Reflections on Teacher Education in Dance

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Article:

We cannot isolate ourselves in dance studios or with philosophy books and expect to make a real difference in what happens in the world.

It takes little if any imagination to recognize that today's schools are not working well for more than a small number of students. Statistics on low SAT scores and dropout rates are part of the daily news. There is little evidence, despite efforts at educational reform, that the situation has changed much from that in 1983, when Ernest Boyer wrote that American high schools provide an outstanding education for only 10 to 50 percent of the students. Further, he noted that a larger percentage of students-perhaps 20 to 30 percent-mark time in school or drop out. The majority of students are in the vast middle ground…They attend high schools that, like the communities that surround them, are surviving but not thriving.¹

Many people blame teachers, accusing them of not being bright enough or hardworking enough; my university now requires a second academic major for education students, as well as higher OPAs and higher scores on the National Teacher's Examination. Others blame students, and/or they blame their families for raising students who are lazy or who are more interested in a job at McDonald's to support a car than they are in learning. The proposed remedies have included more of many things that now exist-more academics, more testing, more homework, more requirements.

This kind of thinking provides fertile ground for the latest movement in arts education, usually referred to as Discipline-Based Arts Education (DBAE). The term was popularized by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, whose 1985 publication Beyond Creating: The Place for Art in America’s Schools, called for a standardized, sequential program consisting of four disciplines: art history, criticism, aesthetics, and production.² The Getty Center also supported standardized testing to measure curricular outcomes. Although using different language, the National Endowment for the Arts, in its 1988 report Toward Civilization, also called for a discipline-based approach.³ The four purposes for arts education cited in the report are

- to teach civilization (specifically, the great works);
- to foster creativity (including the vocabularies and basic skills that produced the great works of the past);
- to teach effective communication (understanding the languages of the arts and analyzing their meanings);
- to provide tools for critical assessment (so that people can make better choices about art, thus becoming better consumers).

A survey of recent issues of arts education publications makes it clear that DBAE is a powerful trend in the field. The “old days” in arts education, when we spoke of creativity and self-expression in an activity in which there
were no wrong answers and every student could find success have given way to a language of standardization, sequential curriculum, testing, and accountability. Rather than nurturing students to personhood and social development, arts educators today are asked primarily to challenge them intellectually. Under DBAE, dance becomes less an experience and more an object to be looked at, analyzed, and evaluated.

DBAE has significant implications for teacher preparation in the arts. The Getty Center telling us that teacher-education students need to spend more time thinking about the arts, meaning that they should spend less time creating and performing. Any reduction of creating and performing experience has been regarded by many university dance faculties, including my own, as anathema; they ask how one can teach any art well if one is not accomplished at doing it. The only solution to this dilemma that our faculty has found has been to require more and more hours of dance within the four year program. Consequently, very few hours are left for students to explore other areas outside of dance and to develop their ability to think about and do things other than dance-things they will need to do as public school educators.

**SAVIOR OR DESTROYER?**

Most articles about DBAE seem either to see it as a savior-able to move arts education beyond the fringes of the curriculum into the central core where it will not be subject to the funding cuts that seem automatic with each economic downturn-or else as a sure way to destroy the arts as a personally meaningful experience. It is my intention here to reject both of these responses. Instead, I will explore my ambivalence toward DSAB, seek to reveal some underlying issues that affect any approach to arts education, and culminate with implications for teacher education in dance.

To begin with, I must note that much of, DBAB's emphasis on the *academic* and scholarly side of dance feels right to me. For a long time I have felt concern at how often dance is taught as a mindless activity in which one must move and sometimes feel but not think. ("Don't think about it; just do it" is often heard in dance classes.) My intellectual self is glad to be appreciated in dance, after feeling second-class too long within a field that has looked down upon those who create with words.

