Title of Work:
CRWDSPCR (Crowdspacer)

Creator:
Choreographer: Merce Cunningham (1919 - 2009)
Performed by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company

Background Information:
While in his teens, Merce Cunningham did exhibition ballroom dancing in local farmers’ lodges. He received his first formal dance and theater training at the Cornish School in Seattle, where he met musician and composer John Cage. In 1939, dancer/choreographer Martha Graham invited Merce to work with her in New York, and for the next six years, he was a soloist in her company as well as a member of the faculty of the School of American Ballet directed by George Balanchine. In 1944, Merce presented the first of many annual New York solo concerts with John Cage, which continued until the formation of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1953. A world tour in June 1964 created a turning point in the company’s history; audiences in Europe and Asia recognized the importance of its work. From the start, in their approaches to choreographing dance and composing music, Cunningham and Cage agreed on the mutual independence of dance and music. They would agree on a certain time structure -- for example, 3 parts of 1 to 2 1/2 minutes each -- and then go off independently to compose the dance and the music. Cunningham and Cage’s artistic association endured for more than fifty years until John Cage’s death in 1992. Cunningham is still celebrated as an innovative artist, who choreographed more than 185 pieces for his company during his life.

About the Artwork:
CRWDSPCR (Crowdspacer) is a result of the intriguing choreographic process of Merce Cunningham’s work with the Life Forms computer program. Cunningham was an inveterate explorer of new technology, and he became interested in “how the computer opens the eye to detail - the way a photograph does.” CRWDSPCR follows the dancers as they physically try out and adapt movement sequences derived from Cunningham’s computerized images to discover ways to make those movements “work” with real bodies in real time.

Creative Process of the Artist or Culture:
Cunningham used the new Life Forms computer figures to originate movement possibilities for CRWDSPCR. Then he worked with the dancers to replicate, coordinate and perform the movement for the piece. The music, blues 99, was composed by John King. It is produced through the transformation of sounds made by a steel Dobro slide guitar. Cunningham gave King only three pieces of information about the dance: its length, its title, and the fact that there would be groups of dancers on the stage. This suggested to King a picture of urban life.

“Dancing for me is movement in time and space. Its possibilities are bound only by our imaginations and our two legs.”
Merce Cunningham
Indicates sample lessons

Audio-Visual Materials:
• To make the best use of these lesson plans, we recommend first conducting an internet search for Merce Cunningham, as well as video clips of his work and choreography, including CRWDSPCR. His work can also be found in books and DVDs.

Discussion Questions:
After the video clips have been viewed:
• View a short CRWDSPCR video clip several times. Each time, focus on a different aspect of the work. Merce used a strong rhythmic structure to unify and drive the movement of the dancers traveling through space on various pathways. Observe a group of dancers moving to a 3-count or 2-count rhythm pattern, “One, two, three” or “One-two.”

1. How does the rhythm pattern support the dancers’ movement in relation to one another? Are they performing as one unit or as individuals?
2. What is the relationship of the rhythm pattern to the music? Are the dance and the music mutually dependent or independent?

• CRWDSPCR has been described as showing space itself being defined and redefined by human activity. From photos or video clips used, describe the various groupings of dancers and sense of space that the dancers created. How did the space change? Describe any associations you had.
• How does the lack of an identifiable “motivation,” literal story, or image in the choreography affect the expressiveness of the dance for you? Describe your impressions of and your responses to the video clip you found and watched.
• Describe the kind of music or sound that you heard. How does it compare to the classical or popular music you are familiar with?

Multidisciplinary Options:
• “Time” for the Cunningham dancer is not the time we associate with traditional theatre and music. Events do not develop over its passage, lead inevitably toward climaxes, and fade away. Climax, deemed “privileged moments” by Cunningham, seldom rise from the web of events. Relationships between dancers may occur fleetingly and, although they may seem tender, playful, or antagonistic, they are without an evolving drama. Have students become more aware of time by becoming able to “sense” a 30-second span of time. Do each of the following for 30 seconds: sit with eyes closed and count the seconds; have a conversation with a partner; do a specific activity. Discuss the differences in how each 30-second span “felt.”

