

# ***Bharatanatyam* Dance: Literacy Education Through Transmediation**

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## Abstract

This article explores an Asian Indian American youth's *Bharatanatyam* dance literacy education in a major city in the southwest of the U.S. I draw from sociocultural, multimodal, transmediation, and multiple intelligencies theories to support my claims. Findings reveal the young adult's dance education contributed to cultural preservation (Iyengar & Smith, 2016). A plethora of research on the contributions of dance education in the physical development of children is available. This study offers understandings of how formal classical dance (*Bharatanatyam*) is both beneficial physically and psychologically. Dance, especially *Bharatanatyam*, culturally codified and schematized contributes to literacy learning in school.

*Key words:* Bhartanatyam, Cultural Preservation, Dance, Literacy and Transmediation

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*Dance is literacy. It has vocabulary, uses grammar and relies on semantics, much like traditional forms of literacy that continue to be privileged in schools. However, dance as literacy also holds unique power and potential in schools as embodied knowledge, a form of enquiry, a means of developing autonomy and representing knowledge because the dancing body simultaneously serves as object and subject, enactor and action, writer and the written, speaker and the spoken, self and the expression of self. Because our world is one of symbols and complex meaning making within and across media, it requires us to call upon multiple literacies in order to access, interpret and recreate it. In our digital, global world, being literate requires reading, writing and speaking, using combinations of various forms of text: the written word, digital imagery and through the body (Leonard, Hall, Herro, 2015).*



Figure 1: Semiotics

People from marginalized groups in the U.S seek to confront assimilation through enrolling their children in community based music and dance classes for cultural preservation (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Iyengar & Smith, 2016). Formal schooling for some transnational youth (e.g., Asian Indian) is subtractive with no inclusion of their cultural practices such as

*Carnatic* music and *Bharatanatyam* dance. Some students face severe disparagement of their heritage practices because it is considered deviant or exotic. Therefore, it becomes the commitment of the parents to enroll their children in out of school activities so children are culturally grounded and connected to their parents' roots. According to Leander, Phillips, and Taylor (2010), "...individuals create their own learning trajectories or pathways" in the absence of support in schools (p. 336).

Literacy education is not just acquired from the linguistic modes (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), but also through other modalities such as music and dance, which constitute tonal and bodily semiotics respectively (see figure 1). Eisner (1978, 2002, 2006) and Lam and Warriner (2012) support alternate literacy practices in people from different countries. The current study highlights the process of literacy acquisition through transmediation and the cooperative roles in the youth's (Andal, a pseudonym) engagement in *Bharatanatyam* dance as literacy education. The two questions for discussion here are: (1) why do Bharatanatyam teachers utilize different sign systems while teaching dance? and (2) how does transmediated descriptions of the dances constitute literacy learning?

Bharatanatyam teachers utilize transmediation to demonstrate to their students simple and complex dance choreographies. I have had the unique opportunity to sit in Andal's dance classes and observe the instructional methods her dance teacher employs to explain different dances each week. This was one particular lesson where the teacher was describing the longing scene, where a *Gopi* yearningly waits for her beloved, Lord Krishna after decorating herself with much attention. The dance teacher's description did not just include verbal explanation of the pose, but a demonstration of the pose including facial expression (see figure 2).

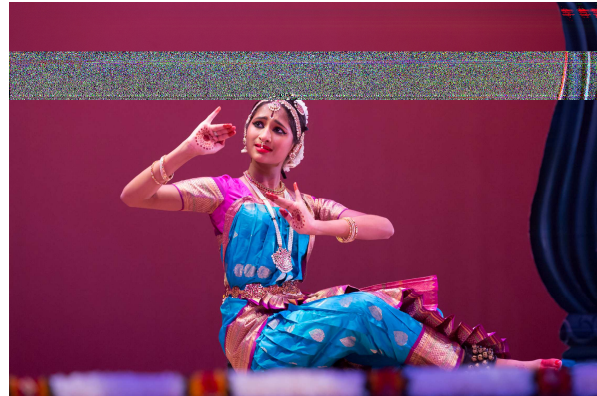


Figure 2: Longing

Based on the oral instructions, the dancers have to transmediate the directions to depict the mood of the scene. The teacher uses verbal language to describe the posture and then illustrates the pose using sophisticated and schematized kinesthetic movements. She also guides Andal with appropriate expression. Such transmediated instructions facilitate critical thinking. Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, (2000) posit, "these transmediations provide students with alternative perspectives and so support them in more complex thinking (p. 164).

