

# From A to Zig-zag: Teaching the Vocabulary of Creative Movement

## ABSTRACT

*Creative movement/dance is an essential element of Orff Schulwerk-based instruction. Creative movement lies outside the skill set of many music educators and can seem intimidating to teach and explore in their classrooms. This article illustrates how creative movement can enliven and enhance the general music curriculum, and explores a vocabulary or skill-building approach to creative movement instruction.*

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## By Griff Gall

### Introduction

“**S**ing, dance, play!” These three words are often used to describe the joyful experiences that occur in Orff Schulwerk-based classrooms. Today the Schulwerk is most closely associated with music education. Educators explore it through workshops and teacher education courses, and then use the process in their general music classes. However, Orff Schulwerk calls for us to explore elemental music. What is elemental music? A full dissection of the term is beyond the scope of this article, but Orff specifically chose the word “dance” when he wrote his brief explanation of elemental music: “Elementary music is never music alone but forms a unity with movement, dance and speech” (1977, p.6).

Although movement is an essential part of the Schulwerk, music educators often limit its use in their lessons. Many possess ample music training, but very little dance and movement experience. How do we then create an environment in our Orff-based classroom where creative movement is truly equal to music? Before discussing “how,” we will explore the question of why movement needs to be a valued and equal part of our students’ music education.

## Creative Movement in the General Music Setting

In the general music classroom, movement is typically defined as (1) explorative; (2) choreographed or folkdance; and (3) creative or expressive. Many music educators are comfortable with the first two examples: Body percussion is often used to explore rhythmic concepts or to learn instrumental accompaniments; folkdance resources provide clear instructions for teaching specific traditional dances. Creative movement, however, can be intimidating to teachers and students alike. Dance educator Anne Green Gilbert writes, "Creative dance combines the mastery of movement with the artistry of expression" (1992, p.3). She further explains that one must teach dance or creative movement concepts for children to have the vocabulary to experience fully the power and joy of dance. Doug Goodkin explains, "Its purpose is to shape the body as an instrument of expression," and, "It is movement brought into more conscious awareness and intention" (2004, p.61). Music educators who value creative music making must also awaken their students to the full potential of expressive movement experiences, and provide the tools their students need to be independent creative movers.

Creative movement not only gives students the gift of kinesthetic expression, but also impacts their musical performance. Responding to music through movement requires critical listening skills that are developed through dance and creative movement. Expressive playing also requires appropriate movement to manipulate sounds and create desired effects. For example, a handbell musician cannot get a bell to sound without movement; a violinist cannot create a sustained sound without the bow moving across the strings. Although musicians can learn the proper technique for creating the sound on their instruments, they create subtleties of sound when they understand how to move musically or when they learn to embody the music. Our students learn to play more expressively on barred instruments when they have an understanding of weight and time.

## Teaching Creative Movement Vocabulary

Creative movement can be explored in much the same way we explore other musical concepts. Recorder improvisation, for example, cannot occur until we have taught a minimum of basic recorder techniques. The same is true for creative movement.

With a recorder, students must understand basic finger positions and rhythmic patterns as well as how to create a gentle tone to perform improvisations with musical intent.

Creative movement also requires basic skills that need to be explored and understood before students can move and respond with intent. Through game-like activities, or movement etudes, teachers and students can build their movement vocabulary, starting from familiar movements—such as walking, jumping, hopping, and, eventually, skipping—then exploring variations on these basic skills, and finally, exploring less familiar movement skills including levels, weight, shape, and focus, as their comfort level permits. Eventually students will be able to move in response to music, utilizing the skills they have sequentially practiced.

Exploring creative movement with students becomes less intimidating when we are able to break down the basic elements of creative movement and find playful experiences to introduce individual concepts. The goal is to develop students' movement vocabulary and ensure they have the tools to move and respond with intent. The book, *Creative Dance for All Ages: A Conceptual Approach* (Gilbert, 1992), provides an excellent breakdown of concepts and individual skills for teaching dance and movement. Overarching concepts include space, time, force, body, movement, and form, and each concept includes specific skills to explore.

At first glance, this list might seem overwhelming; however, one of the hallmarks of Orff Schulwerk instruction is process—the ability to break down large concepts into their elemental components, teach elements separately, and then reassemble them to create a new work. The approach creates opportunities for students to experience new material through imitation, exploration, improvisation and creation, and reflection. Reflection is key, allowing students to comprehend the material and understand what they have experienced. With this in mind, we can also consider how language arts educators teach vocabulary. Starting with a minimal amount of direct teaching that might include the definition of new terms, they then provide basic examples of how those terms are used. Students are encouraged to create their own sentences using the new vocabulary, with the intent that as they explore and practice, these new words will become part of their lexicon.


Elementary classroom teachers often use word walls to reinforce important vocabulary concepts. Creating a movement vocabulary word wall provides a visual reminder of the many concepts and skills for movement, and can be referenced when introducing new ideas or reviewing familiar concepts. Each lesson, or every other lesson, highlights a new movement concept on the word wall as that week's focus. One idea is to use movement etudes, or targeted playful movement activities, to explore specific skills. Begin by exploring new movement concepts without sound, moving to simple sound cues, and finally adding music to the movement. This process is effective because it allows students to concentrate on the playful exploration of the specific movement skill until the concept is secure, without becoming distracted by other stimuli such as musical accompaniment. As you explore new concepts, bring familiar concepts back into the frameworks of the movement etudes. For example, when exploring

levels with younger students, you might create a simple game where a sound cue reminds them to change levels as they walk through open space. Partway through the game, or perhaps in the next lesson, remind them about a previous experience exploring direction. Now they can walk through open space focused on levels, but will incorporate their understanding of changing direction as they walk.

