

The need for child-centered communities of practice for children's dance education in Taiwan

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Abstract

This research takes a socio-cultural perspective in examining the practice of dance education for children at private Taiwanese studios, which have thrived since the mid-20th century. Although various teaching styles can be found in current dance education, an emphasis on the perfection of dance technique is more dominant than other practices, such as explorations in creativity. This observation is derived from my professional interactions that span a two-decade career as a full-time dance educator in both the Department of Dance at a university in Taiwan, and with local dance studios, and is augmented with visual documents of children's performances. In order to draw explanations for the current situation, I adopt the Bourdieuan concept of cultural reproduction, where the individual habituses of young dance pupils are reinforced by dance communities emphasizing perfection of dance technique during the socialization process. Since many of these young dancers exercise the same practice when they enter the field as dance teachers, a different type of dance socialization is needed to reverse the situation. In seeking such a solution, I turn to Wenger's notion of "communities of practice" and to child-centered practice. In this view of learning, child creativity is given the legitimacy it lacks in other approaches. When young dancers are positioned as legitimate in child-centered communities of practice, these newcomers are afforded a space to co-construct their individual dance identities in the process of becoming full practitioners. In my research, I focus on what this entails. Through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I critically explore how young learners engage with each other and with "master practitioners" to forge their own learning trajectories. I also investigate the acts that agency learners exhibit, which are symptomatic of the legitimacy conferred on them. The findings demonstrate that child-centered communities of practice hold great potential in fostering creativity in young dancers in Taiwan.

Keywords: communities of practice, cultural reproduction, child-centered dance education, habitus

Dance activities and classes for children in Taiwan are abundant, particularly for children who are under 12 years old. They can find dance classes to participate in in schools, community centers, or private dance studios. The dance classes that are offered for children vary in genres. Besides routine practices, many dance instructors and children engage in various activities, such as dance competitions, examinations of Chinese dance, and ballet. In most of these activities, skillful performances are often emphasized.

An online video clip that was popularly shared and commented on on Facebook last spring was an inspiration for the beginning of this research (*YouTube*, 2011). This was a training process for

children at a dance academy in China, and shows the aesthetic preferences of many dance teachers and parents in Taiwan.

The purpose of this paper is not to oppose such aesthetic dispositions and training preferences, but to think about the following questions: Is this the best kind of dance instruction to offer our children? How much opportunity do the children have for exploring creativity through movement experience without this noted skillful requirement? Who makes decisions for the children's dance classes? What can we do as dance educators to help our children learn through dance and enjoy what they learn?

I would like to start by considering creativity. What opportunities exist today that encourage young dancers to be creative? The main private institution in Taiwan that offers creative dance and movement activities would be the Cloud Gate Dance School. Besides this school, a few dance communities, such as the National Dance Association of the R. O. C.; Dance Research Society, Taiwan; and regional dance teachers' associations organize activities annually for sharing knowledge in creative dance among its members. In addition, workshops in creative dance for children are offered at different institutions from time to time.

As a way to augment these existing opportunities, I strongly feel that a child-centered community of practice can act as a forum where children, teachers, and parents regularly discuss and explore creativity through dance. The establishment of the national chapter of Dance and the Child International in Taiwan in August 2011 initiated my interest in expanding the circumference of dance education in Taiwan from a concentration on technique drills, to fostering more creativity.

As for the theory approach, I rely on the research perspectives and methodology derived from the Sociology of Education. In particular, this research applies Pierre Bourdieu's (1984/1979) analytical framework, particularly the concept of cultural reproduction, for analyzing the motivation, process, and consequences of dance socialization, where perfection of dance technique is emphasized. Also, Etienne Wenger's (1998) notion of "communities of practice" provides the conceptual basis of how and why a domain of common practices can establish a creative space for its participants, especially the newcomers, to construct their individual dance identities in moving from the periphery to the center of the dance field.

Data for this research was collected from personal observations and in-depth interviews. Initially, my two-decade-long career as a full-time dance educator at a university in Taiwan, as well as my professional interactions with local dance studios, provided primary first-hand experience. Informal discussions with colleagues and observations of children's dance performances stimulated helpful thoughts for further research. Semi-structured interviews and participant observations rendered more in-depth, first-hand material, along with collections of media artifacts, including web pages, blog and forum entries, *Facebook* pages, and videos posted online. The children ranged in age from 6 to 12, and included both male and female students. The interviewees were professional dance teachers who have been involved with children's dance classes and performances for five or more years. Among them, some are also parents of the dance students. This research is theoretical and practical, but not empirical.

Why child-centered communities of practice?

First, let me explain the term of Community of Practice in dance. The Community of Practice is composed of three fundamental elements: a Domain, or the common ground of shared knowledge; a Community, or a social space of learning; and Practices, or a set of shared values, thoughts, perceptions, or behaviors (McDermott, Snyder, & Wenger, 2002, pp. 27-29). Thus, the communities of practice in dance can then be explained as the social learning space for dance activities.

As I have mentioned earlier, in most cases, children in private dance lessons are trained to achieve perfection of technique. More often than not, children are required to strictly follow their teachers' instructions, which often blocks opportunities for the exploration of creativity. When the children grow up and become dance instructors themselves, they often carry out a similar style of teaching and reproduce the culture that they learned from their instructors. Such reproduction is affected by symbolic systems, such as prestige and honour (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990, pp. 4-68). As the children become skillful dancers, they are often praised by their instructors and envied by their peers. Thus, they acquire a feeling of prestige and tend to cling to a similar practice throughout their primary socialization process.

