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Gestural interactions in the intensive training of *Waza* at a puppet theater

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Haruka Okui and Alexandre Legendre

An ineffable character is often reported in the skill learning of artists or artisans in East Asia, especially in Japan. Bungoro Yoshida, one of the best classic puppeteers in modern Japan, attested that his master rarely gave him advice during the days of his apprenticeship (Irie 1981). Instead, the master simply said “no” when he saw the disciple’s choreography, without explaining what was wrong with his performance. More precisely, when Bungoro manipulated a puppet on stage with his master, unseen by the spectators’ eyes, the master would suddenly stamp on the disciple's foot without saying anything. The disciple had to guess the point of his mistakes on his own. This might have been partly because the master did not have a pedagogical mind, but also because he wanted his disciple to realize and reflect on his choreographic mistakes independently. Hence, it is usually said that skill is not taught but “stolen” by the disciple through attentive observation and imitation of the elder’s performance.

1 Two supplementary facts are necessary to understand this episode. First, young Bungoro was not a complete novice at that time. He was already an accomplished puppeteer. Thus, even if he could not immediately understand why the master was dissatisfied with his manipulation, the master knew that his disciple was capable of understanding it later. Second, many Japanese artists or artisans, including someone like Bungoro's master, believe that verbal explanation is an inefficient way to teach a skill, and may even prevent its acquisition. This is because they consider thinking to be different from performing. Even a person with a rich vocabulary, such as Zeami, the director and writer of classic Noh theater, often concludes a description of an esoteric Noh text with “it is difficult to convey this in writing” (Zeami 2008).
Therefore, if Bungoro did learn skills from his master, what kind of instruction took place? Why did young Bungoro not escape from his brutal master and follow an instructor who explained things clearly in order to make better progress? To answer these questions, we have to carefully observe the process and consequences of silent but rich communication between the disciple and the master. We can guess that even if the master did not correct his disciple’s choreography, it does not mean that there was no instruction. On the contrary, the master succeeded in drawing the disciple’s attention to his own choreography; hence, to “not teach” might be a kind of instruction (Nishihira 2012).

In this paper, we examine how artists learn and teach waza, the know-how required to act skillfully, by describing the practices in a traditional Japanese puppetry theater. In Awaji Puppet Theater, despite the troupe’s dynamic history, its puppet manipulation skills have only changed slightly in at least the last 250 years; a single puppet is manipulated by three puppeteers, who hold on to the puppet’s legs, hands, and neck from behind. This technique enables the puppet, a nonhuman object, to express emotions as well as, or perhaps even better than, the human actors on stage.

In this theater, most of the puppeteers’ learning is based on their daily practices as members of the theater, involving their participation in stage preparation and performance, puppet construction and maintenance, and public workshops and social activities. However, in terms of mastering complicated skills, intensive training is necessary. This intensive training is an instructive session in which a novice learns new skills from experienced puppeteers, or an expert puppeteer improves his or her skills on the advice of other experts.

An interesting aspect of the training process is that verbal communication often becomes harsh, albeit not as brutal as that described in Bungoro’s experience. Since the skill is embodied in the puppeteer and the expert does not always consciously recognize how their body moves, the communication between the instructor and apprentice does not consist of vocabulary-rich explanations or dialogue. On the contrary, the training is interactive and rich in gestural conversations. It is the total sum of their interactions, including not only the master’s words, but also their speech and pre-verbal gestures that do not make sense as words, that implicitly drive the training. This paper precisely analyzes how such gesture-rich interaction underpins the learning of puppeteering skills.

Intensive Training and Situated Learning

Studies on social learning in small-scale cultures have paid attention to learning outside formal education. In professions requiring skill-expertise such as weaving or tailoring, most learning is based on observation and imitation in daily life (Gaskins and Paradise 2010). Situated learning studies, such as the legitimate peripheral participation theory, emphasize that skill acquisition can result from participation and engagement in the community (Lave and Wenger 1991). Specific teaching activities rarely occur because the novice acquires the skills through spending time with an elder member in the community of practice (Lave 2009).

At the same time, however, these researchers agree with that the dichotomy is too simple that separates formal and informal education: the language-based instruction in formal educational curricula which is set apart from the context of everyday life, and
the demonstration-based instruction embedded in daily life activities. They indicate that teaching by demonstration or learning by observation does not account for all learning activities (Greenfield and Lave 1982, Lave 2009). It is reported that small-scale cultures use multiple methods of directed instruction, storytelling, and scaffolding to modify an individual's behavior to enhance learning (Hewlett 2011).