### Implementing Creative Movement

Although general music teachers are often pressed for time, meaningful creative movement vocabulary can be easily incorporated into lessons without sacrificing music instruction time. For example, as students enter the classroom, invite them to explore a specific skill as they make their way to their place in the room. Use movement etudes to transition from one activity to another in the middle of a general music class. These explorations generally take five to seven minutes and provide a

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much-needed opportunity for students to move and refocus. When exploring movement etudes, guide students to move musically, or artistically, even when the skills and concepts are new. Establish and post classroom management expectations, such as a reminder to maintain personal space and respectfully and actively participate, in order to help ensure safe and productive exploration.

After students have developed a basic movement vocabulary, incorporating movement into artful lessons will reinforce the movement goals and encourage the connection between music, movement, and speech. For example, with kindergarteners I use the book *Hop Jump* (Walsh, 1996) to stimulate improvised music and movement to act out the story. After reading the book, we think about the action words in the story then explore classroom instruments that can accompany those movements. For our final “performance,” children assign parts, choose who will play instruments and who will be movers, and then act out the story as I read the book. This is a simple but quite magical lesson, because my students see the playful connection between text, music, and movement.

With older students, a short poem filled with word painting works well. After reading and discussing the poem, we explore one of the simple melodies found in the *Music for Children* volumes. This past January we used *The House in the Night* (Swanson, 2008) and the popular *Canon #44* from *Music for Children Volume I*, and wrote simple words that altered the rhythm from sixteenth notes to eighth notes. We then explored ways to perform the melody that fit the poem we had read and the new text. Next we came up with a list of movement words that fit the music and the text. The students improvised movements as I played the melody using recorder and piano. Finally, we created a performance that included students moving, performing, and reading. The readers were responsible for selecting sound-color instruments to highlight the text, and the movers created a formation and loosely organized the dance while still allowing for improvised movement.

In both lessons, we discussed the expressive qualities of the text to inform both our music making and our dance, and students chose how they participated in the final performance. During the process of the overarching lesson, every child experienced movement and instrument playing.

## Teaching Creative Thinking

I have the privilege of working with a talented and thoughtful team of music teachers in Danvers. Recently we have been discussing the importance of teaching the creative process explicitly. When challenged to create on their own, students often spend time talking (sometimes arguing) with each other instead of exploring their ideas, and there seems to be a fear of failure when they are asked to create their ideas. To help them overcome these obstacles, use their time effectively, and be more successful, we developed a creative process checklist (see Figure 1).

Our students live in a world where answers are either right or wrong. This checklist gives them permission to try out new ideas, bend rules, and solve complex problems in their own unique ways while developing metacognitive awareness of the

Figure 1: Creative Process Checklist.

### Prepare

- I know what the goal is for this activity.
- I know what tools I need and how to use them.

### Experiment

- Based on the goal, I tested different ideas without worrying about mistakes.
- I kept track of my favorite ideas that fit the goal.
- I explored ways to make those ideas even better and more interesting.

### Organize

- I organized my ideas to fit the goal.
- I used the tools I needed for this activity.

### Surprise

- I included at least one idea that makes my creation unique.
- I used familiar tools in a new or unexpected way.
- I included a surprise for the audience.

### Reflect

- Did I achieve the goal?
- Did I challenge myself to take risks and try something new?
- Did I like my creation? If not, do I need to experiment more?

process itself. Relating this checklist to creative movement allows for the task to be as simple as creating a movement that represents a favorite animal, or as complex as creating a dance to accompany a familiar piece of music. The checklist provides a guide for students as they explore their own ideas, giving them permission to explore, “fail,” and continue experimenting.

### Common Core

Administrators frequently ask music teachers to connect their teaching to the Common Core state standards. Several articles were published in the Spring 2014 issue of *The Orff Echo* pertaining to critical thinking skills and Common Core connections in the Orff Schulwerk-based classroom. Jenn Dennett summarizes her article as follows:

By now, it is very apparent that there are many ways in which the ELA Common Core ties naturally into the music classroom. This intersection of music and literacy demonstrates how we, as music teachers, can support the Common Core—not as something we do in addition to teaching music, but as something we do in the process of teaching music. (Dennett, 2014)

The same can be said for exploring creative movement in the general music classroom. In the “College and Career Ready” section of the ELA Common Core document, students are expected to demonstrate independence; build strong content knowledge; respond to the varying demands of audience, task,

purpose, and discipline; comprehend as well as critique; value evidence; use technology and digital media strategically and capably; and understand other perspectives and cultures. Targeted creative movement instruction and exploration contributes to each of the college and career-ready goals. Specific standards may also be met; for example, ELA, Vocabulary Acquisition and Use, Kindergarten 5.d. “Distinguish shades of meaning among verbs describing the same general action (e.g., walk, march, strut, prance) by acting out the meanings” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).

### Conclusion

Process teaching requires us to think about where our students are, break down concepts into manageable chunks, and then help our students reassemble them in new and creative ways. This sequential process can also help us grow as teachers and learn unfamiliar concepts and skills. We need to give ourselves permission, just like our students, to explore skills and concepts outside our comfort zone, even when we are not experts in the field. We need to challenge ourselves to read and research and to explore and play with new experiences, to provide our students with a broader perspective of music education. We need to give ourselves permission for lessons to fail, to learn from those lessons, and then move forward with a positive outlook. When we find our voice for sharing the joy of creative and expressive movement, it becomes a rewarding and valuable benefit of music education. ■

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