

## **Questioning Trends in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract:**

This article revisits ideas put forward at the beginning of an academic career and discusses the ways in which time and experience within academe has shifted my perspective. Specifically, focusing on the balance of artistic thinking with the widely perceived need to justify the arts in higher education, I explore questions regarding the interaction of teaching within liberal-arts-based dance departments, the careers of those graduates as they become professionals, and possible effects on the art itself.

**Keywords:** dance | dance education | higher education | educational trends | dance professionals | dance majors

### **Article:**

This article revisits ideas put forward at the beginning of an academic career and discusses the ways in which time and experience within academe has shifted my perspective. Specifically, focusing on the balance of artistic thinking with the widely perceived need to justify the arts in higher education, I explore questions regarding the interaction of teaching within liberal-arts-based dance departments, the careers of those graduates as they become professionals, and possible effects on the art itself.

Years ago, as a doctoral student returning to school after a career as an independent artist, I published an article (Van Dyke 1992) advocating against the narrow curriculum many dancers study and pointing out what I saw as the need for an education that teaches breadth, including advocacy skills based on both cultural and self-knowledge. At the time, I argued that a typical education for dancers failed to instruct about the world in which we live, and that studio-trained dance artists were often ill-equipped to speak for themselves among nondancers. My ideas were—and are—similar to thinking that continues to be current among dance educators, voiced here by Professor Ann Dils (2008): “I see reading and writing ... as vital to our abilities to think, create and share information, and to participate in society” (97).

After many seasons on the inside of academe, although a continuing advocate for this kind of breadth, now I see the complexity of the situation. In many ways, what we choose to teach is a question of departmental mission, facilities, scheduling, and the hours available. In other ways, it has to do with who is doing the scheduling, the teaching, the character of the surrounding community, overall university support, and current “best practices” within higher education. No doubt there are more influences than I have listed; the tensions involved can be considerable.

My own department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro is a major reference as I write. We are a very active community offering BA, BFA, MA, and MFA degrees, with a website that states:

Rather than trying to make a standardized product, we recognize that students enter the Department as individuals, and will pursue diverse paths and accomplish different outcomes. We facilitate students' journeys through a number of programs with common concerns: the lived experience of dancing, creative and critical engagement with performance and choreography as expressive mediums, and the development of the individual in relationship to community.

With a full-time faculty of 12, we have about 110 undergraduate majors and 30 graduate students residing in a School of Music, Theatre, and Dance in a public, liberal-arts-based institution. As artists and scholars, the 12 of us cover a wide range of expertise, from choreography and performance to dance education, somatic studies, cultural studies, criticism, and video dance. We take a certain pride in our diverse interests and seriously try to prepare our students for rich and balanced lives.

## UNIVERSITIES AND THE ART OF DANCE

Over the past 40 years, there has been enormous growth in the number of dance programs nationwide, and although these programs differ widely in size and focus, the effect has been to swell the population of the “professional” dance world of performers, teachers, and choreographers outside higher education. A 2008 study by the National Endowment for the Arts, focusing only on those dancers and choreographers lucky enough to be employed, states that from 1990 to 2005 the population nationally rose from 21,771 to 25,651—about 15 percent. Colleges, universities, and performance-focused conservatories, although not all teaching to the same goals, graduate a large number of young people who aim to make a life in dance, whether or not they ever get a paying job with a company or show. Many go on to teach dance in higher education, the public schools, or their own studios.

As a professor and former department head, a choreographer, former freelance artist, and founding director of a statewide dance festival, over the years I have striven to keep abreast of the ongoing interaction between the education of dancers and the art of dance. This fall as I return to teaching, having turned over the headship and entered a period of phased retirement, I sometimes find the artist in me at odds with the educator. A big part of me perceives a university education based in the liberal arts as necessary to give dance artists the skills to speak for

themselves and make informed decisions about the direction of the field. Other parts, however, see more need to focus on the art itself and its complicated relationship with our culture.

Although I do not believe that a college degree centered primarily on studio work is the answer, too often I find myself thinking of today's bachelor of arts in dance as diluting the artistic thinking in our field. A BA is the most typical type of dance degree earned in the United States, and is defined as a liberal arts degree with 30 to 45 percent of the program required to be in dance (National Association of Schools of Dance 2012). Although in theory, BA degrees are given standing equal to the BFA, this is not always true in terms of budget and faculty time (Jones and Little 2011). Too often, I worry about not providing meaningful artistic standards for our BA students, as well as failing to help them understand the possibilities and the likely results of their own choices, and neglecting perspective on the artistic skills and knowledge we teach.