### Theoretical Scaffolds

I draw from several theories that are interstitial in nature. Schemes including sociocultural learning (Vygotsky, 1978), transmediation (Siegel, 1995), multimodality/Multiliteracies (Leander & Boldt, 2013; New London Group, 1996; Ranker, 2009), and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2005) stand as theories helping to crystallize the findings of this study. Andal's dance engagement, a social practice, added to her literacy education.

Children learn from their environments by observing their elders and peers (Heath & Wolg, 2005). They also imitate and practice skills each day through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). It is well-established that literacy is no longer acquired through print media, but other modalities are also equally effective in helping children

literacy skills (Pahl, 2014; Olson, 1992). According to the New London Group (1996), Multiliteracies scaffold children with multiple learning styles, which is supported by Gardner (1995) and Kress (2003). Correspondingly, Andal's dance education is literacy acquisition.

The presence of the different modalities in Bharatanatyam is evident through music (instrumental and voice), dance (kinesthetic), and semiotics (expression). *Bharatanatyam* dance is a transmediated product that audiences enjoy. Some children have constraints in expressing their cultural practices because their culture may be marginalized and considered functionless (Skerrett, 2016; Dyson, 1993, 2003, 2004). Hence Andal's Bharatanatyam dance education, which integrates different sign systems and is vilified in schools, demand our responsiveness.

### Transmediation

According to Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) and Gallas (1994), students discern meaning based on synthesizing instructions, "that is, the hypothesized macrostructure affects interpretations of components, as interpretations of components feedback and can confirm or disconfirm the macrostructure" (p. 51). Hence, students must be able to deconstruct a text to fully comprehend the intended meaning. Like in language, dance choreographies also require the dancers to apply the language functions (e.g., analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating). Further, Hull and Nelson (2005) posit:

There are unmistakable signs that what counts as a text  
and what constitutes reading and writing are changing—indeed,  
have already changed and radically so—in this age of digitally  
afforded multimodality. To rehearse the obvious, it is possible now to  
easily integrate words with images, sound, music, and movement to

create digital artifacts that do not necessarily privilege linguistic forms of signification but rather that draw on a variety of modalities—speech, writing, image, gesture, [dance], and sound—to create different forms of meaning (p. 224).

Transmediation is the transfer of one sign system into another (Siegel, 1995).

Multiliteracies, as defined by the New London Group (1996) signifies an array of literacy practices including dance education. Accordingly, the dance choreographies, ones which Andal learns and dances, are outlined as visual literacy. Andal acquires Multimodality through dance education. For example, when Andal's dance teacher demonstrates a dance on Goddess Chamundeshwari, who is the embodiment of prowess, valor, talent, and grace, it calls for the teacher's dexterity to not only explain to the students what these abstract qualities are, but also to show them the traits using the body and paralinguistic features. The teacher demonstrates, for example, valor using her hands and legs (see figure 3), while she shows the expression of heroism using her face through semiotics. Both the teacher and the students are able to transfer one sign system to another. The teacher was successful in integrating linguistic, semiotics, and kinesthetic modalities to teach this particular dance pose.

Students have an opportunity to learn and execute different poses that signify different emotions and bodily movements that help augment the choreographies. This aspect of transmediation is optimally achieved by advanced dancers who train for their solo debut as the culmination of years of training with a guru. They learn the repertoire composed of *adavus*, *korves*, *jatis*, etc and the corresponding *hasta mudras*. Lessons on expression is also an integral part of *Bharatanatyam* curriculum.



Figure 3: Transmediation

Further, Albers and Harste (2000, 2007) plead researchers to conceptualize literacy as representations integrated from performing arts (e.g., music & dance). The researchers also argue for cognitive development in literacy classrooms can be achieved through exposing children to performing arts and other modalities and not just the linguistic modes (Harste & Hoonan, 2010; Miller & McVee, 2012; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

*Bharatanatyam* dance classes are perfect illustration of a transmediated classroom, where students learn to switch from one sign system to another with the expert guidance of a practicing teacher. In each class, students are repeatedly exposed to several sign systems including linguistic, dance, art, and music that support the choreographies. Siegel (1995) refers to this act of transference of meaning from one sign system to

another as “the invention of new connections and meanings” (p. 456).

The purpose of using two different modalities is to help students grasp the dances while comprehending the subtle meanings in the dance. It must be done under the guidance of a dance teacher who is trained in the performing arts and just by people who know the fundamentals of movements because, “one must look and look again to see if the meanings created in one system are explaining and enhancing the meanings in the second system” (Wolf, 2006, p. 18).