But there is much that troubles me within this reconceptualized vision of dance education. It is partly the recognition that those organizations leading the way "beyond creating" to an emphasis on the "great works" are the very ones that claim the right to declare what the great works are and how they should be judged. It is partly the recognition that the emphasis on looking at and judging art at the expense of making it furthers the already rampant consumerism of U.S. society and the way we rely on material goods for status. It is partly the way it celebrates mind over body, valuing art only as mental experience. Although I recognize the validity of the notion that art is an activity of the mind, I know that I came to dance as an adolescent not to find intellectual challenge but to find a safe place in which I could reclaim my body and explore its possibilities as part of myself. I liked dance because of the way it felt when I did it. Over and over again, when I ask students and colleagues why they chose to make a career in dance, I hear the same answers: the sense of power and control over themselves, the transcendence or "high."

But there are other voices that I know as well, those that I hear while I am in public schools, teaching young people and dancing with them, listening to their stories and those of the dance educators who face these students every day. It is important to share some of these voices as a context for what will follow, for they are the ones that call me to question teacher education in dance.

One of the schools in which I teach demonstration classes each year is a middle school for students who have been removed from their assigned schools because of either pregnancy or disruptive behavior. Most of these students have had years of school without experiencing much success. Many of the young women have children; there is a day-care center in the school. Before the first class, their teacher tells me about their lives. Last year she told me of Rosa, who went to bed at 4:30 in the afternoon because this was the only way she would to sleep in a bed; there were ten people in her family and only eight beds. Keisha lived in a shelter for abused women. Lynn was on parole and living, in a halfway house, trying to "be good" so she could earn the right to
regain custody of her child. She was married at fourteen, and was fifteen when I met her; the very successful halfway house where she lived closed recently for lack of funds.

Each year, these young women's stories and those of their peers raise profound questions for me in relation to DBAE. How can I talk to them about Martha Graham? Is this what they need in their lives? Do they even need dance? Who decides what they need? Each year I decide that the only thing I can help them find in a brief unit is the knowledge that they are strong and beautiful and can make choices that will have good outcomes for them and that others will also admire. Last year we worked on some basic movement concepts and skills, allowing them to experience themselves moving well; I then gave them opportunities to make choices in how to vary the movement, changing speed, level, direction, and so forth. We explored the difference between just moving and dancing—the focus, the intensity, the different state of consciousness. Over four classes, we created a group dance, which we videotaped and they proudly shared with their teachers and peers. They danced and helped make a dance; it was a small accomplishment in their lives.

**STUDENTS IN PAIN**
I see similar accomplishments while engaged in my current research in progress, an ethnographic study of how students make meaning of their dance experience in schools. I participate in two beginning-level high school dance classes each week, dancing with students, hanging out in the dressing rooms, with attending their informal performances, and interviewing them at the end of each semester. Dance is an elective course and classes are small; the focus is on creative experience and choreographic and movement skills. I leave my days of interviewing them overwhelmed by the pain in their lives, pain far greater than one would assume is normal for adolescence. Several have moved out of their homes or been kicked out. A few stories involve various forms of abuse. Anna was in her third foster home at the time of her interview; a month later she was in her fourth. Several students have been suspended from school for misbehavior in other classes during the year, even though they were quite cooperative in dance class. Two frequently miss school to care for an alcoholic parent. Last semester only one student (that I knew of) out of sixteen became pregnant and only one already had a child; some years, the dance educators tell me, as many as one fourth of their students have been or become pregnant. The mother of Linda confided to the dance educator that she was concerned about AIDS because her daughter's boyfriend was an intravenous drug user. Very few live in two-parent families.

These are stories that most public school teachers know. In 1988, 19.8 percent of the children in my state were living in poverty, and over 15,500 babies were born to mothers between the ages of eleven and nineteen. Only 68.5 percent of all ninth-grade students were graduating four years later; nearly 7 percent failed kindergarten. As more and more students do not have a parent at home to help with homework or have a parent who does not have the skills to help with homework that gets harder and harder, as more children have parents who are themselves children, these students who are so intimately acquainted with failure will make up a larger and larger percentage of public school classrooms.

