

Building Character through Empathy Centered Dance Education

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Abstract—This paper argues that dance education courses in higher education can be structured to enhance students’ sense of empathy thereby building character through taking select course experiences and activities. It will offer reflections on teaching methods and approaches utilized in select dance education courses that I teach at The Ohio State University that promote empathy. I strongly believe that an effective teacher is keenly aware of its transformative power.

Keywords—*empathy; empathy training; multiple intelligences; multicultural education; cultural relevant teaching*

I. INTRODUCTION

A recent research projection empathy and the arts draws attention to the efficacy of empathy training. In 2017 the Minneapolis Institute of Art, in Minneapolis, MN, USA, received a \$750,000 Andrew Mellow Foundation Grant to teach empathy through the visual arts. The project’s core question is: Can you teach people empathy through the visual arts? [1]. This venture is groundbreaking because it establishes the first center for empathy and art in the United States [2]. “It will bring artists, historians, researchers, and philosophers together to learn how art museums can promote empathy and understanding” [3]. It is a generally held belief that the arts and humanities supports and encourages compassion and humanistic values. A basic definition of empathy is as follows: The ability to understand and share feelings of others. A more detailed definition from the Merriam Webster Dictionary in the United States asserts that empathy is the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experiences of another.

Recent trends in arts education that nurture students through empathy training are gaining popularity. There is educational literature that interrogates the implications of this approach in arts classrooms for young people in elementary, middle and high school in the United States. Yet there is a dearth of literature that cites the importance of empathy training for arts education students in colleges and universities. In terms of teacher education in dance, I believe that an essential character attribute for pre-service dance teachers is empathy. A September 9, 2016 Dance Magazine article entitled “Are Dancers More Empathetic?” provided evidence to the affirmative. Yet how does this transfer to those who will be

teaching dance to young people in communities that are culturally, socio-economically, and ethnically diverse?

Concepts such as respect, cooperative learning, community building, caring, imagination, creative problem solving and emotional intelligence underscore the importance of empathy training [4]. In this paper I will reflect on teaching methods and approaches from select dance education courses that I teach in the Department of Dance at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, that promote empathy. I strongly believe that an effective teacher is keenly aware of its transformative power. Throughout the paper links and references will be made to current trends in dance education such as Multiple Intelligences, Multicultural Education, and De-centering the Eurocentric K-12 and College Dance Curriculum. This paper argues that dance education courses in higher education can be structured to enhance students’ sense of empathy thereby building character through select course experiences and activities.

Writing this paper at this time in my teaching career is significant and appropriate. As coordinator of Dance Education, I have spent 32 years (three decades) guiding the dance education curriculum at The Ohio State University (O.S.U.) Department of Dance. I joined the dance department in 1986 as the director of the newly created Ohio K-12 dance teacher licensure program, one of the first of its kind in the United States in the 1980s. The program was discontinued in 2010 but the dance department continues to support and offer dance education courses that ultimately lead to dance teacher licensure (pre-school to high school grades) for our undergraduate students interested in teaching in public education.

When I began my teaching and administrative responsibilities in higher education it became clear to me that my task of guiding pre-service teachers would be all encompassing and comprehensive. Our B.F.A. (Bachelor of Fine Arts) dance licensure program requirements included the following courses: contemporary and ballet dance technique, production and lighting, dance history, dance notation/Labano-taion, kinesiology, dance repertory, choreography and music skills. In addition, there were required dance pedagogy courses for dance in grades K-12, and fieldwork (practice teaching in the schools through student teaching.) The third layer was comprised of education courses

outside the dance department such as Child and Adolescent Psychology, Philosophy of Education and Teaching Exceptional Children. Most of our students are familiar with teaching in private dance studios in the community with homogenous populations yet teaching in a K-12 public school setting is an extremely new experience. They approach dance education course work with limited access to the real world of teaching in public school settings. To that end I began to brainstorm experiential teaching models to allow students to encounter the everyday joys and challenges of teaching young people in diverse settings.

When I arrived at Ohio State University, the standard dance education courses did not include practice teaching fieldwork. All the coursework was grounded in theory rather than theory and practice. This presented a major challenge. How do you prepare pre-service teachers to be effective in the dance classroom and studio when they are charged with teaching students from diverse economic, social, ethnic, cultural backgrounds? I began to restructure courses to meet the needs of our students in terms of being equipped to understand the classroom culture outside of their own worldview. What follows are examples of empathy centered teaching approaches utilized in select dance education courses.

II. PEDAGOGY COURSES

As I began building “new” courses, empathy training was not in the forefront of my agenda. But based on my own early experience, I achieved the most success when I stepped out of my comfort zone and considered an emic perspective often used in the field of anthropology. It considers looking at a culture using an “insider’s” view. The key factor is an immersion in the setting you plan to teach. This approach begins to build the seeds of an empathetic perspective. To that end, fieldwork is a primary approach. My dance pedagogy courses entitled “Dance for Children,” “Methods of Teaching,” (K-12 and Higher Education), “Directed Teaching,” (K-12 and Higher Ed),” and “Student Teaching” are grounded in observation, participant observation and pedagogy fieldwork. One of the primary features of the pedagogy course work is extensive engagement with team and individual practice teaching executed in appropriate diverse public/private schools and college settings that have existing dance programs and some that do not. In addition, students are required to read and discuss pedagogical literature aimed at demystifying the world of young people and young adults. These sources suggest lesson plan ideas created for diverse student populations at different stages of their cognitive, affective, physical and psychological development. Core texts used are Mary Joyce’s *First Steps in Teaching Creative Dance to Children* [5] and Ann Green Gilberts’ *Teaching Creative Dance to All Ages* [6], Cheryl Willis’ *Dance Education Tips from the Trenches* [7], Jan Erkert’s *Harnessing the Wind: The Art of Teaching Modern Dance* [8].

