its meeting once a week, which lasts an hour and a half. It is open to any interested person above eighteen years old, and participants must register on the Extension Commission of the School of Physical Education and Sport of University of São Paulo. Approximately ten people participated in the whole process, but it is important to explain that we had people

who came in and out, as the composition took one year (two semesters), and the students’ schedules underwent changes. We affirm, however, that participants could offer opinions about the choreography at all times.

The Gymnarteiros, GfA group of the Federal University of Ceará, meet twice a week for two hours sessions. It’s an Extension Project of the Physical Education and Sports Institute, and it is open to people above fifteen years old. This choreography the group had about thirteen participants, and its process took ten months. As in the Gymnusp experience, every member of the group could offer suggestions and opinions throughout the process.

Both researchers analyzed field notes, each group’s social media, and photos and videos that were taken during the process. Finally, they categorized the steps following Kneller’s codes.

RESULTS

We present the stages of the creative process (Kneller, 1973) parallel to the choreographic process of two GfA groups (Gymnarteiros, from the Federal University of Ceará, and Gymnusp, from the University of São Paulo) led by the authors of this paper, followed by a collaborative and creative process.

Collecting data and proposing the first ideas somehow determined the epiphany stage. That is, meetings and/or practice sessions were planned and developed in alignment with the ideas that were initially raised and that focused on the theme. But we highlight that the choreographic process aiming at a product to be performed at an event does not need to be the focus of every group meeting.

The group spent months in various exploratory experiences. The choreography was developed depending on the short-, medium-, and long-term goals of the group, especially if the group wished to participate in festivals.

Until the group decided to finish the choreography, it was possible to hold sessions filled with the exploration of choreographic structures and possibilities

involving movement and music, movement and space, movement and aesthetic elements, among others (Costa, 1997).

Table 1

Stages of the creative process and how they relate to the experience of GfA groups

Stages of the creative process		Experience of the Gymnarteiros GfA group	Experience of the Gymnusp GfA group
First insight	Have an idea (insight) that will be developed	The first idea was to represent a typical element from the Brazilian Northeast region - hammocks and how they are used (to replace a bed) became the focus of the choreography.	The city of São Paulo (where the group lives) sparked this idea; the Tietê River, which crosses the city, became the focus of the choreography
Preparation	Collecting data; investigation of first insights	We studied how hammocks started to be used by indigenous peoples in South America. They were initially used both for rest and for other purposes, such as a means of transportation and to carry the dead in the rural area.	We studied the cartography of the Tietê river and its round curves, which made it navigable and suitable for leisure. With the expansion of the city, its margins were redesigned, and its function was recovered.
Incubation	Unconscious action; when the topic is still the object of analysis, even outside the formal environment of creation.	Reflection on the possibilities to portray the current uses of a hammock - specially to depict <i>sertanejo</i> people (people who live in the countryside of the Northeast in Brazil), and characteristics of the countryside; the group looked for a song that represented this scenario.	Group members told stories about the river; they looked for songs by Brazilian singers Fernanda Porto and Fernanda Abreu; most of the points raised by the group members had to do with how the river relates to the ring roads that run alongside the river
Epiphany	Discovering solutions to problems; determining the paths to take	Understanding that the choreography should show different ways to use a hammock, in the context of gymnastics. Understanding that the song to be used should portray the life of <i>sertanejos</i> .	Understanding that the choreography should have a smoother beginning, indicating how quiet the river was back in the day. Later, the buzz of the city, the typical São Paulo rush and the ring roads alongside the river filled with cars and buildings would be portrayed as rigid movements and acrobatic poses.
Polishing	Corrections, adaptation, analysis, polishing of the product	Choreography: "Enredando com Gonzaga" (In a hammock with Gonzaga) Song: Asa Branca by Luiz Gonzaga (orchestrated version)	Choreography: "Rio Tietê" (Tietê river) Song: O Paraíso (Buscemi's Afro Mix) by Madredeus

DISCUSSION

From the perspective of aesthetic education, GfA choreographies are focused on expanding perceptions and unleashing the human potential; they contribute to an enhanced understanding of oneself and of the world.

