

The development of identity in teenage dancers through community engagement

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Abstract

This paper looks at the impact of community engagement through dance on the development of identity in late teenage dancers. The research investigates dancers from ages 14-21, both private studio-trained dancers and dancers in an undergraduate dance program, who volunteer on an ongoing basis with students in community settings. The community settings include teaching dance and developing choreography with low-income teens in an urban community center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and a wheelchair dance class at a residential school for 14-21 year olds with cerebral palsy. The data under analysis includes interviews, observations, and surveys of 25 dancers who have each volunteered more than 40 hours with a community population in teaching dance, developing choreography, or performing alongside youth in an urban setting. Four different projects in particular are examined. The first two are weekly dance classes that result in a performance between able-bodied dancers and wheelchair-bound teens. One group of dancers partnering with the wheelchair-bound students are high school students from a local private pre-professional training studio, and the second are dance majors at a local university. The second two projects analyzed take place at an urban community center. One group of dancers taught technique classes as an after-school activity, and the second developed choreography with local teens. Preliminary results speak to four areas of impact: 1) career choice, 2) definitions of dance, 3) views of themselves as agents of change, and 4) development of empathy.

Keywords: dance and identity, community engagement in dance, teenage dance, wheelchair dance, differently-abled dance

I am a dancer. This simple statement of identity is the assumption that underlies how I design pedagogy and research. But what exactly do I mean by that statement? This investigation looks at what teenage dancers enrolled in the disparate settings of a private dance studio and in a university dance program mean by that statement. These dancers all have one thing in common, however: they are engaged in community-based dance work. Does this experience shape their identity as dancers, as my experiences as a dance teacher has shaped mine?

I teach at Drexel University, a midsize private urban college in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the fifth largest city in the U.S., located on the east coast midway between New York and Washington, D.C. We are also the third poorest city in America with 36.4% of the population earning under \$25,000 a year and pockets of deep poverty where Philadelphians earn only half the income to be considered at the federal poverty level. One such pocket of deep poverty directly abuts the university, where tuition is at \$44,000 a year coupled with housing, meal plans, and fees, bringing the total cost of attendance to nearly \$70,000 a year. In an effort to address the “town-gown” tensions, as this sadly not unusual paradigm is called, Drexel’s president has launched a series of initiatives to develop robust civic engagement between students and faculty and the surrounding community. Drexel has built the first urban extension center in the U.S. Modeled after rural colleges with agricultural programs who build extension centers to bring current research on farming techniques to local farm communities, the Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships was established to bring the expertise of the urban university to the surrounding population. The center houses a free legal clinic; public health services such as AIDs testing, vaccinations, advice on how to access health care; free computer use and instruction, vocational services ... and dance classes.

Working in community settings has had a profound effect on my students. Their eyes have been opened to the power of dance as it affects the youth of a community, something they experienced themselves as children but now see as the adults in the situation, sharing what has been precious, cathartic, expressive, and central to who they are. This phenomenon of aiding young adults (teens, really, when they begin) in teaching children has been a part of my professional practice for many years. As these programs proliferate at Drexel in accordance with presidential priorities, I decided to engage in an

action research study to look more critically at the effect that these programs are having on my students' education and on their identity as dancers.

Action Research is also known as practice-led research, practice-based research, practitioner research, and participatory action research. In many ways, action research is less a specific method and more a commitment to personal accountability, equality of voice, and inclusion of contextual factors in your research. It involves you thinking carefully about what you are doing, so as McNiff explains, "it becomes critical self-reflective practice" (McNiff, 2013, p. 23).

Reason and Bradbury (2000) describe a family of three approaches to action research: first person, second person, and third person. First-person action research is when an individual participant reflects on his or her own personal practice. Second-person action research happens when people inquire about others and how to address areas of mutual concern. Third-person action research is an individual researching with a wider community. Noffke and Somekh (2009) refer to these same three categories, giving them the labels personal, professional, and political. I would consider this project as fitting into the professional category since my students and I have related interests in seeing how working in community-based learning in dance affects the university participants and what pedagogical adjustments might result from what we learn.