In these studies, verbal instruction of skills involving physical movement has not yet been fully discussed. For example, according to a study in philosophy (Dreyfus 2002), when a novice starts to learn a skill, she or he moves according to their instructor's advice, which deconstructs a task into context-free features that the novice can recognize without previous experience. This explanation seems plausible when the novice can easily perform the instructions they receive. Using the example of driving instruction, Dreyfus shows that even if the driving skill is complicated, each manipulative motion is simple: grasping the steering wheel, stepping on the pedal, etc. This simplicity means not only that the motion is easy but also that it has an arbitrary quality. That is, it does not matter exactly where a novice driver holds the steering wheel if the maneuver goes well, although there may be a recommended point.

However, other skills of artists or artisans are not the same. They often require rigorous movements that learners cannot easily perform (Legrand and Ravn 2009). The learning, cognition, and transformation of body techniques require long-term practices that are embedded in a specific context (D'Onofrio & Joulian 2006). Moreover, because skilled people perform the appropriate actions without calculating or reflecting, they do not consciously recognize how to move their bodies – “What must be done, simply is done” (Dreyfus 2002). If an expert does not recognize how they move their own body, how can a simple verbal instruction be effective?

Ikuta reported on skill learning in the context of Japanese classic performing arts (Ikuta 2007). In the classic performance of Kabuki, the choreography is complicated and artificial in terms of the physical movement. In this learning process, verbal explanations are often avoided because explanations can interfere with the motion; being able to describe movements does not immediately improve them. Therefore, the novice engages in a long-term apprenticeship. Ikuta describes “teaching-less” or “minimum-teaching,” characterized by imitation, not having specific stages, non-transparent evaluations, and engagements in the world.

Ikuta (2007) also mentions that although direct instruction is rare, if conducted, it requires a particular language-use; these non-analytical expressions promote the mastery of the art. The “craft language” (waza-language) is a good example; it describes the angle of the arms in Kabuki’s choreography. If a master uses a metaphorical expression such as “like receiving a snowflake fluttering down from the sky,” his or her pupil’s movements will improve. This has the effect of giving the pupil a concrete image, helping them to successfully recombine their physical movements.

Even in Ikuta’s fruitful research, verbal instruction is not fully analyzed. Although she emphasizes that instruction in skill learning is not the same as in modern educational institutions, her research into craft language does not yet seem to depart from a language-based perspective. That is, it remains within the modern pedagogical view, which assumes that knowledge can be translated into words and learning occurs if the correct words are used. In other words, the structure of the instruction is regarded as one person transmitting words to another.
The key is the communication that takes place “before” the craft language is used, especially on a non-linguistic aspect (Lemonnier 2012). Everyday communication involves an interactive, unambiguous interplay of bodily gestures that contribute to the progress of a conversation (Sugawara 1990, 2010, Takada 2011). If there are also interactions between the instructor and the learner that promote learning, we could understand the phenomenon of instruction through describing not only their speech but also their gestures (Okui 2015). This is a project that involves being in the place where the language is being created, rather than isolating the language itself from the scene. Through detailed description, we can analyze the dynamics of orality as the basis for the mastery of the skill.

The Puppeteer’s Skills in Awaji

The Awaji Puppet Theater is situated in Awaji Island, central Japan. Other than the Osaka National Bunraku Puppet Theater, Awaji Theater is the only company in Japan that specializes in classic puppetry (Ningyo-joruri). The theater has a set structure with three types of performers: narrator, accompanist, and puppeteers. The narrator presents all the characters’ lines, as well as the plot explanation. The accompanist uses the shamisen, which resembles a banjo, to create rhythms, tempos, and moods that work in collaboration with the narration. The classical Japanese visual and sound design gives an impression that is unfamiliar and disconnected from the modern world, not only to foreigners but also to the current Japanese audience. Further, the troupe also gives instruction to local junior and senior high school activity clubs and regularly organizes workshops across the country. Unless there is a touring show, performances are usually held at a dedicated theater.