I wonder what the critical reader is probably wondering at this point: Maybe I should leave teaching and become a social worker. Education is about teaching, not dealing with students' personal problems. Dance education should be about teaching dance. And a scholarly article is no place for a bleeding heart. But these are the children my dance education students will teach, and I cannot think about teacher education without giving names and faces to the statistics about dropouts and failures and low SAT scores.

**CULTURAL CAPITAL**
In my research, when I see the degree of engagement that students have in their dance classes, and their degree of success, it is easy to believe that creative experience in a caring environment is the solution to these students' problems, and all that is needed is more of the same. But I continue to have questions: Do these at-risk students not have as much right as my own teenage daughter to know who Martha Graham is? Are proponents correct when they argue that DBAE can be a way for disadvantaged students to gain the "cultural capital" they need to make it into the middle class?
Each time I face such students, whose stories change only in their details, I end up deciding; that they first need to appreciate themselves, not as a step toward appreciating Graham, but as an end in itself. Certainly appreciation for oneself can be gained through academic skills as well as movement skills, through what one has written as well as what one has created in space and time. But to tell them first about Martha Graham, as one more piece of information that someone else decided they should know, one more piece of information they do not value enough to learn, is to ensure that they will fail in dance as they have failed in so many other courses.

**LOVE, THEN INTEREST**

I know that, in the case of my colleagues and myself, interest in the field of dance, in learning history, criticism, and aesthetics, came after we knew we loved to dance. Perhaps, I wonder, is this kind of sequencing a way out of the conflict between the approach of "creative arts experience" and that of DBAB? One could start with the former, and then, once appetites were whetted, move to the latter. This would seem to offer what is necessary for the at-risk students I cannot ignore: first self-esteem and motivation achieved through doing and making the art, then a chance to obtain the "cultural capital" that might allow them the same kind of opportunities my own daughter has.

Certainly it seems to me that once students are interested in dance, it should be possible for DBAB to be satisfying and meaningful for many of them. I know that I can and do find satisfaction and meaning in the kinds of discussions about art that are described in *Beyond Creating*. Why, then, am I not hopeful that DBAE will actually exist in ways meaningful for many students other than the 10 to 20 percent who are already motivated, who already see themselves as competent learners, who want to learn what the teachers are teaching?

The basis for my pessimism becomes clearer whenever I go into schools or ask students to describe for me what goes on there. For the most part, the only high school classrooms in which I hear the kind of talk described in *Beyond Creating* are those for the academically gifted. In my current research, when I asked students to tell me what school is like, I heard almost nothing about school as an interesting and exciting place to be, other than socially. Even many students not classified as at risk bad withdrawn emotionally, not particularly caring whether or not they failed. Almost all students said they had a hard time staying awake in classes other than dance; at most they had one other course in which they were allowed to move around, to make things, to solve problems, to come up with their own ideas, to work together with others in the class, and to share their creations and accomplishments with others. Almost always, the other course was an experientially based arts course (open to all students) or a course for those designated academically gifted (containing few poor, minority, and working-class students). This situation is the basis for my fear that DBAE will end up leaving the privileged few in advanced or honors courses to deal with questions of meaning that will excite them about school and about learning, while the majority—particularly those not already successful in school—will end up memorizing the date of Graham's birth and when she choreographed "Night Journey," and thus following the same pattern as other academic subjects.

**BOREDOM AS PREPARATION**

Svi Shapiro suggests that the boredom that most students experience in schools may function as a preparation for the kind of work they will face after their formal education. He notes that even white-collar labor

is increasingly fragmented, monotonous, and bureaucratized. While the opportunity to "work downtown" and wear a suit and tie still hold their attraction over the conditions of manual work, the former is less and less associated with the kind of autonomy or intellectual opportunity suggested by long years of educational training.

Despite the fact that the rewards for being a "good student" (i.e, being respectful, obedient, and diligent) often do not measure up to expectations, many students accept the terms given them; school is seen as boring yet necessary. But we cannot understand the problems and frustrations that teachers face unless we look at the students who do not engage themselves in school and its underlying belief system-those who have emotionally
withdrawn. These are students who, instead of accepting their powerlessness in the face of an environment that they find meaningless, choose to engage in oppositional behaviors. Openly defiant and hostile students are more obvious examples; apathetic ones who do not try and do not care demonstrate a more subtle version. They may not do even the "easy" assignments, or may refuse to "dress out" for dance or gym class.