Personally I have wished for more time to discuss with students the cultural relationship with perception and how viewers respond to what they see, how American public policy interacts with its arts, how art communicates, how artistic ideas manifest in dance, and when dance goes beyond personal gratification for the dance artist into the realm of meaningful communication with an audience. Without doubt, I agree that, in human terms, a university education in dance is forward thinking and beneficial, leading us all to happier lives and making our practice less authoritarian and more inclusive and democratic than in the past. Making sense of the demanding and sometimes conflicting priorities we have developed raises interesting and challenging questions. My thinking here is exploratory, with the hope of stimulating dialogue on some of these issues.

## CURRENT TRENDS IN THOUGHT

From the beginning, the inclusion of dance in the academic curriculum has brought pressures to consider rationales for what we do and to develop related interests and scholarly aspects to our methodologies—no doubt a long-term benefit to our field. But with many on dance faculties limited in their experience with the arts outside the university, dance programs throughout higher education can appear encased within academic bubbles, easily buffeted by currents of thought that strongly influence how we train our students and guide their thinking. Although the recent trend toward taking students off campus, into the community to teach and perform, and helping them obtain professional internships has created a bit of a reality check, even the concerts we produce tend to draw primarily in-house audiences.

Dancers tend to measure success by satisfaction rather than income and stability (Jones and Little 2011), and subjective goals often motivate dancers to find innovative ways to support their participation in the arts. Although, in my experience, most students want to perform after graduation, the interest expressed by many to study fields outside performance might indicate planning for employment opportunities rather than a lack of aspiration. It has been shown that dance performance is rarely the only activity in a dance career, but mastery of the form continues to be the aim for many students, a goal many of us support. It seems realistic to encourage

dancers to pursue secondary skills that will keep them connected to their art, so they are able to work in areas that contribute to their professional involvement, and do not pull them out of the field. Costume design, lighting design, dance photography, videography, and arts administration are only a few possibilities (Van Dyke 2010a). My own perception is that we have not yet achieved a meaningful integration of academic thought with artistic practice, and that most often we manage to provide one at the expense of the other. I think we have work to do in striking a balance between positioning dance effectively within the academic environment and on a level with the other arts outside academia.

For example, the emphasis on multiculturalism throughout our culture makes us aware of the increasing variety of communities and points of view, including different ability groups, groups formed around sexual preferences, modernist and postmodern perspectives, various age groups, and gender-specific groups, in addition to ethnic categories. Nearly every university recruitment picture we see these days is careful to have both men and women and at least two ethnicities represented, meant to signify inclusiveness and diversity. This breakdown of groupings and points of view provides a context for how we think about much of what goes on in our culture today, separating us into differing communities even as it pulls us all together through mutual awareness and tolerance. Without thinking about it, in higher education we typically are very careful to honor all viewpoints, allowing for difference as we preserve the individual ingredients of our “mixed salad.”

A questionable aspect to this kind of categorizing is that it can lead to a kind of niche-ism or tribalization, resulting in reluctance to evaluate or discuss artistic work in terms of its merits beyond reference to culture. This, according to professor and art critic Arthur Danto (1999), has had the effect of rendering all art relative, while validating it among those for whom the object or performance constitutes an “art of their own.” He calls it community-based art to signify the shift in focus from dance as art to a model of dance as cultural phenomenon; that is, dance that is meaningful to specific communities, to aspects of those persons to whom it is addressed rather than to viewers as viewers. The value we now give to difference often seems to have superseded concerns about art. In watching student work and hearing the comments of colleagues, I wonder if we are asking our students to actually look at the dances they are making and to think critically about how to make them more interesting to watch—or if we are too quick to applaud an attempt at social commentary, community building, or cultural referencing without equal regard for artistry.

Under the influence of feminist thought, we have opened ourselves to nonhierarchical operations with an emphasis on the physical-emotive aspects of human experience, and a distrust of the visual (Sanchez-Colberg 1993). In terms of the latter, the tendency to be physically involved in the feel of choreography often encourages decision making based in the experience of the movement, and, in terms of intention, gives high value to the process of making the dance. On the other hand, the embrace of nonhierarchical operations directs us toward inclusiveness in a variety of areas like age, body types, and physical abilities, a sort of multiculturalism of its own,

altering possibilities and often changing the look of the dance itself. Community has become an important goal, as has social inclusion (Houston 2009), casting suspicion on the elitism inherent in an art form that has traditionally required many years of training for active participation.

