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# The Education of Dance Educators

Catherine Kamrath

Dance History

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Sammy Davis, Jr. once said that tap is a “hand me down” art form and the same could be said for how all dance teachers pass their knowledge on from one generation to the next. The education of these dance teachers directly affects the study of dance and its future. The education at all levels - youth through professional - must be addressed as one will continuously feed into the next. Teaching is often developed through observation and the reflection of how one was taught the most effectively. However, the education of dance professors at a university level must have both universal teachings and those unique to a region or dance genre. Due to the university mission statement, faculty, and curriculum, each program will have a different emphasis and technical background. Yet, this does not provide adequate information to continue to teach young artists about dance. The reconstruction of bachelor and master’s program curriculum, a focus on pedagogy to define the role of a dance educator, and an overall system to evaluate the success of educators are important steps to providing a more valued education for all dance educators.

Although the current curriculum of bachelor and master’s programs may have a class on dance education or pedagogy, there is little focus on developing education curriculum in programs. There are currently thirty-seven states that offer a teaching certification alongside their dance degree. However, the number of these teaching certifications should either rise or more schools should offer pedagogical classes within their curriculum. Dr. Doug Risner of Wayne State University suggests that due to “a primary focus on developing and sustaining the demands of rigorous BFA programs” the departments’ resources have been redirected “at the expense of dance education programming, teacher preparation programs, and faculty hires in dance education.”<sup>i</sup> He also found the faculty hired for dance education was often in part-time positions with their

university, further showing that programs without a certification do not have a desire to have an education focus. Risner also believes that the current curriculum does not successfully articulate “the significance of teaching, pedagogy, community awareness and engagement, technology, and research”<sup>ii</sup> that is found within dance education, leading to the narrowing of this field and a lack of understanding by current students. By incorporating more classes within the field of dance education for all bachelor dance students regardless of their emphasis or future employment, there will be an impact on the next generation of educators in both a university and K-12 school setting. Instead of only providing a required class for completion of a degree, programs should offer multiple pedagogical classes with a focus in K-12, studio, or higher education teaching. The dance artist and the dance educator are often viewed as two separate people, but the artist and educator are deeply connected and often influence each other. The current state of bachelor’s programs focus on the training of dancers as artists and choreographers, but underrate the importance of developing effective teaching skills.

Risner suggests a threefold process in which to reestablish viability and relevance of dance education in undergraduate curriculum. Within this process, he includes “the articulation of the breadth of dance education and pedagogy for current programs, the expansion of dance education to include private studio and community settings, and the development of new programs in dance education and related professions degree programs.”<sup>iii</sup> The inclusion of private studio and community dance education settings is important to the appeal of dance education courses. Many undergraduate students teach at private studios or in community dance programs as a side to their dance studies or upon completion of their degree while pursuing a professional career in dance. To expand the

venues in which teaching can be applied to in a dance education course will allow students to connect more to subject and have more knowledge when entering into a teaching setting. Currently, “private sector dance educators are self-taught and must build business strategies and teaching values without the benefit of sound comprehensive degree preparation”<sup>iv</sup> causing them to often struggle at the beginning of their teaching experiences. By better preparing more private sector dance educators, they will be more likely to have a successful and competitive dance studio. Also, if resources in the dance department are unavailable to maintain an increased number of courses, a partnership with the education department could also be beneficial to adding to dance education.

The disconnection between the dance education courses currently offered and the range of dance educator employment venues can also be seen in graduate studies in the MA or MFA level. Through her research, Dr. Karen Bond, of the dance department at Temple University, has found a deficiency in graduate dance education in “its historical and continuing neglect of childhood dance practice and theory, in spite, of childhood’s value as a potent source of dance knowledge, aesthetic understanding, and clues to the future.”<sup>v</sup> MA and MFA graduates are more likely to teach at a college or university setting in a part-time or full-time position, with the MFA being the terminal degree for studio faculty pursuing positions in higher education. The MFA “seeks to prepare highly proficient teachers”<sup>vi</sup> and their teaching preparation is involved in their graduate research coursework and career development through technique, theory, and choreographic curriculum. Clarifying and expanding the role of teaching and pedagogy in the master’s level coursework will further broaden the teaching opportunities available after receiving this degree.

Even with the MFA being the terminal degree for those pursuing positions in higher education, many MFA programs have a focus on performance and choreography, with a smaller number focusing on dance education. The rarity of this degree limits the engagement and development of those students focused solely on dance education and not on choreography or performance. Some choreography and performance focused schools offer the opportunity for either teaching assistantships or the opportunity to teach undergraduate courses. However, this is not guaranteed for all MFA students, hindering their education and experience in teaching. When studying the graduate school system in the United States, Bond discovered that as a whole “graduate dance education supports a complexity of purpose and content, from the preservation of traditions to extending the frontiers of creative innovation, to outstanding teacher preparation, to cutting-edge scholarship.”<sup>vii</sup> This statement provides an encouraging look at the potential for even greater growth of dance education in a master’s level and at the level of education of current professors.