In the 15th century, puppet performances used in religious rituals, and in the 16th century they were one of the major entertainments for common people. Although at 400 years old, their development evokes sociocultural questions (Law 1997), our focus here is on the present-day puppetry skill these performances involve. My fieldwork on the theater has been conducted since 2009 through regular visits ranging in length from a day to a week.
Concerning skill learning, this theater has “developmental steps.” Although not explicitly stated, these steps are loosely shared by the puppeteers. They say that it takes about seven to eight years to master the techniques of manipulating each of the puppet’s body parts (the legs and the left hand). Therefore, a performer must spend at least 15 years to attain the role of head-puppeteer. It is also said that the training of the head puppeteer never ends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career stage</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Onstage Tasks</th>
<th>Offstage Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeship</td>
<td>1~2 years</td>
<td>Stage support</td>
<td>Toolmaking, Puppet repair, Puppet’s clothes setting, Hair setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legs</td>
<td>7~8 years</td>
<td>Manipulation of legs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Hand</td>
<td>7~8 years</td>
<td>Manipulation of left hand</td>
<td>Stage support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head</td>
<td>Endless</td>
<td>Manipulation of the head and right hand, Lead the other two</td>
<td>Making choreography, Casting the Puppeteers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The puppeteer’s development steps

During the performance, puppeteers have a wide variety of tasks. When they have a role to play, they concentrate on puppeteering that enables a nonhuman object to express esthetic values. At other times they contribute fully to supporting the stage management. Sometimes they are in charge of helping carry tools and moving large props (such as sliding doors), while at other times they are in charge of hammering...
wood to create audio effects. For the effects, they perform live, without using modern devices such as microphones or speakers. Because they cannot be present on stage, their activities are conducted under the stage set. Although almost all the puppeteers have roles during the performance, an apprentice concentrates especially on helping tasks. For newcomers, this is also an opportunity to learn the stage procedure and puppet’s gestures through participation.

There are many offstage tasks such as making tools, stage maintenance, and preparation of puppets. Preparing the puppet means constructing the puppet’s body, setting its hairs, and dressing the costume. While it is the veteran puppeteer who prepares the puppets, the apprentice also mends the costumes and repairs any blemishes or defects on the puppet’s limbs. During the apprenticeship, the novice learns the structure of the puppet though helping elder puppeteers. This process is an example of situated learning.

Figure 2. An expert puppeteer corrects the puppet's clothes
In terms of manipulating the puppet, the puppeteers’ roles are systematic. The legs-
puppeteer manipulates the puppet’s legs. Crouching beneath the puppet, they grasp
the puppet’s two legs, one in each hand. They have to maintain a low position during
the first period of their career, and the manipulation posture is physically difficult to
maintain. This is one of the reasons why young artists take this role. The legs-
puppeteer maintains physical contact with his/her right arm against the head-
puppeteer’s waist in order to sense the head-puppeteer’s movement, by which the legs-
puppeteer can recognize the leader’s signals.

The left-hand-puppeteer stands to the left of the puppet and holds the puppet’s left
hand in his right hand. In contrast to the head-puppeteer or the legs-puppeteer, whose
movements correspond to the puppet’s gestures, the left-hand-puppeteer changes the
direction, keeping some distance from the puppet’s body.
The head-puppeteer is literally the head of the trio. Whether the puppet moves like a human actor or even better depends on the head-puppeteer’s skill. He wears wooden clogs with 20 cm soles in order to provide space for manipulation by another puppeteer. Although the control of head and right hand, facial expression, or whole bodily posture requires a high level of skill, collaborating with the other two puppeteers and controlling the overall direction of the puppet play is even more challenging.

The wonderment experienced when a puppet seems to come to life is the epitome of puppet performance. The attunement skill of the puppeteers called Zu (means “signal”) underpins their performance. Although the puppets’ movements are determined before the performance begins, the head-puppeteer organizes every movement according to the delicate nuances of the play; the tempo and atmosphere of the performance depends on the composition of the performer and the audience. The skill of Zu consists of a preliminary action of the puppet’s choreography, made by the head-puppeteer at the beginning of each gesture by using the puppet’s head, upper body, or right hand, for example, leaning forward before making a standing gesture or opening hands before a clasping gesture. With this action, the other two puppeteers recognize what is necessary and follow a suitable speed for the puppet’s motion. Through the Zu, which realizes collaborative action and executes sophisticated choreography, audiences often come to see the performance as if only the puppets are on stage, as if the three puppeteers become invisible in their black masks and clothing.
Concerning the puppet’s gesture, there are said to be 50 male and 20 female kata. The kata is the basic set of puppet actions that constitutes the choreography of the stage, which is inherited from the puppetry tradition. Each action has a pre-determined procedure that is played in a certain character on a certain stage. Some movements consist of an unnamed (non-kata) gesture, but are conventionally formulated.