The study under discussion is a multi-modal qualitative research project examining my practice as a dance educator by looking at the changes in attitudes and opinions of my students over an academic year as they engage in dance in community settings. The data upon which I am reporting is still under analysis, a part of the action research paradigm that is marked by a recursive structure. McNiff identifies 10 common steps in an action-research study:

1. Identify a research issue
2. Formulate a research question
3. Explain why the issue is important
4. Monitor practice and gather data to show what the situation is like
5. Take action
6. Continue to gather data and generate evidence

7. State the findings so far and make a provisional claim
8. Test the validity of the claim
9. Explain the significance of the research
10. Decide on potential future action, which may provide the basis for a new investigation

I would say that I am in step 4 of this process.

The bulk of the data collected in this study is interviews with participants in three different community dance projects that take place in two different community settings in close proximity to the university. There were 17 participants in the study who were mainly between the ages of 16 and 21 and who were engaged in one or more of the following projects: Wheelchair Dance with HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy, and Dance at Dornsife.

The Wheelchair Dance is a weekly project conducted in collaboration with the HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy, a residential school a few blocks from campus. Conducted by a dance-movement therapist, the program partners dancers from Drexel with wheelchair-bound teens for a yearlong process to create dances that are later performed at the HMS school and again at Drexel University. Seven to 10 Drexel dancers participate each year in this project, which has been going on since 2009. Dancers keep the same partner all year long, and there are Drexel students who have been involved with the same HMS partner for as long as four years.

A local dance company, DanceFusion, has a youth arm, Fusion II, which participates weekly in a similar project with HMS. These students were also part of the study. Ten of the 17 students in the study were involved in one of these wheelchair dance projects.

Dance at Dornsife is the umbrella name for the dance program's partnership with the Dornsife Center to offer free dance classes to youths and seniors in West Philadelphia. Weekly dance classes are taught by Drexel dance students and alumni, and mentored by Drexel dance faculty to extend the physical, intellectual, creative, and therapeutic aspects of dance to the community. Drexel University's dance program is partnering with the Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships to offer free dance

classes to youths and seniors in West Philadelphia. Ten of the 17 students in the study participated in dance at Dornsife, with three students participating in both projects.

Commitment to these projects — all of which involved once-a-week attendance — ranged from three months of participation at a minimum, and eight months at a maximum. This was the first time for 10 of the students to engage with these projects, and a second or third year of engagement for seven of the participants.

Anecdotally, students report that these experiences changed their lives, that they influenced their career choice and their perceptions of themselves and their skills. In my observations, students who participate in these community-based learning opportunities seem to have a deeper sense of themselves as adults in the world and an earned confidence, as opposed to youth entitlement. I am curious about these claims, however, and what might make these activities successful. Is it that they are youths working with their peers or with other youths? Is it that they see themselves as being in a helping role? Is it the depth of engagement or length of the project that makes a difference? I designed the following cluster of data-gathering devices to test this out, including pre- and post-administration of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem survey, pre- and post-administration of the Balanced Emotional Empathy Test, and pre-participation and post-participation interviews with 17 students.

Rosenberg and Empathy Test Data

The self-esteem and emotional empathy tests have only been looked at as aggregate scores rather than by individual questions, although that might be possible with further analysis of the empathy battery at a later time. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Test is a 10-question validated instrument with a Likert scale of four choices — strongly agree, agree, disagree, strong disagree — that is a self-report of one's confidence and sense of control in the world. It is scored from 1-30 with a score of 15 indicating low self-esteem.

Scores for the wheelchair dancers ranged from 17-27 pre-experience and 15-30 in post-experience testing. Four participants scored higher, five scored lower, and one stayed the same. For the Dance at Dornsife participants, the scores ranged from 18-30 pre-experience and 18-30 post-experience. Three participants scored higher, four scored

lower, and three scored the same. There was no apparent correlation between scores of first-time or experienced participants.

While I observe what appears to be an elevation in self-esteem for participants, this study does not bear out these claims, at least not by the measure used. It is quite possible that students who are more affected by the experience and/or are more verbal about these effects are the ones who talk with me about the experience, skewing my perceptions. There is a great deal happening in the lives of 16-21 year olds, of course, and there are many factors affecting self-esteem that may have nothing to do with this activity, but it is still safe to say that I cannot validate my own assumptions regarding the connection of community-based learning in dance and self-esteem, as assessed by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Test.

The Balanced Emotional Empathy Test is a more extensive written evaluation containing two parts, one with 22 questions and the second with 15 questions, using a Likert scale with five options. Higher numbers are associated with higher empathy and general positive outlook on the world. This empathy test is given before and after civic engagement courses in some higher-education institutions to assess the impact that community engagement is having on the students involved in regard to their empathy toward individuals with whom they are engaged. The composite scores for these tests showed a similar pattern as the Rosenberg battery.

