

Samba School of the 21st Century : Learning in the Break Dance Community in Bangkok
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Abstract

International dance culture such as J-pop, K-pop and American street dance spread very quickly among young children and teenagers in Bangkok, Thailand. You can see many dance events two to three times a month. Wandering around the streets in the city of Bangkok, Thailand, at night, you may sometimes encounter a group of young teenagers taking their shirts off and dancing in the dark. Some dances are quite intense as when they put their heads on the floor, flip their bodies upside down and spin on their heads very quickly. People call this group of teens, “street dancers”.

The street dancers or so called B-Boys and B-Girls practice intensively 4-5 hours a day, 5-7 days a week. This is comparable to or even greater than the amount of time that these teens would spend in formal school. “Going to school is boring.” This is quite a hard fact for some students. But looking at the joy of these dancers in their learning and the amount of time and effort that this group of youth put into those solid 4-5 hours of deliberate practice sparked my curiosity. With inspiration from Papert’s “Samba School” (Papert, 1980), I was involved with a dancers’ community group in Bangkok as a novice practitioner and participant observer in my ethnography study since 2013.



Figure 1. Break Dancer Learning Community in Bangkok

The objective of this study is to observe the mechanics of learning in this dance community. I have also analyzed one case study in depth from observations and an interview of a dancer who found that Bboy dance experiences transformed his life and helped him improve his academic achievement in school. This study might give us some ideas on how to redesign learning and intervention in order to deliver “Samba School” (Papert, 1980) learning experiences in formal school context.

Keywords: informal learning environment, learning community

Methodology

I was a participant observer in real settings in Bangkok from May 2013 to July 2014. I participated in the night practices in Bangkok where I spent 3-4 hours a day and 3-4 days a week as a novice dancer learning how to do Bboy (Bgirl) dance at three different practice areas which are Manorohm Building on Rama 4 Road, National Sport Stadium in downtown Bangkok and Gateway Department Store on Sukhumvit Road. I also participated as an observer in “dance battles” once a month at Fortune Town Department Store, and two battles of the year, (BOTY 2013-2014) and International Battle of the Year (South East Asia) in September 2013.

There are also four different field notes from observing the video clips of the practices and battles which were shared on Youtube. Those video clips were recorded by dancers but also some tourists who stopped by and watched the practice. There was one video clip created by a TV program as a semi-documentary about a Breakdance event in Bangkok with some dancer interviews in the clips. One semi-structure interview was done in April 2015. It was a two-hour interview via Facebook messenger. The informant typed the answer in Thai and I translated all the conversation into English.

Getting to know “Breakdance”

Street dancer or Breaker

I learned from discussions with different people during the practices that what we were doing is called “Bboy” or “Bgirl”. Sometimes people called it “breakdance”. They dance to American mid-70’s funky music and the electronic music genre. B is actually an abbreviation for “break” which is a part of the word “breakbeat” in music. Breakbeat is a technical term where the composer plays with the rhythm part of the song which involves syncopation and polyrhythm. Breakbeat can be found in turntablist’s music where they remix the sound from different songs to create a new texture of sounds. This creates the unpredictable and new sound of the rhythm which allows the “break dancer” to express their dance vividly. (Wikipedia, 2015)

Battle and Practice

Breakdance can be performed both in a choreographed style or improvisational style. In the battle, break dancers will improvise their dance according to the changes of music or corresponding to the movement of the opponent dancers. In the battle, each dancer has about 30-40 seconds in each round of the dance. One of the battle traditions is that the dancer has to do the same dance movement with an opponent and make it better in order to compete and get a higher score. There were usually 3-5 judges sitting and watching the battle on stage.