However, even with significant training in becoming a dance educator within a graduate program, the application of this knowledge and other developed skills to professional employment may not be as smooth as expected. During her research in 2001, Sarah Hilsendager, of the dance department at Temple University, faults the generalization of “assuming that students will ‘figure out’ how to apply their content knowledge within all teaching environments” and that “how the content is taught receives far too little focused, developmental attention in dance teacher preparation methodology courses and overall curricular frameworks.”<sup>viii</sup> There was insufficient preparation of educators to provide knowledge as they were not offered enough experience in application to a real-life setting.

A dance education often provides skills for planning, instruction, classroom management, communication, reflection, and assessment, but often does not emphasize the importance of maintaining personal energy. This does not just include physical energy, but also “spiritual, creative, and emotional energy” and “effective teacher preparation necessarily includes means of building stamina regarding each of these kinds of energy.”<sup>ix</sup> Receiving an education does not equate to being fully prepared to teach or being a successful teacher. Especially with the current dance culture influencing youths, dance educators must learn how to effectively use their knowledge to engage their students and provide them with tools for the future. According to Thomas Hagood of the dance department at Florida International University in Miami, the work of dance educators is not “counteract[ing] the corroding forces of a relativistic and narcissistic popular culture.”<sup>x</sup> It is also found to be reactive as it “shifts with the tides of local pressures for product; and is shaped by the limited, parochial, and dimensionless understandings many in education and culture have regarding the merit and worth of educating in and through dance.”<sup>xi</sup> In developing more appropriate traits to combat the social issues within the youth population, graduate dance students must receive proper training through experience, feedback, and the understanding of what their role is as a dance educator.

Developing a universal definition of a dance educator is not possible, nor is it warranted, due to the wide range of work done by dance educators. However, dance educators carry with them certain traits and knowledge that can be applied to many situations; and often, educators have the same end goal for their students. Carey Andrzejewski, a member of the College of Education at Auburn University, states that quality traits of a dance educator are the ability to give “aim, direction, and focus to

educational decision making and practice” including “attitudes, values, beliefs, priorities, preferences, positions, and dispositions.”<sup>xii</sup> The subject matter knowledge of an educator must encompass knowing the body and movement vocabulary in performance, the creative process through choreographic and rehearsal processes, and the culture and social effect of dance through historical and research studies. Andrzejewski emphasizes the necessity for dance teachers to “have established identities as dance artists and teachers of dance.”<sup>xiii</sup> Within this identity as an artist and an educator, one must also refer to tradition, culture, and the new influences of dance including technology. An identity must be a foundation for further growth as a dance educator. If one stays static through change or oblivious to history, the education they provide will be misguided. Students must be educated in dance history, but dance history should not only “continue to honor the work of our most public and well-known fore bearers,” but educators should also “strive toward the inclusion of those less well known, including their contributions and legacies within the overall recording of dance history.”<sup>xiv</sup> This inclusivity allows students to be more aware of all historical influences on their dancing and also deepens a connection to choreographic and performance related awareness.

The influence of dance history is one example of knowledge a dance educator should obtain prior to entering the profession. However, not all traditions should continue to carry on as Hagood’s opinion suggests the changing of “the demonstration and imitation-based approach to teaching dance that many of us experienced in our own learning and continue to perpetuate.”<sup>xv</sup> Although this imitation provides many links to a student’s understanding of technique and choreography, it is still important to allow students to “evolve in his or her own intellectual, kinesthetic, and artistic voice as an investment toward success in life



and living”<sup>xvi</sup> and balance structure with creativity in a classroom. When building a curriculum to find this balance, courses must provide the opportunity to practice and reflect on dance through discussion and analytic observations in order to develop a student’s ability to speak and write about dance in communication with others. By developing this skill, a student will also find their own personal aesthetic, opinions, and points of view through experience and have the ability to explain these aesthetics to their peers and faculty. The goal of an educator is for the student to have gained more knowledge applicable to their dancing in technique, performance, choreography, or other subject matter. This goal is, for the most part, an opinion-based goal that should have a reflective systematical evaluation.

Currently, there is not a standardized test for dance educators to evaluate their success. Instead, evaluation is based on direct feedback from the students. Student evaluations have the potential to be skewed due to a personal dance aesthetic, bias, or differing work ethic. Therefore, another form of evaluation should partner alongside the student evaluations. The expansion of dance education training is difficult and the aim of dance education has become narrowly focused on completing a job. Risner suggests “dance educators and administrators have dutifully done what we were told to do and considered that to be enough” and the void of national leadership has led to a narrowly focused meeting of directives and the forfeit of “the larger aims of dance education and the wider mission and role of dance education in the higher education dance field.”<sup>xvii</sup> With the creation of the National Dance Education Organization in 1998, the ability to advance the education of dancers in private studios, K-12, community programs, higher education, and professional programs was founded. NDEO is “more broad in its approach to dance

