THE PIE CHART DANCE
by Hilary Harper-Wilcoxon

The beginning.

What can you expect when you attend a conference entitled, “Designing Authentic Performance Tasks to Promote Meaningful Learning and Measure What Matters Most”? Lots of things I imagine, but not a dance. A dance that would be shown to a large group of education specialists at a meeting of their own, a meeting where a complex mandate to help teachers in 22 district schools using education consultants (or MILT) would be discussed. The “Big Idea” as they say in Understanding by Design (which was the framework for the conference led by one of its co-founders, Jay McTighe) for this meeting might be, “To use movement as a means of clarifying complex organizational concepts.” And an “Essential Question” (another UbD mainstay) might be, “Can movement help those involved understand their roles and the ultimate goal of a complex project?”

But why dance and why me?

The question.

To answer that I go to Wendy Coleman, an education specialist and my table-mate during the aforementioned UbD conference. My field of expertise is in teaching dance at the college level, not in designing curriculum and coaching teachers in enormous, diverse school districts, which is what Wendy does. But teachers are uncanny at recognizing other people’s strengths (it’s part of the job) and Wendy was particularly creative and collaborative. After lunch on the first day of the conference she leaned over and asked me if I thought dance could help her and her colleagues clarify a maze of information they had been handed the day before, and which they had to make sense of before next week. I told her about a process I had designed and trademarked for business executives called “Dance as Metaphor for Leadership Training” and said that if it worked for business executives https://www.hilaryharperwilcoxon.com/ (which it had) I was sure we could figure something out for educators. We also were learning how to use UbD principles to help us with any challenge we might be facing, so we felt optimistic.

The “flow”.

Initially the idea was to find the “flow” Wendy knew was buried deep inside all of the paperwork and pie charts they had been asked to make sense of. Everyone was reeling from this new assignment but Wendy knew there was a way to make sense of it all and she was willing to try something new; to see if the use of dance could bring clarity and understanding. As she showed me all the material they had been asked to absorb and started to explain the concerns she and others had I, too, felt overwhelmed by the scope of what they were trying to do. I also recognized how high the stakes were. Their mandate was to go in and help the 22 schools that had the most at-risk students and to do it without undermining the leadership teams at the
various schools. As I took notes and asked questions my new friend said, “I’m afraid the MILT group will come in and overwhelm the teachers.” She went on to say that since the ultimate goal was, “to give teachers the resources to identify students who had needs and to increase student performance” that would be a disaster.

The pause.

Let me pause here to say that I know how powerful dance can be as a teaching aid. I’ve seen it synthesize highly complex concepts into visual pictures and, much like art, tell a story in one pose. I also have come to value the fact that the people involved in the dance are physicalizing these concepts and that, in so doing, they go to a level we are just beginning to understand: A level that explains why when you have danced something, you will be able to come back to it again and again both emotionally and meta-cognitively. My surprise with the process I suddenly found myself in at this seminar on UbD was that others who were not dance educators appreciated the possibility inherent in using this tool to promote and aid in a deeper understanding of complex concepts. That blew me away. To be fair Wendy had seen a TED talk that explored using dance to describe complex science concepts called “Dance your Phd” and had been inspired by that example of thinking outside the box. But still, it was impressive.

The road blocks.

As more people joined the conversation we came up against some road blocks. My initial idea had been to start at the end of the “movement piece” (as we were now calling it) with a tableau or pose that would include all the characters in the piece. This tableau is a well-loved choreographic tool and is stolen directly from the visual arts. It seemed logical that we could show the relationships between the teachers, principals and specialists in this final moment. The concerns came from members of the group who were understandably nervous about performing in front of their peers in a piece of movement that would be largely improvisational. Not an easy thing to contemplate! They were also not at all sure how it would be received. We discussed how it would be very important to have a feedback session immediately after the showing and to try to include as many of the consulting group (MILT) as possible in the actual performance. That way there would be both buy-in and deeper empathy and understanding for one another. That could then be translated into empathy for the school districts they were being asked to help.

The worksheets.

Near the middle of our discussion we worked with two of the worksheets that Jay had given us dealing with Task Frames for Communication and one for Critical Thinking and Problem Solving. Using those two templates helped enormously in focusing our goals and asking specific questions about determining the purpose of this communication. We chose “to inform, entertain, persuade and evoke emotion”. Also on the communication sheet we asked, “For whom is this communication intended?” and discussed the need to know your audience. We also determined that we were using both oral (with a brief narration setting the stage at the beginning) and kinesthetic/movement (non-verbal) means of communication. This was very
important as this sort of performance was so outside the norm with the group we were trying to
reach. It was one reason we felt it would be effective as it would capture people’s attention and
cause them to see the subject from a very different point of view. In working with the critical
thinking/problem solving sheet we focused mainly on “analyzing the issue, challenging
assumptions and identifying and addressing any conflicts of interest” that we might be facing.
We finished with the problem solving skills outlined again in these worksheets which had us
think about how to “represent the problem; generate possible solutions” and hopefully “monitor
results and adjust actions as needed.” *

The tweaking.

Good critical thinkers (most teachers) go through these steps almost viscerally. The value in
having a check list is that we often forget one or two phases of the problem-solving process. This
sheet got us all on the same page, addressing the same issues. It was immensely helpful. The
next day there was more tweaking of the piece and some adjustments from various members of
the team who were also attending the UbD conference. One team member made a great
suggestion: instead of having a teacher be lifted up by the support group why not identify
someone as a student and have them get lifted up through the combined efforts of the group.
Terrific revision! I left our second day feeling as if we had crafted a creative and highly effective
way to reach our intended audience and perhaps found a new/old way to communicate and
clarify difficult and multi-layered information. The proof would be in the pudding – could it help
education specialists aid teachers and principals in reaching high-risk students.

The pudding!

Our dance went through modifications and revisions (as all good projects do) even after the
conference was over and ended up being an effective way to communicate complex information
to a large group of educators. Close to 60 of the 70 educators involved in this project took part
voluntarily in this process. Even with very little prep time or the right space in which to work it
was a success. As Wendy puts it, “The debrief was extremely powerful because the feelings of
participants were the ones we were absolutely trying to convey.” What more could you ask for?!
Well done Wendy and her whole team!

• UbD ASCD conference hand-out material in Ft. Worth Texas, December 2016. Jay
McTighe and Grant Wiggins.