

## UNIVERSITY DANCE: SOME QUESTIONS

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This paper points out differences between training and education and the implications of each, and explores the challenges and responsibilities involved in serving dance students within the university system. It was included in *Focus on Dance XII: Dance in Higher Education* published by AAHPERD/NDA in 1992.

There was a time, not long ago, when, as a freelance dance artist, I saw little need for dance oriented theoretical work or a broad-based education in a field geared to performance. For twenty years, my life had been centered on dancing, on being active, making dance visible and possible, seeing that things happened. Today, after three years of doctoral study and one and a half years working as an assistant professor of dance, my point of view has changed. Slowly, I have become aware of the distinction between "training"— which most other serious dance students and I have sought over the years — and "education": the difference between how to produce a better dancer and how best to educate dancers as citizens and members of a culture. I have begun to view the dance studio as confining, and with it, the perspective of the performer, defined by its emphasis on personal readiness. And as my point of view slowly broadens to include more of the world, I glimpse the difficulties in trying to accommodate both approaches at once.

Over the past few years, in adjusting to life within the university, I have experienced a kind of culture shock, finding myself part of a system with its own values, strengths, and weaknesses, quite separate from the professional dance world. Many of my graduate classes were conducted as dialogues between professor and students. After a lifetime of silently taking dance classes, I found myself overcome by shyness and insecurity at having to speak. My initial feelings were of being radically out of context, of having nothing to contribute to the ongoing discussion, of having come from another world, of confusion and uncertainty about my own beliefs. After sitting in these classes I would explode into the technique classes I was teaching, filling the room with my relief at having something to say, being in control, having a voice. But as I continued working toward my EdD, I became aware of questions about technique within the University setting and I began trying to reconcile what I know the profession demands with the realities and values of the university.

In dance, as in any physical skill, discipline is essential. Repetition is accepted as ritual and we work for years to learn control and precision, trying to get it right,

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rarely questioning the why but only the how to. Learning technique is not a creative process nor does it promote critical thinking. In fact, technical training can work against creativity physically in the sense that, with enough repetition, muscles become programmed to move in ways that feel right (we call it "muscle memory"), making it difficult to break out of habitual patterns into new stylistic areas. Wanting to be dancers, we imitate our teachers and accept this training as necessary to building a strong technique. The daily channelling of concentration through the same patterns again and again, the non-verbal acceptance of direction and correction, being pulled to a norm, trying to look right—these are familiar to any dancer who has undertaken serious training, and they are not elements that encourage creative problem solving or critical response. The latter, historically, have been the domain of higher education. Technical training and the philosophical premises of a liberal arts education have never fit comfortably together.

Because university dance programs have traditionally required creative and/or scientific work and theoretical study, while sometimes downplaying the importance of technical training, they have tended to attract and develop dancers more interested in ideas and individual expression than those trained entirely in professional studios. In the university, dance began within physical education programs and from early on was focused on using the form to serve the ends of education by stimulating the imagination and broadening the "social capabilities of the individual that he may at once profit from and serve the greater world without" (Margaret H'Doubler quoted in Ruyter, 1979, p.102). My perception is that, before 1970, university dance students normally went on to become the dancer/teachers or dancer/scholars of the field, with only a small percentage making a career of performing. This lack of emphasis on technique in the academic curriculum allowed universities and colleges to graduate students in four years, though many were, at that point, not employable as professional dancers. Thus, in spite of apparent common interests, a schism developed between the academic dance world and the professional field, reflecting a deep divergence of values centering on the question of whether one is trying to train the dancer or educate the person, to teach skills or build inner resources (Kraus & Chapman, 1981, p.158).