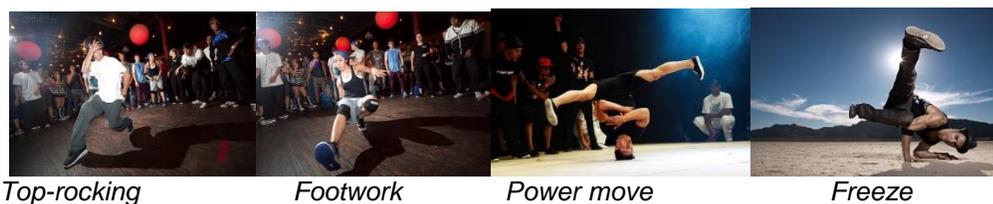
The other dancer came out to show some steps and dance close to the opponent and use the body language saying something like “watch me..”. The dancer mimics the other team and tries to make it more fancy. It looked like fighting but it’s the dance fight, who is more powerful, cooler, stronger in the dance and design. Each dancer has their own design. They used all parts of the body. Some dancers threw themselves on the floor after jumping in the air. The people giving support will point at the dancer and to the movements that they like. ...The three judges sit on chairs on the stage and watch all the dancers. They have paper in their hands for taking notes. The MC holds the microphone to control the time and clear the stage if the dancers become too intense, in order to avoid fighting. (p.3, field note 2)



Figure 2. Monthly battle in Bangkok (Keep It Real) supported by a department store in Bangkok

In order to be able to smoothly improvise in the battles each dancer must practice a lot to get both perfection and completeness of the movement. They must also practice in order to respond quickly and nicely to the unexpected music. The songs that they use in the battle are usually a mix of different songs and each song will last only 25-40 seconds. Sometimes the mood and tone of the song can be changed in the middle of the dance and the dancer must respond quickly to the new song and redesign the performance accordingly.

The breakdance basic movements can be divided into four categories which are Top-rocking (stand posture dance), Footwork (dance by sitting down on the floor), Power moves (body flip upside down and spin movement) and Freezes (Body flip upside down and freeze postures). Dancers will compose all these movements into the 30-40-second set which usually starts with Top-rocking and complete the whole set of movements respectively, finishing with the Freeze.



Top-rocking

Footwork

Power move

Freeze

Figure 3. Four basic break dancing moves

For practicing, dancers in Bangkok usually gather after work in a particular spot that they find convenient for practice. It can be either outdoors or indoors. The dancers look for a wide open space where the floor is smooth so they can spin on the floor. The dance practices are sometimes in abandoned spaces in old or brand new department stores, in the open space in front of the building or at the open space at the Bangkok sky train station.



Figure 4. Practice at National Stadium in Bangkok (Left) and practice in front of Maneeya Building by Rama 4 Road (Right)

The battle in Bangkok is usually organized once a month. In the battle, dancers will compete in solo, duos or in bigger groups of teams of up to 10 dancers. During the battle, dancers often take turns supporting each other. This allows each member to support another with their different strengths.

In the battle venue, dancers dress up and get ready for long hours of dancing. Cypher is a favorite activity for many dancers during the battle day. Cypher is a name given to a circle(s) of practice which will be in the battle venue. One battle may have more than one cypher ring in the area. People gather at the cypher to warm up and stretch before the battle.



Figure 5. BOTY 2014 Battle Stage(Left) and Cypher Space (Right)

In general, dancers prepare themselves not just for the battle but also for getting ready for the long hours of dance in cypher(s) as well. The battle event usually starts around 4 pm. and finishes by 9 pm. During those five hours, the dancers take turns getting on stage for battle when they are called and will join the cypher(s) when they are not in the battle. The cypher is considered the more forgiving area for mistakes and practice and it is the space where both novices and experts get together and share the dance and ideas and support each other. The cypher stage is active most of the time until the end of the battle event.

Analysis

Challenge is a powerful drive not an obstacle for learning.

Challenge is one of the common drives among many breakers as stated in the interviews. Some Bboys start off with skateboarding or playing other kinds of sports and at least once had seen another Bboy dance during a practice. Body flip and spinning on the head was one of the common movements that triggered many dancers to start their Bboy experience.

MC: Could you guys tell me your inspiration when you first got into bboy dancing?