It is unsubstantiated why American schools favor the linguistic modes predominantly in classrooms; however, for better engagement, teachers should consider using different modalities to accommodate the different kinds of learners (Millard & Marsh, 2001; Pahl, 2014). Socio-cultural theorists argue for knowledge construction in students outside of the linguistic modes (Gardner, 1998). It could be through social interaction, community participation, and cultural activities (Eisner, 2002). The current study is an example of such learning through transmediation in a Bharatanatyam classroom. Dance education researcher Dils (2007) argues:

[Dance] is an activity in which people participate as doers and observers, dance conceived of as a literacy might spill over into many subject areas with any number of outcomes: individual physical, creative, and intellectual accomplishment; improved problem solving skills in individual and group settings; improved observation and writing skills; critical understanding of the body and dance as social constructs; social integration; historical and cultural understanding; and sensual, critical, intellectual, and imaginative engagement. (p. 107).

These claims are also supported by Towndrow, Nelson, & Yusuf (2013) and National Council of Teachers of English (2005), who argue that

semiotic awareness is meritorious for student engagement.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative thematic analysis supported by Falk and Bluemreich (2005) has been utilized to analyze the data (photographs and field notes) from this illustrative case study. A descriptive case study is a method that explores a phenomenon within a context. Illustrative case studies deal with the descriptions of one or two examples of an event or activity to show the accessible setting (Miles & Hueberman, 1994).

Andal's dance education is impacted by her heritage practices, religion, and an upbringing that promoted cultural groundedness. Dance education is situated as literacy and is supported by Andal's exposure and participation in *Bharatanatyam* dance all her life. Dance education is a literacy endeavor and is supported by the comprehensive definition offered by the New London Group (1996) – a pedagogy of Multiliteracies.

As an Asian Indian educator with firsthand knowledge of the *Bharatanatyam* dance and a literacy researcher, I have passion and interest in delving into the cognitive and psychological benefits dance education offers young people who share different cultural backgrounds in the U.S. The ultimate intent of this study is to propose a paradigm that can ameliorate literacy experiences through performing arts (e.g., *Bharatanatyam*, Danza, Hip Hop, Ballet) of all students from diverse communities in our schools.

## Main Participant

The participant of this study is an Asian Indian youth, who attends a private school for gifted children in the southwest of the US. She sings Carnatic music and plays the piano. She is also a girl scout and has earned the Bronze, Silver, and Gold awards during her girl scout period of 13

years. Andal travels to India periodically to visit extended family and to volunteer at an all girl orphanage in North India. She has participated in her solo dance *arangetram* (debut) and she dances regularly for community centers such as the Arc, a transitional facility for children with learning and behavioural disabilities. Andal is involved in the Indian communities in the city she lives and goes to school. Andal also performs dance and music regularly.

## Researcher's Positionality

I am a post-doctoral researcher in culture, language, and literacy in the Bicultural and Bilingual department in a Hispanic thriving institution in the Southwest part of the United States. I also teach literacy courses to pre-service teachers in the department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching. My research foci are literacy, especially Multiliteracies, professional development for pre and in-service teachers, and Indic traditions. I am a married Asian Indian woman with two children and I am originally from India. I love and teach in the U.S.

## Data Collection and Timeline

The data set for this case study include pictures I took for Andal's *arangetram* (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) and the field notes I kept throughout the arangertam preparation and completion phases. I collected data for two months and archived the artifacts. Based on the research focus to look into the transmediatory aspect of the dances, I chose pictures that enabled me to observe and record different sign systems as interpreted by Andal. I chose five out of 100 high quality pictures for analysis here.

## Data Analysis

I perused the data (portraits) for themes utilizing an approach suggested by Hull and Nelson (2005) because of the heavy presence of sign systems in the pictures and the prevalence of impactful



aspects of life (e.g., joy, anticipation, sorrow) in the dance sequence. They proposed an approach where they found the semiotic power of multimodality, especially for those literacy practices grounded in cultural practices that is disparaged or dissonant to the American school curriculum. However, people from cultures that are ancient engage in multimodal practices that enable their children to carry on the traditions. According to Hull and Nelson (2005):

It is also important to recognize that multimodality too has ancient and deep roots in cultural practices the world over (despite what some would view as its neglect in the West), and that multimodality is in fact what distinguishes human communication (p. 228).

I conducted (1) “first pass” (Hull & Nelson, 2005) and (2) categorization. First pass entails, “choosing a multimodal text...to identify which modes, in relation to each other [i.e. complimentary] (p. 235). I then categorized the pictures to organize them thematically. Again, the researchers clearly point out that transcribing multimodal texts is not prescriptive to one principle.