The term *resistance* is often applied to all oppositional behaviors. Aronowitz and Giroux argue that this term should be reserved for those behaviors that reflect moral and political indignation at the underlying ideology of schooling and express hope for radical transformation and liberation. They find that many oppositional behaviors are more about a display of power, indicating that students have rejected some aspects of an oppressive ideology but adopted others. These theorists do note, however, that even those oppositional behaviors that they would not call resistance have "an emancipator moment." 

Oppositional behavior, whether or not it reflects moral and political indignation, gives students a sense of self-affirmation in rejecting the dominant school culture. It also gives a sense of identity and community, because the alternative norms chosen indicate that the students belong to a subculture that shares those norms. In short, it gives students a chance to find meaning in a situation that otherwise seems meaningless.

**OPPOSITION MAINTAINS OPPRESSION**

Unfortunately, oppositional behavior, while functioning as a way for students to resist oppression, also maintains the students' place in an oppressive situation rather than allowing them to develop the skills necessary to transform it. It may give students a sense of power and identity in school, but ultimately leaves them powerless in the larger society.

As I look further into the relationship between school and social structure, additional disturbing complexities are revealed. Shapiro reminds me that the curricular and pedagogic changes of the 1960s and 1970s came closer to making school a place where anyone could succeed; this time was a heyday of creative arts experience in schools. As long as the economy was expanding, increased upward mobility through schooling was seen as desirable. With the declining economy of the 1980s and the increasing competition for professional jobs, the open door to success needed to close—particularly on poor, minority, and working-class students who were in competition with the middle class. Today, we need schools to restrict chances for such students to “make it”; one way we do this is by reducing student loans for higher education. Another way is by reducing curricular choices that connect to the lives of poor, minority, and working-class students and replacing them with courses that are more likely to alienate these students—and which they are more likely to fail—thus, “proving” that they do not deserve to make it into the middle class.

Is DBAE a way to ensure that more students, particularly the "have-nots," will fail? Without empirical evidence, I draw on my own experience as a parent of a child in a public high school. Although my daughter has been assigned the labels that give her admittance to the more challenging and interesting courses, she not infrequently needs to seek assistance from teachers or parents. Seeking assistance from teachers requires going to school early or staying late, meaning that she cannot take the school bus to her distant, rural school. As I interrupt my normal work hours to make the long drive, I am grateful for the flexibility that my professional schedule allows—and I wonder how other students and their parents manage. When she seeks her father's assistance to explain a new concept in advanced mathematics courses, having long ago passed my expertise in this subject, I think about her peers whose parents did not finish high school. If she took a DBAE course, I could provide similar assistance to that her father now gives. Thinking about my own family makes clear one way that existing social structure is perpetuated, as parents pass on their privilege to their children. Despite our societal belief that schools provide equal opportunity for all students, the opportunities are not equal. Those who start with more almost always end up with more. Of course, the occasional child of the ghetto does "make it" to the National Honor Society or to Harvard on a scholarship. But this one is held up as a shining example, convincing us that the system really does work, blinding us to the inequities that we are otherwise perpetuating.
By now, I have identified two factors that I see as essential in thinking about schools and teacher education. One is the inequity of our social structure, which is replicated in and through schooling. The most personally meaningful curricular choices among academic subjects—and those that tend to motivate students to be self-directed learners—are offered to students identified as gifted, who are disproportionately members of the upper middle class. Further, children from middle-class families have the resources that allow them to take the greatest advantage of public schooling. Children from poor, minority, and working-class families, denied those advantages, tend to be less successful. Because of our societal myth that rewards come to those who most deserve them, those who start out with less often come to believe that they deserve to end up on the bottom; this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The second factor is oppositional behavior, the phenomenon in which people respond to oppressive situations in ways that give them some sense of self-affirmation and solidarity with others, but maintain the oppression. Even when an individual teacher offers opportunities for learning that go beyond the routine and invites students to engage in personal meaning-making, students may not respond because of opposition to the larger system.