The key concepts that are reinforced through the pedagogical fieldwork are caring, imagination and respect. Students gain a newfound perspective on understanding and cultivating compassion for the needs and desires of young people in educational settings. In addition, they discover innovative methods of teaching by utilizing everyday games,

improvisation, popular and international music, creative movement scenarios and personal narratives.

III. LAYING THE FOUNDATION

All dance majors in our dance department are required to take a foundational course entitled “Introduction to Dance in Educational and Community Settings.” This 15-week semester survey course is designed to help students explore and clarify the role of dance in the community and in public education and also reflect on their aptitude as arts/educators. We visit arts centers, observe dance classes in the Columbus City Schools, private dance studios, and in the O.S.U. university dance program. Through field observations, media presentations, guest speakers, and readings, the students gain insight into the “real world” of teaching, and young people. The seminar sessions provide a forum for dialogue that allows for asking questions and clarifying aspects of teaching and learning. The course sets the groundwork for empathetic sensibilities and covers the state of K-12 education in the U.S.A, arts education, arts and dance education in the community, dance in public education and best practices in teaching dance in Higher education. The film “Waiting for Superman”[9] is used as a starting point to help students understand the present day challenges of teaching young people who come from underserved communities and how charter/community schools are being considered as significant to educational reform in American education. Our fieldwork visits provide experiences in actual educational and community settings, and interaction with young people, dance specialists and arts administrators in those settings. Group discussions and teaching projects provide experience in concepts such as cooperative learning, community building and collective creative problem solving.

Throughout the semester the course makes reference to the three educational trends mentioned in the introduction. The first that supports empathy is recognizing the significance of Multiple Intelligence (M.I.) Theory. This theoretical framework supports recognizing seven diverse learning styles [10]. Students read and discuss the article “Seven Kinds of Smart” written by Thomas Armstrong. It deconstructs M.I. and encourages us to consider that students learn through different lenses of intelligence and the importance of approaching class content through a variety of angles because no student learns and decodes information the same way. Course activities that support Multiple Intelligences include cooperative learning discussion groups where students make note of their own individual intelligences that they reference when taking dance classes. Results reveal that some students in my course are auditory and visual learners, while others are more musical and bodily-kinesthetic learners or other combinations. These revelations will help them empathize with students when creating dance classes that meet the needs of all students.

The second educational trend is Multicultural Education, an educational reform movement championed in the 1980s by scholar/educator James Banks [11]. Multicultural education takes into consideration, ethnicity, language, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, gender and exceptionality. The following quote speaks to the importance of this reform movement:

Powerful multicultural schools help students from diverse racial, cultural, ethnic, and language groups to experience academic success [12].

In terms of the dance classroom, students read about the significance of cross-cultural sensitivity through reading “Factors that Affect Dance Programs” by Cheryl Willis. It chronicles the study of two elementary schools in Vancouver, Washington and how approaches to teaching creative dance are impacted by religion, ethnicity, cultural backgrounds, gender and socio-economic status [13].

Course activities that support multicultural education are field visits to select schools whose student populations are predominately African American or Latino and visits to cultural art centers in those neighborhoods. The students in my classes are predominantly white and middle class. For many of them it is the first time they have interacted with people outside their culture. My hope is that stereotypes they might hold about those outside of their ethnic and racial group are readjusted through intergroup experiences during the field site visits and socio-cultural and historical information gleaned during these field visits. Students remark that they are pleased to be enlightened by interactive experiences and the dance specialists and cultural arts experts that facilitate our visits.

The third and final trend addressed that supports empathy is de-centering the Euro-centric dance curriculum in K-12 and Higher Education. Artist/Scholar Nyama McCarthy-Brown’s book *Dance Pedagogy for a Diverse World, Culturally Relevant Teaching in Theory Research and Practice*, asserts that non-European dance techniques and cultures deserve equal significance and appreciation with ballet and western contemporary dance. She urges dance educators and administrators to shift the paradigm through considering cultural diversity in the dance major curriculum and to utilize Cultural Relevant Teaching (CRT), a Dance Pedagogy approach which considers all students’ cultural backgrounds so that they see themselves and their culture represented in the entire curriculum. De-centering the Euro-centric dance curriculum means being proactive in addressing disenfranchisement, ethnocentricity and challenging hegemony when structuring the dance curriculum in K-12 and Higher Education [14].

The course activity that supports de-centering the Euro-centric college dance curriculum is articulated through best practices peer teaching workshops. Each student is assigned a 45-minute time limit to teach a dance class from their preferred dance culture. After the sessions, my students and I render feedback regarding their positive teaching attributes and personal teaching style. Students are allowed the freedom to teach a dance/movement workshop other than the European and Western dance class offerings in the Ohio State Dance Department. It is my intent that students receive the flexibility to teach a dance practice where they feel at “home.” The results are best practices workshops that include jazz dance, Hip Hop, Latin ballroom, Soul Line Dance, Country Square

dance, Traditional West African dance forms, tap dance as well as Ballet and Modern dance. It is imperative that students understand the importance of not placing one dance form above another. Equality among dance practices is important for a harmonious and equitable dance curriculum.

IV. CONCLUSION

I strongly believe that the empathy centered dance education course activities and experiences briefly described in this paper will shape the pre-service dance teacher’s character and worldview. It is my hope that through engagement with fieldwork based pedagogy courses and exposure to frameworks grounded in Multiple Intelligences, Multicultural Education and Decentering the Euro-Centric Dance Curriculum students will emerge as dance educators emboldened with emotional intelligence, a sense of social responsibility and a compassionate spirit.

“Educating The Mind Without Educating the Heart is No Education at All” (Aristotle).

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