education and how it reflects and services its membership”<sup>xviii</sup> due to its influence by multiple teaching sectors. Yet, the membership of NDEO had been at little growth for years, but has recently begun to grow again. Building membership is important to discussion about new curriculum and how to advance dance education in the country. This affects the progress of dance education in both the short and long term as expansion is only possible with the support of a recognized force. As a dance education community promotes change, Risner argues that they must “enter the most difficult part of agenda setting and advocacy: looking at the situational contexts before us and then making informed, creative, and targeted planning agendas for actions which will be interwoven and strong for at least the next twenty years.”<sup>xix</sup> Education must be built in the present through lessons of the past and expectations for the future. Without doing so, the profession of dance education will be at a standstill and dance students will not have the correct resources to remain influential. Hilsendager suggests that “dance educators must assume greater responsibility to first educate and then employ artist-educators who are articulate not only in non-verbal expression, but who also are able to negotiate the language and legacy of education, business, and social change.”<sup>xx</sup> The change in dance education must start with the educators themselves.

If the future of dance education lies in the hands of the changing of undergraduate and graduate curriculum alongside the dedication and leadership of an organization, then “dance educators must feel compelled and know how to advocate for dance as an art form in society, dance as a discipline in schools, and dance education as a profession.”<sup>xxi</sup> Without this internal calling for change, the system cannot be fixed or improved. Educators must demand more support and more education from the schools they are associated with for

the future of their students. The student voice holds little impact on changes in curriculum so change cannot be driven simply from the students. Undergraduate programs need to let students have more access to courses about all kinds of dance education so they are not limited to only one class on one venue for education, but influenced by all possible teaching experiences. Graduate programs must allow their students more hands-on experience in teaching rather than just providing knowledge through classwork. As Carroll warned, it is important to evaluate “if future teachers of art are being prepared in a way that leads them to experience and understand at a deep level what teaching for visual spatial abilities, reflection, and experimentation or other claims must entail”<sup>xxii</sup> then solutions will be identified. If organizations are focused on this challenge, dance education can continue to grow with the cultural and societal changes while remaining true to historical techniques and thereby better prepare the next generation of dance educators.

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<sup>i</sup> Risner, Doug. “Dance Education Matters: Rebuilding Postsecondary Dance Education for Twenty-First Century Relevance and Resonance.” *Journal of Dance Education*, 10.4 (2010): 97. Accessed September 30, 2012. doi: 10.1080/15290824.2010.529761

<sup>ii</sup> Risner, “Dance Education Matters,” 98.

<sup>iii</sup> Risner, “Dance Education Matters,” 98.

<sup>iv</sup> Risner, “Dance Education Matters,” 100.

<sup>v</sup> Bond, Karen E. “Graduate Dance Education in the United States: 1985-2010.” *Journal of Dance Education*, 10.4 (2010): 131. Accessed September 30, 2012. doi: 10.1080/15290824.2010.529763

<sup>vi</sup> Risner, “Dance Education Matters,” 106.

<sup>vii</sup> Bond, “Graduate Dance Education,” 128.

<sup>viii</sup> Hilsendager, Sarah. “The Fabric of Change: Issues in Designing Dance Teacher Preparation.” *Journal of Dance Education*, 1.1 (2001): 17. Accessed September 30, 2012 doi: 10.1080/15290824.2001.10387168

<sup>ix</sup> Andrzejewski, Carey E. “Toward a Model of Holistic Dance Teacher Education.” *Journal of Dance Education*, 9.1 (2009): 20. Accessed September 30, 2012 doi: 10.1080/15290824.2009.10387380

<sup>x</sup> Hagood, Thomas K. “Values and Voice in Dance Education: The Merit of Fostering Tradition, Experiment, Diversity, and Change in Our Pedagogy.” *Arts Education Policy Review*, 108.2 (2006): 36. Accessed September 30, 2012. doi: 10.3200/AEPR.108.2.33-39

<sup>xi</sup> Hagood, “Values and Voice,” 36.

<sup>xii</sup> Andrzejewski, “Holistic Dance Teacher Education,” 17.

<sup>xiii</sup> Andrzejewski, “Holistic Dance Teacher Education,” 19.

<sup>xiv</sup> Hilsendager, “The Fabric of Change,” 16.

<sup>xv</sup> Hagood, “Values and Voice,” 36.

<sup>xvi</sup> Hagood, “Values and Voice,” 35.

<sup>xvii</sup> Risner, “Dance Education Matters,” 107.

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- <sup>xviii</sup> Risner, Doug. "Equity in Dance Education: NDEO Membership Matters." *Journal of Dance Education*, 7.3 (2007): 70. Accessed September 30, 2012. doi: 10.1080/15290824.2007.10387340
- <sup>xix</sup> Hilsendager, "The Fabric of Change," 15.
- <sup>xx</sup> Hilsendager, "The Fabric of Change," 16.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Andrzejewski, "Holistic Dance Teacher Education," 19.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Carroll, Karen L. "What If They Believed Us? How Well Prepared Are Art Educators to Deliver on the Promises of Art Education?" *Arts Education Policy Review*, 112.1 (2011): 10. Accessed September 30, 2012. doi: 10.1080/10632913.2011.518122

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