Interestingly, there is no opportunity to systematically learn the kata themselves. The kata are not accumulated in a cohesive body of knowledge as in an archive, but rather are learned as a result of the actual performances. The newcomer learns the puppets’ actions each time the performance program changes. That is why, for example, the kata called roppo is acquired in a concrete play, such as “the gesture performed by a person named Tadanobu in a program of Yoshitsune Senbonzakura.”

In this sense, most of the puppeteers’ skill learning is situated in their daily practices. In experiences of working with elders in the community, they can acquire skills without a big effort and with minimum instruction from the elder. However, this does not mean that there were no intensive training sessions at the theater where the sole purpose was the mastery of a particular movement. Because the puppeteers are immersed in the context of their daily theater activities, they sometimes realize that their skills are inadequate or could be improved. In that sense, even their intensive learning is situated.

The intensive training comprises interactive sessions where elder artists and young artists interact in order to improve their skills (Chamoux 2010). These sessions do not take place at pre-scheduled times. According to necessity, they begin unexpectedly between daily performances when it becomes necessary to correct or check the movements of the puppets. They tend to start right before the change in the subject of a performance, right after it has begun, or before a special performance. Additionally,
they may take place during the lunch break and at night after a performance. The following sections are dedicated to describing these intensive training sessions, responding to concrete questions about how their interactions are formed, describing how gestural interaction underpins their training, and what learning means to them.

**In Front of the Mirror: Novice’s Training**

The novice’s intensive training is conducted under the elder puppeteer’s instruction. The instruction is an example of communication based on a gap between the skilled and the unskilled; the former has knowledge to teach, and the latter lacks this knowledge. However, where exactly is this skill gap in a puppeteer’s learning process? The following descriptions aim to question simple understandings of instructing and learning that view them as a matter of transferring knowledge from one person to another. Rather, it reveals a dynamic exchange of knowledge based on rich gestural interactions.

The first case is about collaborative interaction. It shows that training is not a one-way communication, but an interactive activity that the learner also contributes to. The emergence of training is also interactive. As some research has reported, there is an imbalance in the utterance rate between novices (students) and masters (instructors) in the community of practice (Greenfield and Lave 1982). Contrary to the veteran who easily makes demands of and commands the novice, the novice rarely asks for advice from the veteran. Therefore, the question about when the training begins concerns when the novice touches the puppet. If a novice manipulates a puppet backstage, the novice easily creates an opportunity to be talked to by the veteran puppeteers. There were a few occasions in their training where the sole purpose was to refine a movement.

![Figure 5. A puppeteer (called C) engages in self-training](image)

She checks the puppet’s choreography in front of the mirror.
© Kanta Kojima

Figure 5. A puppeteer (called C) engages in self-training

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Intensive training often begins in front of a mirror located in the center of the backstage area. Each puppeteer has backstage tasks; prepare the puppet here, check the hall, check the lighting, just talking, etc. Although they do not focus on the novice’s self-training, they are aware, in their peripheral attention, of what happened and what the novice tried to do. Sometimes an elder person discusses or evaluates that manipulation. If the veteran gives the novice some advice, it is the emergence of training.

Collaborative Interaction in Training

Let us consider one example. A puppeteer (called C) carefully manipulates a female puppet, checking its forms and gestures in front of the mirror. This is her final check of the puppet’s manipulation and choreographies. Soon, another puppeteer (called T) approaches her. He not only gives her some advice, but also grasps the puppet’s legs and shows her the puppet’s whole posture.

Puppeteer T remarks that the disciple C’s manipulation was a bit exaggerated. The female puppet is “crying” in this scene by moving her head upward. The interesting point here is how puppeteer T demonstrates the puppet’s incorrect gesture in order to correct it. By moving according to T’s description, the puppet provides a “bad example” and a “good example” of the movement. However, it is actually puppeteer C who demonstrates it. Hence, puppeteer C performs the puppet’s wrong gesture as she did before, according to T’s explanation. With the demonstration, they accurately identify the improper motion.
Should we regard this instruction as guidance from the skilled pointing out the mistakes of the unskilled? There is no doubt that the expert pointed out the mistake of the learner, yet the learner’s flexible reaction meant that the instruction was accomplished.

It is worth noting that speech and gesture were not separate from each other but rather intertwined. In this process, C is able to adapt to T’s speech by precisely picking out and emphasizing the mistake, which they had not been aware of until that moment. Even if the word “this” (used during the interaction) is simple, their interactive manipulation makes the conversation meaningful. The interaction between the “skilled” instructor and the “unskilled” learner, so to speak, was completed by the active exploration of C to jointly bring her own “unskilled” actions to light.