Additional References:
• Merce Cunningham at Wikipedia
• Caplan, Eliot, Director of the award-winning CRWDSPCR documentary film (1996).
• Vaughan, David. Merce Cunningham: Fifty Forward, 2005 (CD-ROM)
• The Kennedy Center ArtsEdge. Merce Cunningham and BIPED: Meet the master artist through one of his most important works.
• Search Internet websites, books, DVDs for Merce Cunningham and CRWDSPCR.

Sample Experiences:
Level I
• Study the dancers’ positions in CRWDSPCR photos and/or video clips. Discuss similarities or differences from partnering or “lifts” that you have seen in ballet, ice skating, gymnastics, or other paired maneuvers.
• View a CRWDSPCR video clip. Focus on the way the dancers move together to perform the rhythm and
timing of a movement sequence. Recall a specific rhythmic pattern. Clap that pattern, then standing in one place use your feet to step the pattern. Once you can repeatedly count the pattern with your feet, find two or three ways that you can use the rhythm and its energy to travel to another place.

**Level II**

- Describe the interaction you observed between Merce Cunningham and the dancers in their rehearsal process and choreography.
- Search the internet and libraries for resources to learn more about Merce Cunningham, his choreography, and CRWDSPCR.
- Create a dance using “chance procedures” to determine the sequence of elements in your choreography. Methods include: selecting elements written on paper strips, tossing coins, drawing playing cards, etc.

**Level III**

- Direct students to find a partner. Each person will create a simple eight-count movement phrase. Have one person design the foot work and its rhythmic pattern, while the other person determines the arm gestures and timing. Take turns teaching and learning one another’s parts. Then combine and perform the footwork and arm gestures within the eight counts. Repeat the phrases over and over to experience the mental and physical “kinesthetic memory” process.
- In small groups, experiment with a specific time structure - for example, three parts of 30 to 60 seconds each. Then independently compose the dance and the music pieces. When each group is ready, come together and perform the pieces simultaneously. Rehearse to become precise in your timing and become aware of what a 30-second span of time “feels” like.

* Indicates sample lessons
HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The history of modern dance evolved from the spirit of change and revolution at the end of the nineteenth century. It transformed from the dancing of Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, through Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, to its foremost pioneers, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. Each artist had a unique vision and they all developed their own art forms and styles based on specific movement principles. Graham’s expressive dance language was built on an earthbound relationship of the dancer’s body and the floor, supported by principles of “contraction-and-release” and “spiraling” around the axis of the spine. Her work opposed the gravity-defying aerial illusion conveyed by the classical ballet dancer “on pointe.”

As a dancer, Merce Cunningham’s natural gifts of lightness, resilience, and speed contrasted with Graham’s style. In his dance vocabulary, the body operates from a central point of balance in the lower spine. This acts as a source for the arms and legs as well as an axis for coiling-and-exploding action or driving movement into spatial paths. The back and torso action is large, open, and free. The dexterity in the legs drawn from ballet technique becomes a means of sweeping through expanses of stage space and making large lateral movements with nonstylized rhythmic running or walking movements.

Cunningham’s concept of dance involves enlargement -- an “amplification of energy,” as well as a total sentient presence “in the moment.” He disliked the modern dance notion of “A-B-A form” based on emotional or psychological meanings. Instead, he devised practical tools of chance procedures to reveal new possibilities and to arrange his materials into relationships and sequences that he might not normally think of. Beginning in 1990, he incorporated the use of the Life Forms computer program into his choreography. Cunningham worked with the computer to prepare new movement materials and then carefully choreographed and rehearsed them with his dancers. His approach does not permit the dancers to improvise their materials spontaneously; rather, it fosters both a precision and a feeling of randomness in a specific dance form.
INTRODUCTION:
Human beings have created rhythm patterns since ancient times. The natural act of walking or running - as well as the heartbeat - creates a rhythm pattern that is repeated many times. Merce Cunningham sometimes uses rhythmic walking and running movements to cover large stretches of space in his dances. One of his concepts about dance has to do with amplifying or enlarging ordinary movement and energy.