## SHIFTING VALUES

This combines with the current interest in student-centered learning and the emergence of constructivism to bring the rigor of historically based techniques into question. We know that today's learners expect more than one-way communications in their courses, and activities that promote interaction and collaboration with their peers are becoming a fundamental part of how students learn. Now, learners are encouraged to discover and structure content for themselves, changing the role of the teacher from the source of all knowledge to facilitator, replacing lectures with discussions and group projects, making the classroom experience a collaborative one. Within our university, the idea of working in teams has taken hold. This trend is finding its way into all kinds of classes, including technique (Raman 2009) and choreography (Van Dyke 2005), giving students experience in helping each other acquire knowledge and experience. Moreover, we have developed choreographic methods ensuring that the dancers' ideas and movements are given importance in the rehearsal process (Kloppenbergh 2010). We work in a culture that seems oriented to sociability.

Writer Susan Cain's (2011) recent discussion of our culture's celebration of extroversion brought to mind how much I sometimes empathize with the quiet, more reserved students in these situations. As an introverted thinker not always easy about putting unexamined ideas forward in a group situation, I might have had problems as a student with the current emphasis on teamwork. Even as a doctoral candidate, I chastised myself for only thinking of what I should have said after class was over. In groups I still experience the same reluctance to contribute until I have had time to decide what I want to say.

Cain quotes science journalist Winifred Gallagher as stating that, "The glory of the disposition that stops to consider stimuli rather than rushing to engage with them is its long association with intellectual and artistic achievement" (Cain 2011, ¶ 10). In the same article, Steve Wozniak, with Steve Jobs, cofounder of Apple, is quoted describing his own creative process as an exercise in solitude: "Most inventors and engineers I've met are like me. They're shy and live in their heads. They're almost like artists. In fact, the very best of them are artists. And artists work best alone. ... Not on a committee. Not on a team" (Cain 2011, ¶ 19).

In spite of this kind of report, in academia we are moving away from an inward focus and the idea of the artist working alone. My guess is that this might be part of a 30-year cycle, the tendency of modern or contemporary dance to reinvent itself with each new generation. Although I hope that we will continue to allow for differences in learning and thinking styles, it will be interesting to see how this plays out as today's students make their way into the

profession after college, bringing with them new ideas about artistic leadership, how to create vision from within a group, and how the process should be structured.

## DANCE BEYOND COLLEGE

Speaking to this situation, a young dancer, Veronica Dittman (2008), describes many in her generation as “slash” artists: dancer/choreographer/teacher/lighting designer, and so on, and notes the free rein they feel in shaping their own identities and training. Living in New York, not associated with a major company, she often works on short-term projects with an ever-shifting array of colleagues. She connects her lifestyle with the education many dancers today acquire, writing that she and others dancing outside the security of a paying job with a major company generally have come through university dance departments within liberal arts programs, and not from a

[s]ingle track conservatory mind-set anymore. On one level this means we're used to collaborative, interactive choreographic processes, and we have a broad experience improvising and choreographing ourselves. On another, we have exposure to writing, technology, history, kinesiology, and somatics ... as well as other strong interests we may have developed elsewhere in the university. (Dittman 2008, 3)

As a result, rather than devoting themselves to a life in the studio, these dance artists have enjoyed a broad-enough education to want to make choices for themselves and collaborate with choreographers and other dancers. Since college, they have not focused solely on developing their technique and seeking jobs as dancers, perhaps partly because of finances. Dance critic Gia Kourlos (2010) notes the downside to this situation, writing in the *New York Times* that she thinks

Trained dancers are becoming more rare, partly because of the expense of technique classes, but also because when given the choice they're choosing yoga, Pilates and other conditioning options. That changes what you see onstage and is absolutely for the worse as far as dances are concerned. You can only carry personality so far. (¶ 12)

The presence of release-based technique, somatic studies, and contact improvisation in many college departments has been welcome and beneficial in many ways, helping dancers to develop a mind-body connection, with attention often focused inward. These studies are now offered widely, and although some educators recognize that a “somatic focus cannot replace training in specific dance forms” (Musil 2010, 119), in some departments the more traditional ways of working have been edged out. As a result, these internally focused techniques often determine the working vocabulary of college educated and connected artists, especially because many college-trained choreographers ask their dancers—most usually also college graduates—to contribute by making up movement. Former *New York Times* dance critic Anna Kisselgoff (2005) has found this problematic, as, in her view, these techniques are meant for training rather than expression, and because their impersonality often makes choreography too oblique to be

understood. I see this in student work and have had the thought that perhaps we are at an awkward stage in the continuum of dance pedagogy. Eventually, we can hope that training will evolve to encourage choreographers to make use of movement well suited to the intentions of the work being constructed. It could be argued that early techniques were devised for the expression of a certain, specific artistic vision, whereas today's studio work has more to do with training the body. Economics today suggest that most professional choreographers will not have the facility to train dancers to their own way of moving, so it might be left to university programs to accommodate a variety of visions.