Un-Decomposable Skill and Un-Coordinated Interaction

In terms of skill acquisition, it is supposed that a skill might be a kind of ready-made knowledge that is transferred from generation to generation. With puppeteers, where there are strict norms of movement, it is not permissible to express an opinion on the master’s actions. In this sense, instruction is one-way. However, as already mentioned, the *kata* is not a representation of knowledge that can be copied directly from body to body. It is not “a context-independent specification for behavior” (Ingold 2000: 386).

In terms of the intensive training, a perspective free from the “context-independent specification” lets us understand the gaps between the master and novice’s habitual familiarity with puppet manipulation that underpin the collaborative interaction, including the challenging aspects of these interactions. In this case, we observe a type of confusion in the expert which is caused by the novice’s inability to understand the expert’s expectation.
In this session, under instruction from puppeteer T, legs-puppeteer Q is trying to learn a dancing *kata*, which is unknown to him. This movement is constituted by continuous “kicking” and “rolling.” Head-puppeteer T attempts to teach the legs-puppeteer Q by moving slowly, using onomatopoeic words such as “tong” or “hoy.” Although puppeteer T sometimes pauses to check Q’s movements, Q rushes ahead and starts to move his leg. As a consequence, T verbally stops Q from doing so, saying “not yet!” Puppeteer T repeats from the beginning several times, but each time legs-puppeteer Q is unable to move while adjusting to T.

Then, it happens. Puppeteer T holds the puppet’s body in a bending posture and moves his hand open and closed. He says, “I lost it.” The left-hand-puppeteer gives a little chuckle of sympathy. He has lost the order.

What arouses our interest in this session is puppeteer T’s confusion. He forgot his own choreography, despite having to teach it to legs-puppeteer Q. In order to recoup the
motion, he had to pause the session and trace this choreography with his own body as if he were the puppet himself. What happened to him here?

Figure 10.

There are two triggers that may have led to this situation. The first is T’s attempt to “move slowly.” Normally, he should have moved the kata at a certain speed, but he tried to slow it down to match puppeteer Q’s pace. This confused the entire movement. Secondly, legs-puppeteer Q did not move at the timing expected by head-puppeteer T. So head-puppeteer T had to rewind the movement a little. However, the order of his movements is not reversible. Therefore, impeded in terms of both speed and coordination, his movements finally collapsed.

The mistakes Q made here are not just choreographic ones but also his decision to put the legs down on his own accord. Since every movement of the head-puppeteer should be understood as a signal of Zu that the puppeteers should refer to, Q should have waited for head-puppeteer T’s next movement.

As Ikuta (2007) says, the training is not characterized by different stages. It relies on a different principle than school-based learning, which builds up easy tasks and gradually progresses to more difficult ones. As is found in puppeteer T’s instruction, a master demands that the whole of the choreographic work be imitated, not taken apart and practiced separately. The training always proceeds in a way that traces the movement from the beginning. This process can be understood as aiming to maintain the organic coherence of the movement.

Although it seems as if the kata is a ready-made knowledge to be taught, it is not form of knowledge detached from physical movement. It could be seen as a norm of
movement, and yet it is a norm in the process of being realized. In other words, the dancing kata is not something that is built in T’s body in advance, but something that emerges as he moves with his body. If the movement is delayed and deviates from a certain range of coherence, the norms it was supposed to realize are lost, and the kata itself is lost. The interaction in intensive training is the process in which participants work together to create a movement.

**On the Stage: the Expert’s Reflection After a Rehearsal**

What constitutes the learning of an expert? Is it different from the novice’s? The expert puppeteer has already acquired almost all the basic skills and rarely learns new katas. Nevertheless, one head-puppeteer told me that he often learns something new through intensive training, even rehearsals of the familiar plays and choreographies.

Contrary to the novice’s training, the expert’s training or rehearsals do not aim at learning how to manipulate the puppet. Rather, their focus is on the puppet’s expression, not on their bodily movements. This is an opportunity for expert puppeteers to reflect on their performance and reorganize the puppet’s choreography.

Here two questions arise. First, what does it mean that they are focused on the puppet’s expression? Second, how can we overcome the scheme of transferring ready-made knowledge? If their embodied skills are just the application of the kata to a given context, the learning would be a kind of linear process without discoveries. As already mentioned, the simple execution of predefined knowledge is not an accurate description of the learning process. How should learning be understood in the expert’s case?