Since the mid-1960s, the number of American colleges and universities offering dance has grown steadily. At the same time, an evolution within the academic dance setting has been occurring with longterm implications for the field: the point of view has shifted. In an effort to integrate professional with educational viewpoints, the trend has been to move away from an administrative base in physical education, becoming either an independent dance department or program, or part of a department or school concerned with other performing arts, such as music or theatre (Kraus & Chapman, p. 292). In addition, dance faculties have adopted professional equivalencies to academic degrees, allowing for the increased hiring of performing artists as teachers. Some have encouraged older dancers to return to school by permitting the transformation of professional career experiences into academic credit.

Moreover, there has been a move to institutionalise professional training standards. In 1981, representatives from academic dance programs met in Washington, D.C. to consider the establishment of an accreditation association for



educational programs in dance. As a result of that meeting, the National Association of Schools of Dance was formed. Forty-eight institutions became charter members: ten professional dance training organisations and thirty-eight colleges and universities. NASD describes its function as one of finding ways of clarifying and maintaining standards in dance through the responsible education of dancers. By means of accreditation, it can encourage those institutions that consistently give students a sound basis for significant future accomplishments in dance (NASD, 1987, p. 2)

Membership is based on criteria such as curriculum, admission policies, sequencing of classes, length of time in operation, faculty qualifications, facilities and equipment, advertising, financial policies, and student access to libraries. Standards and guidelines are described as having evolved from a synthesis of thought about professional training in dance and are to be used as part of the peer review process of accreditation, rather than as a set of rules and regulations. According to NASD literature, standards for admission to the organisation are meant to provide the basis for dialogue on three levels: within an institution as the self-study (which is necessary for application) is being developed, between an institution and the Association (during the period of evaluation), and between the Association and the general public.

Rona Sande, former director of the dance division at the University of California at Santa Barbara, was one of the dance educators who formulated these standards. Sande says that the NASD has, in a real sense, given university dance departments permission to do what many now want to do anyway: to require an intensive studio component within their programs. Additionally, she says, accreditation has helped legitimize dance programs within the university community, particularly among administrators with budgetary and discretionary powers (Sande, 1989).

### "Professional" and "Liberal Arts"

Today, the Association has three categories of accredited membership. Division I is for dance schools and studios seeking legitimation in the eyes of the profession and the public. Divisions II and III are for college and university departments looking for professional credibility. The separation between Divisions II and III marks the difference between a "professional" degree and a "liberal arts" degree. The associate of fine arts and the bachelor of fine arts degrees are both included in Division II and both "require that at least 65% of the course credit be in studio work and related areas" (NASD, 1987, p. 40). This describes a strongly focused course of study, narrowed to the development of technical skills and dance artistry, in essence, a vocational degree. The liberal arts degrees are called associate of arts or science and bachelor of arts or science with a major in dance. These degrees usually require that one-third to one-half the total course credit be in dance. NASD describes Division III as including "schools and departments whose predominant purpose and enrollment are in quality education in dance" (NASD, 1985, p. 3), a telling distinction from BFA (Division II), which has as "its primary



emphasis . . . the development of skills, concepts and sensibilities essential to the dance professional" (NASD, 1987, p. 41).

The difference between Division II and Division III points to the dissimilarity in emphasis between educating dancers as people and training dancers for dance. In its listing in the 88/89 *Dancemagazine College Guide* (Lawson, 1988), the University of California at Santa Barbara, a public, state-supported university, makes the distinction clear:

The BFA degree is oriented toward training the dance student for a professional career in performance and/or choreography and the curriculum is centered around studio courses and related theatrical experiences. The BA degree is a less structured program and allows time for students to pursue course work that could lead to alternate careers.... (p. 87)

This distinction affects dancers throughout their lives, bearing on both the transition they must make at the end of a performing career and on their ability to survive in a field where a "job" as a dancer rarely provides a living wage. It also points up an issue that is becoming more important within the dance world itself: Can educators reconcile the demand from the field for excellence in technique with the simultaneous demand for choreographers who have both skill and vision? What is the relationship between intensive technical training and the development of choreographic ability? Most professionally trained dancers learn to think technically, narrowing their concerns to rehearsing, injuries, diet, physical mastery, and survival issues: how to get work, the critical response to current and future work, and who is doing what. Would this be different with a stronger background in the humanities? With a broader education, might we not become more resonant artists with a stronger sense of our connection to the society in which we work? Today's dance might then be less concerned with itself, with technique and dancing, and deal more with new ways of viewing the times.