Dancer A: I started Skateboarding, I scratched skateboard and saw them spin head. I like that..then can you teach me?(The dancer speaks in phrases and words not in a complete sentence. I interpreted that it started off with skateboarding. He liked skateboard but then saw people spin on their heads and he liked it. So he asked them to teach him.)

Dancer B: I like to challenge myself. I think the other people can do it and I like this thing and I think I can do it, too. I can do it and continue doing this. Have fun with the music.

Dancer C: It is self-proofing.

Dancer D: I would like to share with other kids who like bboying, heart came first. when your heart really feel like it, you put your heart into it and then you do it. Keep doing your best no matter how people may scold or criticize you, you guys keep doing it continuously. Heart must come first. (p.2, Field note 4)

Dawes and Larson (2011) discussed “Developing a Sense of Competence” which is a type of personal connection that drives youth to put so much effort and become highly engaged in the activity. Dancer A, B, C and D illustrated such traits among the dancers in that they enjoyed facing challenges and take them as a “self-proofing” process. Dawes and Larson(2011) explained that youth “Doing well in program activities—and having that acknowledged by others—provided meaningful self-affirmation” (p.264). Bboy activities, both in the practice and battles, continuously provide acknowledgement (waving their hands to show appreciation, supporting each other during the practice and battles, etc.) Moreover the dancer himself/herself continuously achieves small

goals in the dance practice. The joy of small accomplishments in daily practice empowers the dancers to put more effort into the practice and develop confidence in themselves over time.

Low maintenance learning but high performance aims through practice

Break dance culture in Bangkok is casual. People meet up and practice at free random spaces such as a supermarket, in front of a building, in the abandoned space of the shopping malls, etc. They gather casually after work or school. You can come and leave at any time. There is not much investment or expense in the practice. Basically, dancers can just grab a bottle of water, dress comfortably and be there. Dancers or the novice practitioner can join the practice without any fee or experience expected.

This space is inside the supermarket. There were people passing by and some stopped and watched the dance. Sometimes dancers will sit in groups and play on their phones and chat. Some dancers sit and watch the dance and do stretching at the same time. There was not much conversation among those who were dancing. This dance consumes a lot of energy. Most dancers have very strong arms and bodies. None of them use alcoholic drinks. There were some water bottles by the side of the rings. The floor is not clean but these dancers didn't care. They just laid down or sat on the floor very comfortably. (p.2, Field note 1)



Figure 6. Practice at the Bangkok Sky Train Station. (Left) and the cheap speaker that we used to play the music from our phones. We are trying to fix our old speaker in one of those practice nights. (Right)

The simple and low-cost resources that I saw in the practice such as not needing special dress or materials, the group use of a small cheap speaker, and spaces that are free and open to the public, etc. made it easy to get started. The dancers valued the hard work in deliberate practice as the key to success rather than paid attention to external factors. All these factors created a low barrier to entry that encourages dancers or anyone to start and practice once you have the interest, with the least amount of investment. As one of the dancers said “Heart must come first” and the rest is just putting your effort into the practice.

Community of practitioners as a rich pool of expertise

In the battle or practice, you can see the novices and experts mingle and dance together. They share and learn from each other. Dancers come to practice with a goal in their minds and they also learn from watching and observing other dancers.

Informant: There was nobody teaching me step by step. I practice this and that all by myself, it's more like sharing knowledge informally rather than real teaching. The more I dance, the more I find it even more interesting, it's hard to explain

Interviewer: What do you think about novice and experienced dancers practicing in the same place? Were there any rules or ways you guys practiced together?

Informant: Not really. We kind of know what we should do. People who came to practice, they will have their own goal of the day. Did you? In general, it's

more like laid back.

Interviewer: Do the experts learn from novices sometimes? I'm curious.

