

Summer Dance Connections: A Community-Based Education Program.

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Article:

There has been a growing trend within higher education to reach out from the halls of academe into the communities in which people live. From service-learning programs to community action initiatives, many universities are seeking new ways to provide educational programs to under-privileged citizens. In the process, university students are gaining a more global understanding and appreciation of the cultural and socio-economic differences between various groups of people.

This bodes well for dance educators seeking to move dance beyond studios and schools and into communities. With the rising cost of dance classes (the average fee is \$7-10 per class) and the inaccessibility of many traditional dance styles and training techniques, many people find themselves isolated from artistic and creative forms of dance and movement education. Community-oriented programs can be an effective way to bring dance to such people.

Community Dance

Though the concept of dance in the community is hardly new, the phrase "community dance" gained particular meaning from programs that arose in the United Kingdom and Australia during the 1970s. Much of this activity has become known as the "community dance movement." Many of these initial community dance efforts were associated with government-funded youth projects and other community advocacy services (Butterworth, 1989; Thomson, 1989; Tolley, 1989).

This movement actually involves many different styles of dance and pedagogy. However, certain general characteristics can be ascribed to these various approaches to community dance education. For example, inclusiveness, rather than selective professional training, is one general theme. Rather than professing high-arts standards, many community dance advocates believe in "offering dance to everyone in a given community, on the premise that dance is the birthright and the potential of all human beings" (Thomson, 1989, p. 89). Accessibility, participation, and relevance to people in the community are highly valued. According to Tolley (1989), "the animateur [i.e., community dance facilitator] movement puts dance workers into the community at a grass roots level, where they are able to respond to the real needs of the communities in which they work" (p. 107).

This idea that dance can serve community needs is paramount within the movement. For this reason, community dance projects are often aimed at particularly needy groups, such as the elderly, inner-city and "at-risk" children, and individuals with mental or physical disabilities. Consequently, fostering a sense of participation, belonging, and ownership of the artistic process is a major goal of any such project. Some projects also help participants express their personal feelings about various social issues (Butterworth, 1989; Donald, 1997; Fensham, 1997; Thomson, 1989). As Brinson suggests,

[The] innovative nature [of community dance education] extends not only to choreographic themes and Creative work but also to organisation and socio-cultural impact; to its representative and democratic organisation, especially in developing a youth 'voice'; to its educational function; to its challenge to many accepted practices

in choreography and in the use of bodies; in its ability to offer refreshment and new motivation to 'professionals'; and in its missionary influence in the cause of dance and mime. (cited in Butterworth, 1989, pp. 22-23)

This is not to say that community dance programs eschew aesthetic considerations. Though community performance has more to do "with the needs of each individual group and the quality of the dance experience, and less to do with the intention of a choreographer and the perception of an audience[ldots]when the two become fully integrated the effect[ldots][can be] remarkable" (Butterworth, 1989, p. 27). This is why many community dance programs have embraced the notion of involvement and decision-making by the community members themselves (Cameron, 1997; Lanzi, 1997).

In the United States, the community dance movement has developed somewhat differently. Projects are often initiated by individual dancers and educators rather than by government funded organizations. This may be partially explained by the relative dearth of grants given to artistic endeavors, but it also indicates that artists have felt a particularly strong need to reach out to their communities. The rise of AIDS and other public health concerns, for example, has led a number of artists to work with hospital patients (Dobbs Ariail, 1996; Hillman & Gaffney, 1996; McLeod, 1996; Perlstein, 1996; Pimsler, 1996;). Other community dance activities in this country have included work with parks and recreation centers, religious organizations, public housing authorities, juvenile probation programs, alternative schools, and correctional facilities (Hillman & Gaffney, 1996).

Summer Dance Connections

The "Summer Dance Connections" program at the University of North Carolina--Greensboro connects these community dance activities with service learning, which has become increasingly popular in higher education. The purpose of most service-learning programs goes beyond merely supplying volunteers for service work, but rather aims to make community collaborations a part of educational process for university students (Zlotkowski, 1998). Summer Dance Connections resembles many service-learning programs because it attempts to use community work as a way of helping university students critically and reflectively think about significant social issues. Although students are paid for their efforts with the program, Summer Dance Connections is in the same spirit as traditional service-learning programs: it attempts address community needs while educating future dance educators and activists.