**CHANGE IS NOT ENOUGH**

I do not believe that any curricular reform can be successful unless these two factors are dealt with. This means that we must go beyond thinking about what and how we teach dance to thinking about how students develop their identity within the social structure and, indeed, what that structure is and might be. It is not enough to change curricula; we must also transform schools and transform society.

This kind of call seems so enormous that it is easy to become overwhelmed and to conclude that the problems facing us are so large and complex that nothing can be done about them. It would be much less troublesome to read about dance history and criticism than about poverty, hunger, and homelessness; to go into a studio and dance than to engage in social action; to think about only what is beautiful and not also about what is fair and right.

Can education even make a difference, or is it so embedded in the status quo that it is incapable of anything else? I can find cause for hope only when I recognize that there is not just an impulse in education to support and maintain the world, it is, but also one to provide stimulus and leadership for change. In this way, education functions similarly to art, which sometimes focuses on reproduction and transmission of culture and sometimes leads us to imagine how things might be different. After all, both art and education have attracted some people who are visionaries and prophets, people who wish to create new worlds.

**CREATE NEW WORLDS**

I believe that all educators, including dance educators, must prepare students to imagine and create new worlds; to do this, educators must be able to create new worlds within schools. It would be presumptuous of me to try to detail here my own ideas of what such schools should look like; they must be created by communities of people who will live and work and learn in them. For example, Paolo Freire offers a pedagogy that addresses issues of identity and social justice, based on his experiences as a Brazilian educator. He describes traditional educational practice as "banking education," in which knowledge is deposited by teachers ("who know") into students ("who know nothing") for storage and future use. The knowledge in banking education attempts to transmit culture, but, Freire notes, "In the name of the 'preservation of culture and knowledge' we have a system which achieves neither true knowledge nor true culture." Freire contrasts banking education with "problem posing education," in which students develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world within which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.

Freire does not speak directly to arts education, but it seems relevant to examine both DBAE and a creative-arts approach in relation to what he calls problem posing education. Certainly the justifications for DBAE have
primarily been directed at the transmission and reproduction of culture, more in line with banking education. However, it seems clear to me that studies in history, criticism, and aesthetics could contribute to the kind of pedagogy advocated by Freire, if material were dealt with in a problem-posing manner. For example, students might look at their own social dance in contrast to forms defined as art, considering who makes the definitions and what that means. A host of other issues that might be present with the academic study of dance have the potential to engage students many ways that connect to their lives, including pleasure, the body, gender, and race. Maxine Greene, although not identifying herself with DBAE, makes clear that looking at and thinking about dance can do far more than reproduce culture when she states:

There are works of art…that were deliberately created to move people to critical awareness, to a sense of moral agency, and to a conscious engagement with the world. As I see it, they ought ... to be central to any curriculum that is constructed today.15

A creative-arts-experience approach seems easier for me to recognize as problem-posing education. However, creative dance is not an automatic route toward freedom and power outside the walls of the studio. Without a connection between what goes on in the studio and in the world, dance becomes more of a feel-good drug that helps us tune out the rest of the world than a path toward liberation.

Freire comes closest to speaking of arts education when he writes, “The oppressed must realize that they are fighting not merely for freedom from hunger, but for ... freedom to create and to construct, to wonder and to venture.”16 Similarly, I think that dance educators must be engaged in both freeing students from oppression and freeing them to engage in activities that will allow them to find personal meaning in their lives. How can teacher education programs in dance prepare students to contribute to these two kinds of freedom for their students both the freedom from and the freedom to?