Informant: Yes, it's more like sharing knowledge. (Interview transcription)

Knowledge-sharing is one of the common interactions in both practice and in the battle between novice and expert. This is also reflected in Lave and Wenger's descriptions of (1991) "near-peer in circulation of knowledge". Learning in this community starts off with creating a relationship with each other and in the open and friendly community create an effective and powerful exchange of knowledge. Everyone in the community can be a learning resource for other learners. In terms of Hull and Greeno's (2006) "Context of Identity", this community has plenty of "figured worlds" where you can see and learn from different examples of many experienced dancers. This is considered a rich pool of expert resources that you can hang around and learn from. As a novice dancer, I was once practicing the basic steps of footwork with five other mentors watching me and correcting my movement in detail.

Dynamic of achievement and equity to success

Sometimes, as a novice dancer, I tried to compose my own dance movements and many experienced dancers watched me and some of them told me that they liked it and iterated my movements further. Papert (1980) stated that in the "samba school" the novice is not separated from the expert, and the experts are also learning. (p.179) This idea still resonates in this 21st century dance community. Learning and sharing in this community is without the status of expertise. Novice dancers with inexperienced minds sometimes come up with fresh ideas and new dances unknowingly. It is common to see a novice dancer paired up or on the same team with an experienced dancer or even in battle with each other. Sometimes the less experienced dancers win in the battle. This creates a huge impact on the novice dancer and empowers them to work hard and practice because there is always a chance to achieve regardless, of how little experience you have.

This year I won in one of the legend battles in Thailand. I was so lucky. I won the battle in February, 2015. It's called One Man Standing Battle. By the battle's name you know that the person who gets into the last battle is the winner. The rule was all the bboys will be randomly picked to battle one on one and be eliminated until we get to the last one. I felt so good to win this battle. This is my first battle that I win and it's a solo dance. I felt so happy about it. All the winners in the past were very experienced and senior dancers such as Cheno, Tekky, Priwan and Visa (all the bboy's names who are famous in Thailand and all of them have experience in international battles.) I was shocked and could not speak on that day. I smiled and I was so stunned by winning this legendary battle of Thailand. This is my glory in my dance experience! This is like the reward for myself and all dance experiences in the past." (Interview transcription)

The culture that values hard work rather than background experience encourages the newcomers to put more effort into practice. The winner is sometimes the less experienced dancer, this depends on who works (practices) more and performs well on the stage.

Know more about others and then yourself.

The Breakdance community in Bangkok has a high level of diversity. There are dancers from other countries joining in battles and in daily practice. There are some dancers who move to other countries just because they would like to try a new practice experience. There are many dancers from European countries such as England, Spain, Turkey and Switzerland in our dance practice group. Occasionally, there are some dancers from other Asian countries such as Japan and Korea joining our practice. There was a Japanese dancer who I talked to who told me that he comes to Thailand to buy food materials for his Thai restaurant in Japan once every two to three months. He takes this opportunity to practice with the dance crews at the National Stadium. There are Spanish

dancers who can speak Thai just because they come to Thailand very often to practice. These are experienced dancers who sometimes help arrange the battle and give opportunities for the Thai dancers who win to fly to join battles in Spain.

“Some foreigners told me that practice in Thailand is more fun though. They said practice with Thai people is much more fun. In other countries, they are quite serious about the practice but I think that’s why they are so good at it.” (Interview transcription)

This creates an opportunity for dancers to be exposed to international cultures and languages. This supports and encourages dancers to learn more about languages and different cultures and life styles. One of the dancers in the interview told me that socializing in this community changed his perspective about the world and helped him to develop himself to be more mature and get better at English and in his overall academic performance.

Informant: I was like the average kids in high school who just go to school, get bored, I played a lot. I don’t like studying at all. It was during grade 7-9 when I was addicted to games. I went home and played games until I slept, just like other kids, you know. It looked so bad when I looked back. I still feel guilty about it. I am growing up a lot. Dance helps me to learn from the society, from socializing with different people. My world is getting much wider and helps me think about my life and I want to make it better.