### First Pass

I viewed this portrait (see figure 4 below) and watched Andal create the pose by sitting down leisurely to put make-up on to receive the favourite deity of her heart (Lord Krishna). She is looking into a mirror (the right palm facing upward signifies a mirror) and she is decorating her forehead with vermillion or *kunkum*. The music narrates the sequence of anticipation. The linguistic, semiotic, and kinesthetic modes are integrated to create this pose.



Figure 4: Semiotics and Kinesthetics

I continued to apply the “first Phase” analytic to the other pictures. The following portrait (see figure 5 below) is a symbolic representation of Goddess Saraswati (deity of knowledge and fine arts in Hinduism). Andal sat down completely facing the audience and crossed the left leg over the right. She held the arms out (almost in right angles) to create an imaginary straight line (180 degrees) holding an India stringed musical instrument, *Veena*. The fingers are stretched out to show that the player is plucking the strings to make musical notes. Again, here Andal integrates kinesthetic elements, semiotics, and music to convey the representation of Goddess Sarawati to the audience.



*Figure 5: A Musical Instrument*

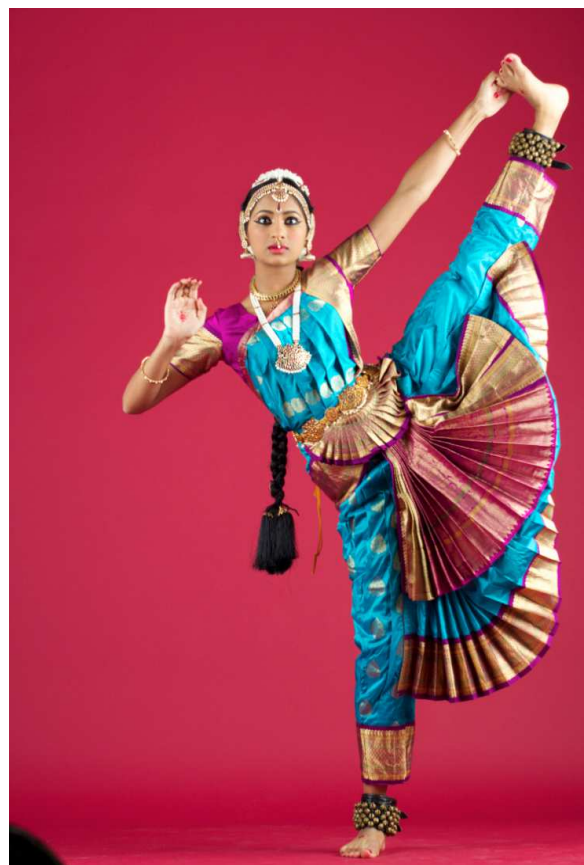
Objects from nature such as a flower can be meaningfully represented using the different modes. Figure 6 below is a depiction of offering a flower in *Bharatanatyam* dance. Here too, Andal sat completely down on her feet and folded her hands parallel only for the palms to touch to make the shape of a flower. Facial expression depicts humility and joy when offering flowers to a deity in Hinduism.



*Figure 6: Flower Offering*

Figure 7 is an illustration of Lord Shiva holding a snake. The dance teacher instructs to the student dancer on how to create this geometrically challenging pose.

The dancer needs gymnastic skills and balancing skill to achieve this stance. The snake is depicted by stretching the right hand to 180 degree and the left hand to an angle where the elbow is bent and the palm makes a scoop to show the hood of a snake. The right leg is lifted high up to reach the right palm (see figure 7 below). Again, kinesthetic, semiotic, and musical modalities are juxtaposed to help audience understand the meaning of the pose.



*Figure 7: Lord Shiva holding a snake*

Eventually, I applied the same steps to analyze the other portraits and the relevant musical narratives to decipher the meaning of the poses. I observed all of the different poses and the symbolic representations of the postures that were juxtaposed with music and sign systems. They

were complimentary to meaning making or semantics. Analysis of Andal's portraits disclosed the meaningful presence of sign systems and corresponding transmediation to the audience.

### Limitations and Findings

This evaluation is based on one dancer's portraits (case study), but the focus is pivotal to understanding the heritage practices of Asian Indian American children and to the field of literacy enhancement. The data analysis yielded two results – (1) Andal's *Bharatanatyam* teacher utilized different sign systems while teaching the different dances and (2) transmediated descriptions of the dances constituted literacy learning.

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