For example, the onset of creative effervescence in dance, represented by North American post-modern dance in the 50's and 60's of the 20th century, was characterized by performances and events that involved the integration of artists who spoke different languages, which led to a breakdown of structures of shows and genres in performances (Costa, 1997).

In sports, a similar movement took place involving Sports for All and Gymnastics for All: it proposed opening space to gymnasts who had different cultural and historical backgrounds and also included expressions of folklore. This movement opened a wide range of possibilities. There is polymorphism in GfA that enhances the breadth and depth of the repertoire, making choreographies more challenging.

The problem is that we address choreographic elements in a unidirectional way, that is, we are concerned only with the symmetrical space/time dimensions, which ensures efficiency and functionality, but we ignore the subtle dimension of gestures (Soares, 2007). Despite portraying gesture in dance, Soares also emphasizes that the choreography should depict situations of gestures that go beyond their mere functional, Cartesian elements, i.e., as an execution of coded steps. We should achieve an expressive gesture in which "senses are intertwined and deeply affect the sensitivity of the practitioner" (p.2).

Moreover, Nanni (1998) advocates that the body has a unique language that is complementary to oral language. Nanni (1998) also says that a choreography not only uses that language but also expands and codes it to establish communication and expression. The fact that choices and

decisions involved in the creation of choreographies are embedded in a cultural context confirms that choreographies are "the expression of an artist's individuality, combined with the influences of his/her socio-cultural environment" (p. 168).

Research studies - such as the one about choreology by Preston-Dunlop (1989) and about dance composition by Smith-Autard (1992) - focus more specifically on the object of our study. Both make an in-depth analysis of choreographic variations, such as the relations between movement and space, costume and stage set, music, and the proper care in integrating all these elements. Sometimes it is difficult to make a linear description of the choreographic research because these steps are part of a journey that swings like a pendulum over time, moving from one direction to another. We wondered, however, what conditions are required to create choreographies.

During that experience we noticed some principles on how to work in GfA to achieve a creative and collaborative choreographic process, namely:

- a) Each participant should, if possible, work actively in all choreographic creation stages: think about the song, the costume, reflect on the relationship between theme and movement, prepare work plans. But one must realize that not all participants have skills, interest, or desire to take on roles in the creative process.
- b) It is important that suggestions are considered, at least to be tested and discussed, and to encourage everyone to participate at all times. This is the only way a choreography can represent the whole group.
- c) Sessions (meetings/practices) can be led by all - in a rotation system, for example - so that all members can share responsibilities for the group experiences.

d) The group can (and should!) organize and document the collected data. Logbooks, pictures and/or footage can be helpful to a group's creative process.

e) It is crucial to give special attention to the theme that was selected, since the overwhelming creative organization can lead to an excessive number of suggestions (leading to digressions), and the group might find it difficult to finish the choreography.

f) The dynamic negotiation process (or conflict resolution) can prolong rehearsal times, but this should not be considered a waste of time. It is rather an opportunity to develop the creative process and collaborative relations.

CONCLUSION

Looking only at the mechanics of gestures of a choreography and its series of movements reduces the energy of a choreographic performance. Intentionality is part of the choreography. In GfA classes, it is essential to explore the possibilities of dialogue between the individual and the various elements that surround him/her. This is far more important than merely learning/memorizing/doing coded, standard sequences.

In a way, the coach's egocentrism is redefined, and he/she is stripped of the choreographer's role. The practitioners are called to action as partners, and the coach becomes a facilitator of the creative process.

The choreography should be considered a sketch since what it reveals inspires constant change. It will be influenced by what spectators think of it, how it can inspire other artists, and how participants will feel fulfilled by it. Therefore, there are endless opportunities. Shaping movement and connecting actions gradually reveal the proposed theme and give rise to technique and aesthetics: that is

the major challenge of the choreographic process!

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Above: Exhibition 8 Decades of Miroslav Cerar - Miroslav Cerar medals at OG, WC and EC;
Below: Youth at exhibition (Photos: Ivan Čuk)