**Dan-dori and Puppet’s Expression: the Adjustment of Choreography**

Let us consider an example. Head-puppeteer X, a veteran with over 30 years’ experience, is assigned to puppets of a stage. Since almost all choreographies are ready, the puppeteers here ran through the play from the top in order to confirm their individual tasks and roles. After an onstage rehearsal, a new perspective arises when head-puppeteer X requests suggestions from the people who are watching from the audience seats. A shamisen player (called S) responds.
She suggests that one of the main character’s actions do not look effective. More concretely, when the puppet is running away, it “does not look like it is afraid.” In this scene, the male puppet witnesses a woman “he” killed, i.e., she appears as a ghost, and he runs away in fear. Therefore, the shamisen player S suggests, “more panic, more chaos should be produced.” The conversation goes as follows:

S: I don’t feel like he is being chased.
X: Hmmm, hard to do.
...
S: I guess you are just preoccupied with dan-dori (the arrangements).
X: If he runs too fast... I can’t move too fast in the furi (choreographed motions). Do something else in other parts, like running.
The conversation identifying the problem.
The *shamisen* player S guesses that the expert puppeteer X is “preoccupied with *dan-dori*.” The term “*dan-dori*” means the arrangements and procedures of the puppet’s motions. It means that puppeteer X was concentrating on the overall flow of the choreography, and by doing so, he did not take enough care of the detailed expressions for “being chased.” Puppeteer X agrees with her. However, the problem for him is that the puppet has many choreographic motions in this part. As a general rule, the puppet’s actions correspond to the narration and the *shamisen* music. This means that puppeteers cannot change the motion’s speed according to their own decision, even though they may modify the choreography or order of motions. Therefore, puppeteer X concludes that he should make the puppet run fast in that part. In order to practice this idea, on the stage, expert puppeteer X grasps the puppet again with the left-hand-puppeteer and the legs-puppeteer.

Nevertheless, watching his demonstration, *shamisen* player S is still unsatisfied. Using some gestures, she recommends other motions for “the feeling of being scared” and “a sense of panic.” Responding to these suggestions, puppeteer X demonstrates the new motions in improvisation. In this way, they found a solution for the scene.

The point here is the conversation process. We can see that their interpretations of the same issue were slightly different. Contrary to puppeteer X who had only one solution (running fast), the *shamisen* player had another idea of gestures that gave “a sense of panic.” The external perspective can focus only on the puppet’s actions, which means that *shamisen* player S does not consider the manipulative procedures. In contrast, puppeteer X had to pay attention to the context before and after and the coordination with the narration and the music.
Should we assume that this is the application of ready-made knowledge? Indeed, X took S’s point and succeeded in inserting the new choreography without any difficulty. At the same time, it was also a process that took him away from the choreography he had been focusing on. It is not just a matter of applying the choreography he has already acquired based on his previous experience. Rather, this is the point which was arrived at in response to criticism by S and involved setting aside his previous experience. In that sense, what the puppeteer X did here involves not only getting an unexpected idea, but also getting out of his own perspective.

“Ma” and Creating through Gesture

Consider the troupe in charge of manipulating a specific puppet: the play in question is a war history and the puppet is playing a soldier searching for the hero to arrest him. Head-puppeteer T (the same puppeteer from the earlier sections) wants to introduce to the soldier puppet a choreographic *kata* called “uchi-komi.” Since this is not difficult for the left-hand-puppeteer and legs-puppeteer, they perfect the movements after two to three trials. This scene shows the rich interaction among participants, which takes the form of abundant bodily expressions.

Figure 13.

Puppeteer T (on the left side) is practicing the choreography of *uchi-komi* following the instruction of puppeteer X.

© Haruka Okui

During practice, expert puppeteer X approaches to observe them. T asks him to correct the choreography. After a few trials, an idea strikes puppeteer T. He proposes to skip the motion of “get-ready” after he has done the *uchi-komi* and connect to the next action “all at once.” To “get ready” means to return to a neutral, upright posture after performing the choreography.

Listening to the T’s idea, expert X demonstrates the idea with his own body. Puppeteer T says onomatopoeic words according to the X’s demonstration. X’s trial demonstration persuades him.
T: Shouldn’t we go back to our original position?
X: After the uchi-komi?
T: Yes.
X: (does the action)
T: Tong-tong.
X: Okay.
T: Tong-tong, from here, all at once, tong-tong.
X: Ah, speaking of flow...
T: it flows, right?
X: It seems good. If you got ready again, you would lose the ma (the timing).
T: I would lose the ma, right?
X: Right.