I first encountered the distinction between education and training when I began doctoral studies in 1986. It was new to me and seemed to imply that by thinking in terms of training, the term we use to describe a concentration on technique and production, we in dance deny our students balance. Already, in my professional life, I had been aware of a lack of verbal confidence and my narrow range of abilities. I was also conscious of the passive acceptance among dancers of professional situations that are sometimes inhumane and the lack of power many of us feel in response to press coverage and the political dance establishment, or in simply being able to speak intelligently about work we are interested in doing. With many dancers, there is a notable lack of relationship with the world outside the dance studio. In fact, in my experience, many dancers willingly exchange a lack of general power within society for the very personal sense of power that comes from having strong physical skills.

This is a trade-off with serious implications. The precursors of modern dance, the two women who pioneered the field, were not technicians and did not grow up in dance studios. Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis were largely self-taught (Page, 1984, p. vii). Both trained sporadically in assorted styles ranging from Delsartian interpretations to ballroom dance, acrobatic tricks, and a brief introduction to ballet (Ruyter, 1979). Since their time, many of the artists considered leaders in



modern dance, the innovators, the more creative minds, also have not been people who trained intensively in technique. Doris Humphrey did start dancing at the age of eight (Humphrey, 1966, p. 17), but Martha Graham waited, because of parental opposition, until she was 22 to begin her studies (McDonagh, 1973, p. 52). Paul Taylor got “a flash, or whatever it is . . . telling me that I’m to become a dancer— not any old dancer, but one of the best” (Taylor, 1987, p. 26), when he was a sophomore in college with no previous dance experience. Merce Cunningham has had a lifelong interest in theatre and began intermittent dance study at the age of eight, but he came to the study of modern dance during his college years (Cunningham, 1985, p. 33). Erick Hawkins began studying dance after college graduation (McDonagh, 1976, p. 297), and Jose Limon, who thought he would be a painter, came to his first dance classes at the age of 20 (Gadan & Maillard, 1959, p. 214). Alwin Nikolais initiated his training at the Bennington College School of Dance as a young man (Gadan & Maillard, p. 242), and Alvin Ailey started studying with Lester Horton while in his teens (Mazo, 1984, p. 23). Yvonne Rainer says she began studying dance in earnest in 1959, when she was 25 (Rainer, 1974, p. 5).

### How Do People Learn To Dance?

These experiences raise a number of issues on the broad question of how people learn to dance. Is there a relationship between technical training and creativity and leadership? As we train bodies to be disciplined and obedient instruments, skilled at following directions, accustomed to taking correction, working silently to become a vehicle for another person’s ideas, are we also training minds in the same way? Are serious, long-term dance students put at a disadvantage in today’s society, sacrificing language and social skills for movement and technical training?

Speaking as one who spent much of her youth in the dance studio, I find that the very questions and their implications are uncomfortable. Discipline and obedience are high on the list of values we instil in dance students, and they are, on the whole, not the makings of creative leadership and innovation. What would Yvonne Rainer’s work have been like had she studied dance for ten years before arriving in New York? As it was, she was 25 before she began serious work. Understandably, she had no tradition to uphold, and though she was an earnest student, the realisation that she would never fit the mold of “dancer” in this society gave her an ambivalence that developed into a radical response, an adversarial posture in regard to the dance establishment (Chin, 1975). “The choices in my work are predicated on my own peculiar resources . . . and also on an ongoing argument with, love of, and contempt for dancing” (Rainer, p. 71), she said, and in this context, the extraordinary directions she pursued make clear sense.