If prospective educators are going to provide freedom for their students, they need to experience freedom in their own classes. Students often think of freedom only in terms of having few restrictions, so that “anything goes.” However, they also need knowledge and skills if they are truly to have the freedom to create and to construct beyond the most superficial levels. Dance education students need to develop their own skills as dancers and choreographers in order to appreciate the sense, of personal power that comes with competence, and they need to develop the pedagogic others to help others find their own power. Courses in technique, improvisation, choreography, and pedagogy have traditionally provided these skills. In such courses, however, teachers need to avoid methods that emphasize rote imitation. Instead they should use methods that encourage exploring and understanding the underlying concepts of dance movement, choreography, and teaching. Even dance technique should be taught as a way to empower students; allowing them to accomplish the artistic challenges they choose rather than training them to become obedient, unquestioning followers.

FREES TO QUESTION
Courses in the social-historical-cultural context of dance should be designed to free students to make their own interpretations of dance and dances from a context of knowing the multiplicity of possible interpretations. All too often, dance history, like dance technique, is taught as though there were a single truth or a single set of right answers. Again, I do not wish to promote an anything-goes attitude; students also need to question their own interpretations and recognize the importance of supporting their interpretations, whether historical or critical.

Throughout their curriculum, teacher education students in dance need to learn to think critically rather than reverentially about their art and their chosen profession. They need to learn how dance is like other human ventures in that it can contribute to either freedom or oppression, personal meaning or alienation, community or isolation and how different pedagogies offer them a choice of which of these they will promote. Ideally, they should be taught by teachers who see their students and themselves as equal partners in the learning process. Unfortunately, universities, like most other educational institutions, are constructed so that teachers, whether they like it or not, hold power over their students. In such a setting, it is natural that students wish to move up
the hierarchy so that they can have power over their own students; this changes them from being among the oppressed to being among the oppressors. Although it is unlikely that sudden changes will occur in the power structures within educational institutions, we can work toward their evolution. We can also help students think critically about the structures in which they learn and will work, rather than accepting “the way things are” as a given. Perhaps dance education can offer the most for prospective teachers if it includes both transcendence and critical thinking, so that students come to know that it is possible to go beyond the limits of what we accept is “reality” (even though it is a reality that we ourselves have constructed).

But dance courses, no matter how well conceived and implemented, are not sufficient to prepare dance educators for the challenges they will face in today's schools and those of the future. Those of us who design teacher preparation programs in dance need to struggle against our own tendencies to be obsessive about our art and about the number of hours in dance required for majors. We might need to reconceive the particular courses into which we have traditionally divided dance education and begin to integrate multiple kinds of learning in dance within single courses. Such integration could free students to take more coursework other than dance.

EXAMINE THE MYTHS

In addition to taking general liberal arts courses, teacher education students need courses that encourage them to look at their own lives and their place in the social structure; they also need to examine the myths underlying the current structure. They need to move beyond seeing the have-nots of society as hopeless rejects and to start seeing them as persons with rights and possibilities. As they consider the possibilities of others, they will need to appreciate the variety of forms of intelligence and what that means as we interpret Scholastic Aptitude Test scores and assign differential value to different kinds of work. Certainly these recommendations imply coursework in selected social science and education courses and in other courses that can help students both examine their own lives and go beyond the prisons of their own experience. They also imply time to volunteer in homeless shelters and soup kitchens as well as in schools. Here, prospective teachers can learn to meet opposition without despair, appreciating it as a cry for identity and personal meaning.

These few suggestions are clearly not a definitive prescription for teacher education in dance. Rather than seeking prescriptions—whether informed by DBAE or other approaches—we must allow ourselves to listen to and be touched by the stories of students in today's schools and to reflect upon deeper issues that affect these young people and ourselves. We cannot isolate ourselves in dance studios or with philosophy books and expect to make a real difference in what happens in the world. Dance educator must work together with other concerned educators, with students and parents, to create and construct schools in which participants can find: justice, identity, meaning, and community.

Notes:

2. Getty Center for Education in the Arts, Beyond Creating: The Place for Art In America's Schools (Los Angeles: Getty Center for Education in the Arts. 1985).
4. All names of students have been changed to protect their privacy.
6. Ibid.
7. Data obtained from Information Center, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh.
10. Ibid., 100.
11. Shapiro, note 8 above.
13. Ibid. 68.
16. Freire, note 12 above. 55.