Informant: I got much better grades. I’m not very good at language but I can communicate in English better. My GPA is increasing from 2.50 to 3.20 now. Many things are getting better. Now I am studying in IT department, information system. (Interview transcription)

This environment created complex learning opportunities for this dancer. The language barrier became an opportunity for him to put a high level of effort into practicing English in order to strengthen his experiences as well as develop social networking. As Hull and Greeno (2006) stated about language, that literacy practices are “diverse in function and form and purpose”. (p. 81). For this circumstance, English and other languages are needed to help dancers accomplish the goal of learning some new dance techniques from each other and sometimes to work together as a team in the battle. Moreover, dance as a self-expression art could help learners to learn more about themselves. Designing your own dance and practice gets the dancers to actually explore and build their identity throughout the process.

“Informant: I have been changing a lot! I will put it simple like this. Considering, if we live our life normally, your life is just normal but if we try something new, we will have an extraordinary life. I think it’s more challenging life. Consider change, I feel like I grew up in another community. The community that all have their own attitude about life, very independent. Dance is like you can express your identity. You can dance at any time during the day. Dance helps me find freedom.” (Interview transcription)

Discussion

We can see from the evidence in this study that what learners required to help them learn well is not “easiness” of content. Learners, instead, require challenging tasks regardless of how hard the content or practice might be. The hard tasks on the other hand create pride and confidence for learners in the end. To transfer this powerful street dance learning mechanism to conventional classrooms, I would like to suggest some ideas to restructure learning and assess strategies in the classroom.

In learning, the design of classroom activity should focus on developing challenging task as the first priority. The key success factor is to present topics in more interesting ways to “students”. Teacher’s knowledge of students’ interest would be a good start to meaningfully and tactfully

connect a topic of learning to them. For example, dancers develop their language skills in order to communicate to new friends who can teach them how to dance. One right trigger for many learners can motivate them to learn for years. We can see that many dancers who were not successful in school, were triggered by something else which is “very hard” outside of schools. They spent a lot of time and effort into “hard practicing”. They were dedicated students but only when they found something that interested them and could meaningfully connect with them. Teachers could spend more time designing “creative challenges” for particular contents to help students learn by themselves rather than planning how to teach content directly to them in the first place.

In the 21st century, digital technology provides us with a variety of learning resources including almost every kind of media available. This creates advantages where learners can access almost limitless content at their level and in their learning styles. Many dancers learn basic movement by themselves from video clips and they can connect to experts in the field by sending online messages at any time. Consider this natural learning interaction these days, how teachers now can let loose the old structure of conventional content knowledge transferring in classroom. Networking becomes an important skills for students to acquire knowledge in new learning culture. Hence, allow space and time for networking among students inside and outside of classroom can help facilitate students to learn how to connect and use of new learning amenities.

Restructuring the assessment mindset and how it should function in the classroom would also be another interesting aspect. Dancers grow up with intense competition, however all those competitions are done in a very creative manner. Studying the way that battles and cyphers coexist in the same environment may give us ideas on how to create such intense but forgiving evaluating atmospheres in the same place. Friendly and entertaining assessments, which do not compromise on quality, help dancers to be ambitious and to develop themselves continuously. In the classroom, assessment is a tool to help teachers keep track of students’ progress. But formative assessment can be done in the form of fun competitions or sharing sessions instead of in a formal testing atmosphere. However, the teacher’s skill in orchestrating a good balance between competition and collaboration is another key factor where further investigation is needed.

While the “Samba School” of the 1970s has many of the characteristics of the “Street Dance Community” of the 21st century, the core value of learning quality in the informal learning environment is still maintained. They both provide learning experiences where all learners in the community can find joy in learning and developing themselves continuously. Furthermore, considering the modern learning technology environment and a better understanding of informal learning, it is possible to have better opportunities to turn “phobias” or a negative self-identity into a “mania” for deep learning and creating new positive identities. This preliminary study of the street dancers community in Bangkok gives us a big picture of an alternative social and learning interaction in a unique learning environment. However, it also gives rise to more need for further observation and study, both in scale and depth.

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