I suspected that I would never be “good enough” to dance in an official company. Although I was becoming more proficient in conventional technical matters, the chunky construction of my body and my lack of natural fitness did not fit the popular image of the female dancer. (Chin, p. 51) So she made work that defied that image.



More important, she was not so identified with dance that she could not defy it. Because she had a broad background to bring to it, her work was not about trying to fit in.

A point of view, necessary to the development of one's own voice as an artist, needs cultivation and stimulation, exposure to ideas, and faith in one's own ability to know the truth. Richard Kraus and Sarah Chapman (1981) state that most dance educators today believe their position in education is strengthened by a growing recognition of the need for educational experiences that will provide a sense of personal involvement, helping students become aware of their uniqueness and capable of making meaningful judgements within all areas of life. Perhaps these kinds of experiences occur in programs that include dance in a general curriculum, but are they reflected in the way professionally oriented dance students are being taught? In fact, the restricted focus of a professionally-oriented dance program cuts out the social and philosophical grounding needed to understand the world and form a response to it and, without doubt, affects both art and lives in the long run.

Excellence in any field requires some narrowing of focus. As a dancer, I have valued my own technical ability and worked hard to increase it, enjoying the power it gives me, the pride in myself, and the range of performing opportunities it has opened to me. The issue here is how to balance the concentration required for this kind of achievement with the breadth and scope necessary for an active participation in the culture around us. Our problem—and the problem of the university programs involved with meeting the demands of the dance profession—is that the technical requirements of a professional career are so consuming that time taken out for other areas of study necessarily inhibits energy, concentration, and momentum in a very competitive field. However, university programs are uniquely placed to offer dance within a context meaningful to both the person and the professional in each student and could, with thought to curriculum, begin to exert profound influence over the teaching of dance.

### Teaching About Choices

If long-term, rigorous technical training is the only way to produce versatile and skilled dancers, should we not also from the beginning teach dance students to develop their minds and emotional beings along with their bodies? Beginning training after the age of ten, teaching nonjudgmentally while providing information on safety and style, and allowing time for students to work out problems with combinations individually and together during class are all ways in which we might begin. Allowing discussion of why things are done the way they are to be a regular part of learning technique is another. Providing a context for what is being taught will give students a clearer picture of a world in which they can make choices, as will linking a particular technique to a belief system. Encouraging the development of a point of view can only help to balance the discipline built in to longterm technical training.

We must be sure that dancers can separate the person from the function and that we teach them to strengthen both aspects. We do want to give students the



skills required for moving with power and articulation. That sense of control is, I think, what draws many young women to the field, giving them a realm where they feel a certain empowerment. But we do not want them to stop there. While teaching physical skills, we must watch that we do not also teach dependency, creating followers and giving freedom only within the restrictions of the studio or the confines of a role.

The unanswered question is: how much do we require dance to stay as it is? By broadening the education of dancers we will be transforming the field in ways that cannot be predicted. Certainly dancers will become less pliant, more questioning of how they are used, and more conscious of their own power, as well as more aware of the context and history of their art. Perhaps the form will evolve to fit the dancers rather than the reverse process, to which we are so accustomed. Today, both dancers and choreographers find themselves swept up in the culture-wide worship of success, spectacle, and mastery. Western dance has traditionally held these qualities to be important and has tailored its training programs to suit its values. For a time, it seemed that with the work of Margaret H'Doubler and Anna Sokolow and the early work of Martha Graham and others, individualism and democratic thought would have an influence on the art. The old values have withstood the intrusion, however, and continue to exert a profound influence on standards within the field, on methods of training, and on priorities in dancers' lives. Serving dance students within the university system remains a challenging issue. How best can we join the demands of the field with the educational grounding necessary for the creation of an authoritative art that can help us see ourselves, make us aware of what we take for granted, and lead us to provocative questions about the way we live? What we all want is the best possible situation for dance and dancers. In order to achieve this, we must continue to examine what we are doing, reflecting not only on how to be excellent dancers, but on how to be active and responsive members of our culture as well.

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