Besides private dance lessons, many dance activities also favor those who are skillful in dance technique. Taking the annual National Student Dance Competition, sponsored by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, as an example, dance technique proficiency is considered a form of cultural capital that enables technically-gifted children to acquire more symbolic capital, such as high self-esteem and a positive dance identity. Thus, winners of this competition are likely to parrot the dominant discourse, which encourages technical proficiency at the expense of creativity. Engaging in a child-centered community of practice, which places emphasis on the exploration of children's creativity, would give a chance to modify the situation. However, this idea must be recognized not only by the instructors, but also by the parents of the dance students, because the parents are the key persons of a child's socialization process.

One of the interviewees, Sue, a dance instructor who has many years of experience in teaching classes at private dance studios, stated,

It is difficult to teach creative dance classes at the private studios because most parents would not feel [that] the money they spent for sending their children to take private dance lessons worthwhile if the children are not able to show skills, like a split or somersault, but seem to play around in the studios. (Personal communication, March 10, 2012)

Sue's statement suggested that the parents play important roles in affecting the instructors' teaching styles and materials.

Another interviewee, Ray, one of the counselors of the Cloud Gate Dance School, stated,

In my opinion, parents [who] allow their children to participate in Cloud Gate Dance School are those who understand the essence of [a] free mind as the most important element of the children's learning process. (Personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Both Sue and Ray's voices suggest the importance of the parents' roles in the children's choices and the instructors' decisions. In this light, the national chapter of daCi Taiwan can act as a forum where children, teachers, and parents regularly discuss and explore creativity through dance experience.

What can the child-centered communities of practice offer?

Child-centered communities of practice are crucial for young dancers because they enable them to avoid the pressure of learning through traditional methods that stress the perfection of technique, and also provide space for these dancers to articulate a unique dance identity. By introducing a counter-discourse in dance education, the expression of creativity becomes a more important part of the economy of meaning in any given dance community, and reconfigures what is valued and legitimate. It offers all the children opportunities to strengthen their self-identity, to establish their social space, and to accumulate cultural capital.

Strengthening self-identity through child-centered communities of practice

The child-centered communities of practice in dance offer children an opportunity to construct their self-identity through their movement experience. It is through this experience that children explore themselves and forge identities of who they are while interacting with each other.

My observations of four classes at two different dance studios were that all of them put stress on training children's dance skills. It became apparent that children who were capable of managing the skillful movements (group A) showed higher confidence than those who were not able to perform movements with difficult skills (group B). Most children of group A were found to be the center of attention, while children in group B seemed to occupy the periphery of the classes. This was dictated from where they placed themselves in the space of the studio while working on the movement phrases. Many in the group A were used to taking the front or center spots of the studio, while just as many in group B were often scattered around the back or the side of the space.

In the child-centered communities of practice, the children's movement skills are not considered as the most important part of their learning process. Encouragement of developing each one's own movement expressions in their activities allows them to establish self-identity through interactions with others. Thus, self-assertion of uniqueness becomes the key feature in their individual and collective habituses.

Establishing social space through child-centered communities of practice

Child-centered communities of practice provide the child participants with the opportunities to establish their social space. This is based on the reason that their needs of belonging can be fulfilled through "engagement, imagination, and alignment" of their movement experiences (Wenger, 1998, p. 174). Engagement in movement experience allows them to establish their social space through an on-going negotiation of meaning, the formation of trajectories, and the unfolding of histories of practice in their own movement interpretations. To be specific, they engage with each other in the movement experiences that are created through their imagination, which can result in different interpretations based on the same activity. They choose, adopt, or

play with their own styles or methods through aligning themselves in the same practice, while the social space gives them the context to express themselves.

Accumulating cultural capital through child-centered communities of practice

Through participating in child-centered communities of practice, children collect and accumulate cultural capital from a creative process. The result of accumulating cultural capital can also enrich their social capital, symbolic capital, or physical capital. Such concepts must be recognized by the instructors for fulfilling the needs of the children. That is, in order to better the status quo, the instructors should find opportunities for themselves, as well, to acquire cultural capital through creative dance experience. In this light, the instructors are able to provide creative classes for children to explore and expand their imaginations in dance.

The creative experience, part of the cultural capital acquired by the children from the child-centered communities of practice, also enables the children to enrich their physical capital. This kind of physical capital may not be the same as technical proficiency, but a kind that is fluent in manipulating their physical bodies in their own ways. Moreover, accumulated cultural capital and physical capital equip the children for higher self-esteem, and thus grant them with symbolic capital. With all the capital together, the children move from the periphery to the center of the dance communities. Thus, their social spaces are enlarged and so is their social capital, respectively. In this light, the values, ideas, concepts, framework, and practices for promoting the child-centered communities of practice in Taiwan must be recognized and encouraged by the teachers, as well as by the parents to redirect the dance field to diverse development. They are able to express themselves in creative and unique ways.

Conclusion

Promoting the child-centered communities of practice in dance will be a benefit to Taiwan's dance field in several ways: to shift the boundaries of the center, to re-center a space, and to reconfigure what is seen as valued and legitimate. Again, the purpose of this study is not to deny the value of training that is based on technical proficiency, but to develop more possibilities for instructors and young learners to interact in dance through different ways. With this, a more dynamic learning environment, either for drilling dance technique or fostering creativity in young dancers, can take hold in Taiwan. To do this, the circumference of what is acceptable dance practice needs to expand so that children can explore their creativity.

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