OBJECTIVES: (Student Outcomes)

Students will be able to:

• Identify and demonstrate clear rhythm patterns performed by the dancers in CRWDSPCR or other video examples. (Responding & Performing)

• Demonstrate a variety of ways to transfer specific rhythmic patterns into footwork performed in one place and also traveling through space. (Creating)

• Describe, discuss, analyze and connect information and experiences based on this lesson. Refer to Assessment at the end of this lesson. (Responding & Connecting)

MATERIALS:

• Use Internet, DVD or library examples of Merce Cunningham choreography, including CRWDSPCR (1993) and Loose Time (2002).

• Drum or percussion instrument.

PROGRESSION:

• Present excerpts and guide students to learn about Cunningham's artistic and choreographic approaches to his work over more than 60 years in creating innovative dance.

• View CRWDSPCR and other Cunningham clips. Pay particular attention to the rhythm patterns performed. Are dancers actually moving in groups of 3 counts or 2 counts, i.e., “One-two-three, one-two-three” or “One-two, one-two, one-two”? The first count is emphasized as a stronger or accented beat.
• Have your students count out the rhythm that the dancers are performing. Then practice clapping the rhythm pattern several times in a sequence without stopping.

• Once the students can successfully clap the rhythm, direct them to step the rhythm pattern with their feet in place (without traveling), i.e., step, hold, hold; step, hold, hold; step, step, step; repeat. The teacher must clap, call out the counts or use a percussion instrument to maintain a consistent rhythm.

• Next, have your students travel as they perform the pattern over and over several times to reinforce the kinesthetic “feel” of the rhythm and movement.

• After they have practiced this pattern several times and can do the pattern successfully, have students experiment with ways they can travel in different directions and facings (forward, backward, sideways). Students can also work in pairs or small groups to practice the rhythm pattern.

• Coach the students to make their movements larger and more energetic so they can cover more space.

• Become aware of the sensation of the “momentum” of the movement as they become more skilled in moving with speed, strength and force across the floor space.

• Have small groups of students perform their improvisations while others observe.

Criteria for Observing:

• Is the rhythmic pattern clearly performed?
• Are the accented beats clear? (1st beat in each measure/group of beats)
• Are there many variations in direction and facings?
• Are the movements big and covering lots of space?
• Are the movements strong and forceful?

EXTENSIONS:

• One group of students can clap the rhythm as another group performs the movement.

• Think of other traveling movements that could be used in performing the rhythm pattern, i.e., jump, hold, hold; jump, hold, hold; run, run, run; repeat.

• For more advanced students, focus on disciplining their energies through their ability to sustain physical action. For observation and experimentation purposes, isolate the physical dynamics of movement in space and time in relationship to:

  • tempo (slow/fast);
  • space (short distance/large expanse);
  • momentum (awareness of one’s weight driving the force and continuity of a movement or phrase; length of time required to bring a moving body to rest when under the action of a constant force or movement); and
  • velocity ( quickness of motion; rate of change of position along a straight line with respect to time).
VOCABULARY: rhythm patterns, accent, beat, improvisation, direction, facing, momentum, velocity, kinesthetic

ASSESSMENT: (Responding & Connecting)

DESCRIBE: Describe the feeling of traveling with strong, swift and powerful movements of the legs and feet through space while keeping the body and arms centered and still.

DISCUSS: Discuss how the dancers in the video clips you have seen moved together to the same rhythm pattern.

ANALYZE: Discuss the difference in energy and weight when performing the accented movements of feet, arms or torso while sustaining the basic traveling rhythm pattern.

CONNECT: Identify other examples of hearing, seeing or experiencing rhythmic patterns in your everyday life or activities.