Figure 14.

The process of discovering a new connection through X’s bodily demonstration. © Haruka Okui

Two points should be examined in this scene. First, it concerns the emergence of a skill. As in the previous case, the expert puppeteer demonstrates the choreography with his own body as if it was the puppet. Through recreating the movement, both puppeteers discover that the motion of “get ready” is not necessarily efficient and is even unnecessary. Interestingly, before the trial motion, X did not recognize what puppeteer T wanted to say. Performing “all at once” without getting ready is a deviation from the choreographic order, that is not normally permitted. However, physical practice has given them an intuition that goes beyond the automatic application of the codes.

Second, this is the moment in which they reflect on how to use the kata. The crucial point is the vocabulary of “ma” (flow). The Japanese term “ma” is translated as “pause”
in a temporal sense. If one can take an appropriate pause before the next motion, one says “the timing is perfect.” At the same time, it also indicates the space of “gap” or “between” (Kono 2019). Here “losing the ma” means to lose the appropriate timing for shifting to the next motion.

The context in which the puppeteers were embedded suddenly emerges with the word ma. It is an implicit norm that the gesture should proceed in a series of flows. Although it must be an important word for them, their conversation is not only dedicated to “the acquisition of vocabulary ... as such,” but rather “the subtle social uses of language” (Gaskins and Paradise 2010). The sense of ma is not a goal to aim at acquiring, but rather something shared in daily activities. In this sense, the training is not only an opportunity to learn movement, but also to coordinate their movements and to learn how to use the gestures. It functions as a way of developing sensitivity about the ma, even if it is not something that is necessarily focused on directly. By repeating the action using the vocabulary of ma, the participant is able to learn to use that vocabulary. That does not mean understanding ma or flow as a propositional form of knowledge but refers to the ability to handle ma in practice.

Gestural Interactions for Recontextualization

Now we will go back to the original question about how gestural interaction underpins the training, and what the puppeteers learn in it. What the important pioneering studies in this domain, such as Dreyfus’s (2002) or Ikuta’s (2007), have overlooked is that the instruction is not “from the skilled to the unskilled,” nor is it a “unidirectional message.” Although this schema is able to show that knowledge is not something that can always be formally represented, it does not escape the perspective of instruction as a one-way, linear process.

Figure 15. Uneven and one-way communication

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In contrast, as mentioned above, instructing and learning are not a simple matter of transferring knowledge from one person to another. Knowledge, including skills, is not a ready-made material to be transmitted. Even in the novice’s training, the interaction is so bi-directionally formed that it would be impossible without the reaction or response of the disciple. Of course, the participants’ power balance such as social status affects their interactions, especially in the relationship of master-disciple. However, this does not mean that their communication is completely one way. In terms of
participating in the conversation and keeping it going, both skilled and unskilled puppeteer are equally responsible for the exchange of meaning. In other words, this is the experience in which “my words and those of my interlocutor [...] are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 413).

Figure 16. Even and interactive communication

The dynamic schema of interactive communication also suggests how the skill emerges through interactions. On the one hand, for the unskilled, the training is an opportunity to incorporate the skill in their performance and to participate in the context in which previous puppeteers have engaged. The “unskilled” here means not only the novices but also the experts, if they learn something new in the interaction with those who have a different perspective from their own. This schema, therefore, could be applicable for the interactions among experts; the difference between the skilled and the unskilled could be more dynamic, and even exchangeable, during conversations.

On the other hand, for the skilled, this is an opportunity to reflect and reorganize their skills. Since the instructors have already acquired the skill in question, they have to return to the unskilled body and understand why the apprentice is unable to make the required movements. The instructor’s task is to imagine what it is like to be a learner and bring out his or her movement.

In this process, as mentioned in the second example of novice training, the expert could fail to demonstrate his own skills. Alternatively, as mentioned in the last example, the expert can discover a new movement that he had never done before. This is a moment of dishabituation of the skill, that is, breaking out of previous habits, and is also a moment of creating a new context that had not been there before. The intensive training is a largely cyclical process in which master and novice participate in their previous contexts while at the same time renewing the contexts through their interactions.