Summer Dance Connections is designed to give a targeted group of "at-risk" youths, ages nine to thirteen, the opportunity to participate in an intense summer dance workshop and to become comfortable in a university environment. The program inculcates both dance technique and the creative possibilities of choreography. Choreographic experiences focus on issues and experiences in the lives of the students, who help to create their own culminating dances. Additionally, the program enhances the teaching skills of the beginning dance educators who serve as teacher-mentors to the young students.

The initial project involved five UNC--Greensboro dance majors and 23 young people from city recreation centers and the Salvation Army Boys and Girls Clubs. It was supported by a grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro. The university students taught a daily class in dance technique and improvisation to the entire group of young people on a rotating basis. Following this class and a snack break, each university student worked with four or five of the young people to create a piece of choreography based on their lives and interests. The resulting five pieces of choreography were eventually performed twice in the university theater. The first performance was for an audience of young people from the various recreation centers in the city. The second performance played to the families and friends of the participants, and other guests from the community.

Both university faculty and community representatives (e.g., directors from the City Arts program and Boys and Girls Club) were involved in the coordination of the program. Through this pilot program and its two-day teacher-mentor training sessions, the coordinators attempted to effectively meet the needs of all the

constituencies involved and explore the meaning and value of such a collaborative effort. Parents are often suspicious of educators who assume to know what is best for their children, so the coordinators tried to foster as much family participation in the program as possible.

On the whole, the program was successful in meeting its goals of education and community service. One indication of this success is the fact that the two performances were packed with families, friends, and children from the community. Furthermore, initial findings from an accompanying study point to an increased interest in dance among the young people as well as an increased respect for their own potential to accomplish goals through hard work and cooperation with others (see Green [1998] for a discussion of specific findings from this qualitative research project). Many of the young people expressed their enthusiasm for the project and a desire to return the next year. For example, the local paper cited one young student saying, "I really enjoyed [the program]. It was my first time [dancing], and I learned a lot of things I never learned before" (Perel, 1997, p. D1).

The efforts of the university students had tangible results as well: these teacher-mentors served as much needed allies and role models who inspired the young people, set challenges for them to meet, identified their strengths, and supported them. One student said, "[The teachers] really helped me out with the things that were hard for me."

Parents continually pointed out the great need for community programs in dance and asked for more programming of this kind, particularly after witnessing positive changes in their children. The university students also stressed the need for this type of program. In their journals, they often noted the challenge of participating in the project, but also described the many rewards and learning experiences they gained. There was an air of sadness about them at the closing reception. Furthermore, they grew to respect the particular problems and daily obstacles that the young people faced, and developed an understanding of cultures different from their own.

However, there were also a number of concerns and struggles within the program. Difficult power relationships developed between certain organizers and students. One student, for example, had to be reminded to take her medication for attention-deficit disorder. Both the university mentors and program directors began to realize that working in the community was a complicated endeavor, and that the students could not always be empowered to do as they pleased. Flexibility was a major concern, though, given the difficult lives of the young people. They did not always show up for class or attend to instructions, but such lapses were understandable: there were more pressing survival issues confronting them in their lives. Teaching and choreographic approaches had to be adjusted with this fact in mind. Program coordinators also faced practical concerns such as transportation, scheduling, and the complexity of cooperating with other service agencies involved in the lives of the young students. The coordinators would like to see more constructive collaboration in the future in order to bypass some of this frustration. They are also continuing to analyze their own agenda (Green, 1998). These obstacles may provide one explanation for the dearth of such programs in communities across the country. However, the participants consistently expressed a desire to work on these problems. Learning and appreciation of dance were their paramount concerns.

For these reasons, community-based dance programs may be a valuable model of both multicultural education and service-learning. Dance has not often been thought of as a way of uniting members of the community and university populations. Yet community programs may be more necessary than ever for college students. With new national initiatives to understand race, class, and gender, it may be time for dance majors to work with and learn about people from different backgrounds, people who may greatly benefit from dance instruction. It may be time to look at dance education and performance from a community perspective. The Summer Dance Connections program inspired the participating university students to search for new ways of teaching dance and reaching and supporting their students. Dance became more than the perfection of technique: it became a way of communicating with the world.

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