Whatever the case, most of today's major touring companies (Mark Morris, Paul Taylor, Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham, Trisha Brown, among others) perform in the techniques of their founders. These companies provide a select group of dancers the opportunity to work steadily within a particular style, perfecting a way of moving that has developed to express the ideas being communicated (Morgenroth 2004), even though many on this list have catalyzed the art with new methods of art-making. On the other hand, the majority of college-educated dance artists today perform with pickup companies and are trained broadly, eliminating the luxury of settling into one technique as they mature. A major question centers on how much guidance to give young artists as they train: should we suggest they study a limited number of styles or insist on a curriculum that covers a range of techniques? Or, in the spirit of constructivism, should we allow students to create their own curriculum, making choices as they go? Or perhaps the question to ask involves the number of techniques that can be offered with integrity within an academic curriculum: is it more or less beneficial to focus on a limited number of techniques within a department?

Also worth noting is that, in many cases, the focus of dance technique class has been subtly shifting. Traditionally, building a technique in any art form has been viewed as acquisition of the knowledge and skill that enables all else—something to be mastered that makes work in the art form possible (Hope 1990). Today's tendency to stereotype traditional training as authoritative and isolating, with replication of the teacher's movement as the measure of success, has brought into question historic criteria for excellence. In keeping with emerging forms of expression, the discounting of inherited canon and standardized criteria for evaluation (Jenkins and Bertozzi 2007) allows dance students' exploration of their own ideas and inclinations to supplant established values and principles rather than adding to them. In this way, the potential for lost knowledge seems to grow.

With belief in the regular reinvention of our form, we have often counterposed creative thinking with technical knowledge and skills, positing one against the other, rather than regarding inspiration and originality as achievements made possible through the acquisition of technique. Because we want to give students ownership of the material they are studying and foster higher order, active thinking, we have introduced creative work and peer teaching to our classes. Although creative practices deepen understanding of compositional skills and provide students with opportunities to develop their own ideas about movement, adding them to technique class

takes time away from learning the kind of deep body knowledge that comes of focused study within a particular movement style. Dancers are being trained to respond when choreographers ask them to create movement, a valuable skill, although it might be at the expense of the technical distinction traditionally expected in dance performance. There must be many ways to encourage students to ask and learn to answer their own questions, to teach technique “mindfully,” hoping to engage students' intelligence and sense of responsibility for their own development by exploring the “why” of a technique class as well as the “how” and the “what.” We want them to learn to analyze and experiment, to understand sources and build perspective. Is it possible to find ways of encouraging those activities in a way related to building technical proficiency? As a field, my hope is that we will continue our exploration in these areas. To quote one of my students, “I think it bodes well for us in the dance field to fight hard against the lines that seem to have been drawn between dance education and dance training and that seem to separate dancing well from the brain” (Herndon 2011, 8).

#### WHAT IS THE ART IN DANCE?

Our very inclusivity has invited many bright and ambitious young women and men to participate in our field and contribute according to their strengths. Over time, we have connected with many competing ideas and areas of study that, although meaningful, have little bearing on the appeal of dancing as something to watch, moving us toward the inclusion of other-than-artistic purposes in both performance and choreography. I wonder at the seeming need to link choreography with social change and the tendency to defend dance as a means to other ends, evidenced by many dance faculty members. Choreographer and teacher Susan Rethorst, who spends half her time working in Europe, understands it this way:

In the US there's a nervousness about art being elitist and self-indulgent. So that in order to do it, you have to prove you're not a bad person, and the way to do that is to make it a moral education or social contribution. People don't ask that of every profession, but somehow art has to prove its validity every time. (quoted in Burke 2011, ¶ 4)

My sense is that we have allowed concerns other than the artistic merit of a work affect our sense of its worth, and we have become entangled in questions about the purpose of dance making. Value, for some, has come to depend on the function served by the dance, rather than the dance itself (Van Dyke 2010b)—a frequent lack of attention to the dance itself is the worrisome part. Examples might include encouraging students to create using historical processes without acknowledging what these processes were developed to communicate and the aesthetic issues involved, asking students to employ cultural or historic references in their dances while neglecting to examine the choreographic means of integrating these ideas into a meaningful artistic experience, or using dance as advocacy without consideration of form or the slippery slope toward propagandistic work.