Emphasis on: Common Core - CA State Standards for Language - Reading; Writing; Listening; Speaking
INTRODUCTION:
Merce Cunningham’s experimental choreography has had a great impact on the evolution of contemporary artists’ work in the twentieth century. Cunningham disliked the modern dance theory based on emotional or psychological meanings. Instead he believed in being “in the moment” and in movement for movement’s sake. He devised practical tools of “chance” procedures to discover new movement possibilities. This allowed him to arrange his movement materials into relationships and sequences that he might not normally think of. He left it to his audiences to bring meaning to the movement rather than having a specific meaning that he intended to communicate.

OBJECTIVES: (Student Outcomes)
Students will be able to:

• Identify and select one or more “chance procedures” to determine specific aspects of a dance. (Responding)

• Create three specific movement patterns, two specific pathways and two different tempos to use as the basic materials for their dance. (Creating & Performing)

• Use the “chance procedures” to arrange the movement, spatial pathways, tempi, and other aspects that comprise the making of a dance. (Responding & Connecting & Creating & Performing)

• Describe, discuss, analyze and connect information and experiences based on this lesson. Refer to Assessment at the end of this lesson. (Responding & Connecting)

MATERIALS:

• Prepare Internet, DVD or library resources: written descriptions, video excerpts and photographs (such as Loose Time/2002, CRWDSPCR/1993, Rondo/1997, Enter/1992 or Trackers/1991) in which elements of the choreography were determined by “chance procedures.”

• Drum or percussion instrument. Music is optional.

Flipping a coin is a commonly used method of chance.
PROGRESSION:

• View video clips to become aware of the innovative style and work of Merce Cunningham. He has used “chance procedures” to rid himself of his own clichés. But, we also know that “chance” is only as interesting as the choreographer who uses it.

• Cunningham has produced dances based on strict “chance” arrangements of predetermined sequences to underscore the unpredictability of life itself. Whether decided by tossing a coin, throwing dice, or an arbitrary shuffling of a movement sequence, Cunningham’s choreography stimulated his own creative process while frustrating some audience expectations of a “story narrative.”

• Guide students to work individually to create three simple movement patterns executed with their legs, feet and lower body. Then draw two clear and different pathways, and specify two different tempi (tempos).

• Introduce a few chance procedures to the students so they can select one that they wish to use. Have them work in groups.

• Ask the students to write or draw with stick figures, each on a separate strip of paper:
  • each of their three movement patterns (3 paper strips);
  • each of their two clear and different pathways (2 paper strips);
  • each of their two different tempi (2 paper strips).

• Put all of the paper strips together in one pile and shuffle them to mix up their order.

• Randomly draw one strip at a time from the pile, placing each one in the “chance sequence” in which it was drawn.

• Students practice putting the sequence into movement, space and time. They may spontaneously elect any movement they want to move along pre-determined pathways or to demonstrate their specific tempos as well as to draw from movement already determined.

• Practice your dance so that all the parts can be connected smoothly and continuously in a rhythmic flow for a good performance.

Suggested Criteria for Dance:

• Application of one “Chance Procedure”
• Clear focus in performance
• Three movement patterns
• Two spatial pathways
• Two different tempos
• Smooth and continuous transitions (continuity and flow)
• Clear beginning, middle and end
• Perform each person’s “chance sequences” one person at a time or simultaneously in small groups.

EXTENSION:

• Experiment with another chance procedure such as using a deck of playing cards. Select five different numbers and use all four suits with these numbers. Decide how to adapt the movement choices to the cards, i.e., numbers each stand for a different movement pattern or phrase; colors stand for two different tempi; and suits represent four different pathways or other dance element. Use a similar procedure of drawing the cards and setting a sequence which is then practiced and made “kinesthetic” or can be performed with a natural and repeatable form and flow. This can be done as individuals, partners or in small groups.

VOCABULARY: chance procedure, pathway, tempo (tempi), transition, flow

ASSESSMENT: (Responding & Connecting)

DESCRIBE: Describe the chance procedure you used in creating your dance. Discuss the differences between using a chance procedure and a more traditional choreographic method for creating a dance.