From the wheelchair participants, four scored higher, five scored lower, and one scored the same. With Dance at Dornsife, four scored higher and six scored lower. While there may be some systematic increases in answers to specific questions in the battery that have not yet been analyzed, from this particular testing method, again, it is not possible to demonstrate that students gain empathy or a positive outlook on life in general from these experiences.

The third method of data gathering was to interview each student before and after the projects in which they participated. The 34 interviews were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed for predominant themes that recurred in the discussions. Three areas arose as a result of the interview questions: defining dance, identifying differences between this and other volunteer or community work, and career choice.

Interview Data

For all but two of the 17 students, the definition of dance changed from the inception of the project to the conclusion. These changes can be represented by the following five themes:

1. From “communication” to “a way of understanding others”
2. From “personal expression” to “something that you share”
3. From “performance” to “communication and connection”
4. From “cathartic” to “expressive,” and the reverse
5. A broader definition of dance altogether

The two students whose definitions didn’t change both defined dance as cathartic self-expression.

The interviews also revealed how students saw this activity as different from other volunteer or community work they have been involved in. All 17 participants saw a significant difference in this kind of community-based work. The differences could be described by the following four themes

1. Deeper engagement and more impact than other volunteer experiences
2. Being in charge as opposed to being an assistant
3. Becoming part of a community and a collaboration

In a culture where service hours are required of nearly all high school students and community involvement is tallied for awards in many schools and listed on countless college applications, it was refreshing to see that millennial students could be moved by deeper engagement through the arts.

Some of this did seem to affect career choice or direction. While no participants reported a complete change in career direction from this particular experience, two reported that these experiences had a significant impact on them and pointed them in a

very specific career direction in previous years. Both of these were wheelchair dance participants, and 10 participants reported knowing more about the population they wanted to work with as a result of this experience.

Conclusions

What, if any, conclusions can be drawn from this very preliminary review of my practice in engaging students in community learning? At this very early stage of analysis and reflection, I would say that I have learned four things so far:

1. Community-based learning in dance contributes to the student finding a deeper sense of impact from volunteering and a sense of belonging in a community. In addressing the town-gown tensions in my own context, this is important.
2. Change occurs in how students understand dance as an art form. Most of these changes can be described as deepening a student's understanding of dance as a mode of sharing and understanding emotion. As a dance program that educates dancers with the goal of becoming dance/movement therapists, educators, or physical therapists, this is also an impactful effect.
3. From a pedagogical standpoint, the issue of being in charge came up more than I would have expected. It is clear that the students are growing by being responsible for others in these activities. For me as an educator, I need to examine my focus in developing the students' "tool kit" for teaching and make sure that they are feeling empowered with non-patriarchal teaching paradigms — that they trust the power of dance as an activity itself to make change between and within people.
4. It appears that different methodologies capture different aspects of a complex and interactive phenomenon.

While this might seem obvious, it is worth noting. I usually dismiss even validated general survey instruments as not being relevant to the depth of examination that I am interested in pursuing, but if I am to be true to the concept of reflecting on my own practices from multiple perspectives, then I need to see what a social psychologist might see when they look at community-based learning in dance and be prepared to

understand why they do not see the same quantifiable effects that I do. Just as dance as a performing art becomes marked by fusion and the hybridization of genres, perhaps dance research, too, may become a place for multi-modal approaches.

Designing and implementing community-based learning in dance has an observable impact on our students and the youths of our community, although perhaps not what we would initially anticipate or claim it to be — such as a way to enhance empathy and self-esteem. Returning to the model of action research, one possible next action is to address issues of authority in the community setting as part of the preparatory instruction for students preparing to participate next year. We do already, of course, deal with this topic, but knowing that it is a salient feature of the experience for the students could be more overtly addressed. Subsequently, I may elect to engage a co-researcher from a community-based research consortium of which I am a part to continue to investigate dance in community-based learning from an even more multi-modal approach, having seen the benefits of discovering discrepancies between methodologies. Whatever the next steps, I look forward to exploring, reflecting, and sharing experiences with other educators in this area as we all navigate the complex phenomenon of the development of our teen and young adult dancers.

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