The current emphasis on process might also be listed here—including theories of choreography as community-building, or as an emancipatory practice that regards “the ‘work’ of art not as a fixed and determinate thing” but as Professor Larry Lavender (2009) suggests, “a socially fluid doing through which all involved may share both the pleasure and the responsibilities of collective creation” (383). Although this might lead to a valuable educational experience, it seems an instance of shifting the purpose of the artwork from communication with the viewer to exploration for the doer.

## RECURRING QUESTIONS

Perhaps we should not be evaluating new kinds of work with old standards. Dance and choreography—at least within experimental circles—seem destined to become more participatory, perhaps, as mentioned earlier, more about the doing than being viewed, raising questions about the intention of such work. I suspect that whether and how this will change the viewer's quest for meaning, and indeed, the relationship of the viewer to the dance, is still an open question. Considering the profusion of possibilities available today, I expect we will see a further expansion of what “technique” is as young dancers use what they know to make dances. Perhaps we will see an increasing display of fusion-based work, with artists exploring their multicultural training. The breadth of their exposure, which can include hip hop, African, Brazilian, and other ethnically based forms, as well as ballet, jazz, and contemporary dance, is, in some cases, making ethnic distinctions fuzzy (Van Dyke 2010b). The mix of ideas within both the academy and the profession provides young artists with a broad palette for materials and subject matter, generating the possibility of new approaches moving beyond categorization. Or perhaps, as the choices become broader and broader, the field will move in the opposite direction, toward less movement and more performance-arts-based work.

Should we be suggesting one direction over another? Or do we go further in the direction of constructivism and encourage an artistic practice that is experimental and hands-on, without requiring achievement beyond exploration? As the arts become more inclusive and participatory, the developing do-it-yourself aesthetic might signal a revitalization of folk art and mark professional artistic production as a strange blip in cultural history. Perhaps, in the foreseeable future, the traditional “high arts” will operate alongside and in dialogue with popular culture to survive.

As teachers, our connection with academe allows us to experiment in these areas, operating in the bubble, away from market pressures and broad cultural developments in American society. We have been able to produce many young dance artists, all trained in thinking about their work and in producing work intended to make audiences think. We have been given ample support for exploring and experimenting, for “pushing the envelope”—and inside our bubble, we have not needed to consider our role within American culture.

In our quest for the next new thing, we sometimes reach beyond the use of design, rhythm, and athleticism, which by themselves can engage an inexperienced eye. We often operate in a realm that considers a “product” something to be avoided, a realm more interested in doing than in viewing, and perhaps is more involved in work for its intellectual components rather than any formal or kinetic concerns. The choreographer in me worries that, as we focus on broadening the education of dancers, we run the risk of losing the strengths of our medium and glossing over what audiences want to see: aside from the major companies, which are widely advertised, boast high production values, and employ the best dancers to be found, does contemporary dance have any draw beyond fellow dancers, friends, supporters, or students coerced into attending by course requirements?

Is it important, then, to prepare our students to engage with the culture into which we send them? Or is it enough—or better—to infuse them with the zeal to use their choreography to make changes in the world? Should we be thinking in the broad terms of that relationship, or is it more important to develop our art form in intellectual terms? Or should we be focusing on turning out the best dancers possible? At first glance, it seems a zero-sum game: within a broad curriculum, there is less time for technical and artistic work. However, hours spent in the studio limit learning about humankind. In a perfect world, we will have discovered the means of doing it all.

Perhaps, with distance, some of these issues will resolve themselves. Some, I suspect, are examples of generational differences. At the moment I have more questions than answers. For example, are we, as educators, ethically bound to expose our students to the ideas that we think will help them develop as strong and independent individuals? Is this, as many seem to think, irreconcilable with the traditional demands of dance training? Or, on the other hand, does our form—our art—make its own educational demands? Should these be taken into account as we think about curriculum? Do we need to be clear with our students about our concessions, or is it possible to find a balance that does not compromise either one?

Or is art creating its own continuum of pedagogy and culture, allowing the market to make corrections over the long term? Is it, perhaps, important to push dance into new directions, even at the risk of disappointing audience expectations? Maybe we need to think about whether we actually want to have a connection with the general public as audience, or for whom we are actually making our dances. Perhaps we are all more interested in doing than watching. It might no longer be about audiences. Perhaps we are being swept along to a new paradigm with a different set of values, promoting the creative process and democratization of the arts and amateur practice (Jackson 2008).

Wherever we are headed as a practice, I would like to think we are considering what we are doing. How we encourage the next generation of dancers to think about the meaning of their work will focus their journey and bring awareness to the choices available, helping each one to achieve his or her own measure of success along the path being traveled.

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