DISCUSS: Discuss your experience in working with chance procedures and what you liked and what you found frustrating or challenging.

ANALYZE: Discuss and analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the chance procedures.

CONNECT: Discuss other aspects of your life where chance procedures are used.

Emphasis on: Common Core - CA State Standards for Language - Reading; Writing; Listening; Speaking
INTRODUCTION:
When dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham could no longer experiment with movement using his own body, he turned to a computer program. The *Life Forms* program simulated body movement to further investigate new possibilities. In every rehearsal of a new dance, Cunningham's bright and gifted dancers are challenged with seemingly impossible moves that are totally unfamiliar.

As you watch video excerpts of dances that were made using technology, imagine Cunningham reviewing possible movement sequences of the computerized figures on the screen, consider the way in which he and the dancers had to work together to reproduce the computer-generated movement on real human bodies in real space within a predetermined duration (length) of time. Cunningham and composer, John King, worked on the CRWDSPCR project independently, but in collaboration. Cunningham gave the composer only three pieces of information about the dance: its length, its title and the fact that there would be groups of dancers on the stage. Then Cunningham, along with the dancers, created the dance without music. Sometimes they rehearsed without the music and then performed it with the sound score. The collaboration is that the dance and music simply occupy the same space and time.

OBJECTIVES: (Student Outcomes)

Students will be able to:

• Describe, discuss and analyze the process of creating two separate compositions that are then performed simultaneously. *(Responding & Connecting)*

• Create either a dance or a music score separately and perform them together. *(Creating & Performing)*

• Describe, discuss, analyze and connect information and experiences based on this lesson. Refer to *Assessment* at the end of this lesson. *(Responding & Connecting)*

MATERIALS:

• Prepare Internet, DVD or library resources: written descriptions, video excerpts and photographs (such as *Trackers*/1991, *Enter*/1992, *CRWDSPCR*/1993 or *Loose Time*/2002) in which elements of the choreography were developed through the *Life Forms* computer program.

• A variety of sounds, stringed and percussion instruments.

PROGRESSION:

• View the video clips and give background information on Merce Cunningham and his work with computer-generated movement, as well as his unique collaborations with composers, costumers and set designers.
• With a partner, agree upon a specific time structure, i.e., three parts of 30 to 60-seconds each. Agree upon which partner will make the music piece and which partner will choreograph the dance.

• Work separately to create the music and dance parts, making sure that each person stays true to the time structure.

Suggested Criteria for each part:

• Concentration in performance
• Precise time structure
• Maintaining the integrity of each person’s part during performance

• When each person has completed their dance or music part, come together to perform the pieces simultaneously.

• After a run-through, work to refine the timing by using a watch or timer along with repeated practice in counting to become aware of what the duration of a 30- to 60-second time span feels like.

• Perform these pieces for the class and give each pair constructive feedback.

• In collaborative partners, discuss the experience and the works created. Analyze the process you both went through and what it was like to maintain the integrity and clarity of each individual component (dance or music) performed simultaneously.

EXTENSION:

• Repeat the same procedure in small groups. The dance group choreographs together and the musicians compose together.

VOCABULARY: simultaneous, time structure, duration, constructive feedback, integrity, chance procedures, sequence

ASSESSMENT: (Responding & Connecting)

DESCRIBE: Describe the challenges you faced in the creative process and in the performance experience.

DISCUSS: Discuss the ease or difficulty of learning to work in a precise time structure comprised of specific durations.

ANALYZE: Analyze the impact on audience members as they experience the music and dance pieces performed simultaneously. Do they feel any emotion? Do they try to find stories in the movement? Are there unexpected moments filled with surprises and meaning?

CONNECT: Discuss other moments in life where independent random events are experienced simultaneously (i.e., the TV is on, you are making breakfast, and the dog is barking).

Emphasis on: Common Core - CA State Standards for Language - Reading; Writing; Listening; Speaking