Communication that facilitates the acquisition of waza is a multi-layered process in which words and gestures are inextricably linked and mutually formed between the instructor and the learner. This interactive process is not limited to one specific context in puppetry but is open to other domains of waza. Using puppetry as an example reveals not only the phenomenon of learning a bodily skill but also the dynamics of our bodies, which can enliven a conversation, engender our transformation, and redefine our social lives (Sigaut 2012).
The more scenes of the Awaji Puppet Theatre’s training are described, the more blurred the line becomes as to what is considered waza and what is not. Mastering the basic actions (kata) includes mastering the “flow” that connects the katas and creates the stage context. Mastering “flow” means deepening one’s understanding of the scenario of the play in which the puppets are embedded, and at the same time, learning to harmonize with other puppeteers, narrators, and shamisen players. In this way, their “learning” expands incidentally. There is no need to be consciously aware of what they are learning, but rather learning occurs implicitly. In this sense, the acquisition of movement is not a step-by-step learning process that permits us to isolate parts of it. It is a tentative process of transforming habitual actions that have been embedded in a concrete context into different habitual actions, and by transforming them, they live in a new context. The training is a series of continuous acquisitions of movements, and the dishabituation and redefinition of the movements that they have previously learned. It always starts and ends in the middle.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Although Bunraku puppetry is famous as a classic performing art in Osaka, Awaji Island was famous as the home of the troupes of travelling artists who visited the countryside seasonally. The basic technique of puppetry was established in this period. Even in the 20th century, local people supported their activities and reformed the troupe. Succeeding one of the oldest troupes, Awaji puppet theater started in 1942. They changed the social organization and members, and then continued puppetry activities.

2. The puppetry consists of three types of performers: narrator, shamisen player, and puppeteers. The narrator presents all character’s lines and asides, and the plot explanation. The shamisen player creates a rhythm, tempo, and mood, working in union with the narration, each supporting the other to express the heart and feeling of the characters. It is aimed at adults rather than children.

3. Whilst conducting doctoral research during 2009-2014, I visited over 70 times. I continued to visit after obtaining the Ph.D., and still do so now. I recorded the video for the training sessions, rehearsals, and performances, totaling over 500 hours of video clips.

4. Although it goes beyond the limit of this paper, an important theme is how the puppetry can be considered with Leroi-Gourhan’s thought of “muscular sensibility,” in terms of a challenge for our ordinary bodily use. “Acrobatics, balancing exercises, the dance, are to a large extent the material expression of the attempt to break away from normal operating sequences and create something outside the day-to-day cycle of positions in space” (Leroi-Gourhan 1993/1964: 286).

5. The puppeteers try to be absent, even when standing onstage; many wear black robes and cowls to conceal themselves. Hence “it is futile to wonder, as certain Europeans do, if the spectator can ever forget the presence of the manipulators” (Barthes 1982). This is a sort of animation in “the narrow field between a fiction and reality,” according to Chikamatsu, a pioneering playwright (1734).

6. For example, the kata called “roppo” involves the puppet “stepping out with its left foot, then right, in turn, and then striking the pose.” This is one of the movements used in scenes where the male character bravely steps forward.

7. For example, in the case of the gesture of “crying,” the procedure is to place the hand gently near the face and bring the face toward it.

8. During the research, I tried to be present backstage as much as possible during such scenes, and to observe the entirety of the training when it began. Such opportunities could not be predicted in advance. For my research, the unpredictability of the beginning of the training was certainly the first hint for understanding their approach to learning, i.e., its unplanned character.

9. Puppeteer C is not a genuine expert because she has only eight years of experience in this theater. Nevertheless, since elder puppeteers acknowledge her talent and motivation, she is assigned as a head-puppeteer for this month’s play.

10. The elder puppeteer T is one of the veterans in the theatre and has been working there for 24 years.

11. The legs-puppeteer Q performed for six years in amateur clubs during junior high school and high school, and it is his first year in this theater. Although he cannot play on stage yet, other puppeteers expect him to play soon.

12. From a state of readiness in the neutral position of “standing,” the puppeteers start to kick up according to the puppet’s body, which is bending backward. Subsequently, they move the legs down slightly, raise up one knee, and step forward. They then perform this motion on the opposite leg.

13. Although these words do not have clearly defined significations, the former is used as the sound of tapping an object, and the latter is used as a shout-out to create momentum for action.
14. This case can be analyzed though the notion of performativity of language by Austin (1969) and his disciple Searle (1972). It could be described that by using the word “ma,” the puppeteers are practically refining their sense of what “ma” is. While this paper does not look into this phenomenon in depth, future studies should consider how the acquisition of a puppet’s sensitivity concerning “ma” connects with the acquisition of vocabulary.

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