

# **Contemporary Dance and Community Practices**

## **One student's perspective on American Higher Education**

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**Author's note:** This paper was originally presented on July 15, 2008, in conjunction with my colleagues Mary Fitzgerald and Satu Hummasti, as part of a panel discussion at the World Dance Alliance Global Summit, entitled *Issues in Community Dance*. Our panel sought to present a historical context of American contemporary dance and community practices, while also investigating certain aesthetic and educational values of the art form and its practice within this context. Within this frame, I chose to present a personal account of my experiences as a student, facilitator and community dance practitioner.

As my colleagues and I discussed, artistic practices imbued with notions of community engagement have a long and rich cultural history. The community-based arts movement, engaging broad socially minded participation from both its artists and audience, can be traced all the way back to the advent of American industrialised society. As in other cultures, in the shift towards industrialisation and the dislocations of urbanisation, the arts became part of the separation between the division of labor and leisure, thus creating a gap between those with access and means to participate in the arts and those without (Shifferd & Lagerroos, 2006). This notion begs a number of questions. Is this where the tensional hierarchy between 'high' and 'low' art began? Is this hierarchy, which seems to be a predominant paradigm of Western culture, based on legitimate differences in artistic vision and practices? Or have we, as a society and within our own artistic communities, merely chosen to view artistic practices through separate aesthetic lenses? I am not attempting to answer these questions within the parameters of this paper, but merely pose them as possible inroads as to what is behind this sense of separation and aesthetic hierarchy within the arts. More importantly in terms of my own focus, how does this view affect our own educational values and curricula in terms of dance practice and community engagement beyond the arts world?

In the context of American contemporary dance where, as in many places, artistic resources and funding can be scarce if existent at all, the perceived separation of community based dance practice and concert dance is often

palpable. It is not only a question of funding support, but as my colleague Mary Fitzgerald has addressed, also a question of what is aesthetically valued and in what context. As a graduate student in contemporary dance practice, my current interest lies in how this separation tends to manifest itself in the dance curriculum of higher education. Here in part are some of my own thoughts and experiences from a student's point of view, as a performer and practitioner at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, on the practices of dance and community engagement within the university setting and beyond.

I came into contemporary dance as an undergraduate at the University of Montana, a moderately sized university in my mostly rural home state. Coming from a private studio background in my home town, where the culmination of our efforts was the annual recital put on for our relatives and friends, I had no idea that dance could be about anything more than tap shoes and sequins. Growing up in what was an urban environment, at least by Montana's standards, still did not afford me a wealth of meaningful cultural participation opportunities. And I had certainly never encountered the kind of dance I began to interact with in college. This kind of dancing was different. It was weird. And yet there was something intriguing about it at the same time. As my horizons began to broaden and my aesthetic tastes began to shift, I realised there was a kind of hidden power in these new genres of dancing. There was a feeling of individual empowerment and a sense of presence and embodiment that I felt while participating in the creative process, one that I had only seen glimpses of in my prior experiences with dance.

At the beginning of my college experience, I had no context in which to place this new view of dance, which I had always enjoyed doing, but had never been entirely sure of its importance in my own life. Growing up, I knew that dancing gave me both a sense of discipline and freedom. I knew I felt a part of something. There was a sense of community within the family-like atmosphere at our studio and I knew that this feeling of inclusion was important in my adolescence. But as the shift in my understanding occurred, the opportunities seemed more urgent somehow. I came to realise that dance or physical movement held the possibility of acting as a radical catalyst to engage someone's intellectual curiosity and critical analytical skills, in both its participants and observers. This for me was both a revolutionary and thrilling prospect, a sizable shift in perspective. With this new information in place, an important lesson was learned and my sense of community was magnified.

As I continued on in my studies, I became a member of the Montana Transport Company, a small modern dance repertory company funded through the university's dance department. Although I did not think much of it at the time, I realise now that the mission of the company was twofold; company operations and values were somewhat compartmentalised. On the one hand, the company was focused on learning and creating a repertory of modern dances that we performed in local concert venues, touring outside of the local community when possible. On the other hand, we also created and performed educational outreach pieces that we toured in school settings around the state, often to the more rural areas of Montana that had little or no contact with dance. These facets of the company were two separate strands

and were managed and treated as such. However, in both our concert and educational works, performance was the inherent common denominator and was implicitly valued in the mindset of the company. The audience and content may have shifted, but the core context of performance remained. And although our educational work did contain moments of audience interaction with the children, they were mainly there to watch us dance.

Within these educational works, we danced about a number of subjects like science and the weather. We illustrated concepts the students were learning in the classroom. We were embodying that radical idea that dance can be about something other than itself, and we were sharing it with these fresh faces, in the hopes of planting the seeds of future artistic engagement. The experience was incredibly valuable to me as a young performer and hopefully had some educational impact on our audiences as well. However, at the same time, this model begs the question of why tightly held notions of performance, while obviously central to what we do, are often inherently valued as the epitome of our field. If we indeed choose to view dance on a hierarchical chain, performance, replete with its issues of spectatorship and accessibility, is always on top. And while we sought to address issues of access to these performances by touring around to rural areas, still not everyone had the means or desire to see concert work.

Even if we can set the issues of accessibility and performance aside, community arts based projects often come up against other hurdles. Many within the arts world itself often call the artistic value of community-based work into question. Echoing her own resentment at this line of questioning, in her article *Dancing in Community: Its Roots in Art*, American choreographer Liz Lerman (2002) writes of her frustration about the imposed artifices upon the identities of artists and how they are supposed to behave. She essentially writes of the dichotomous view of the art world, where the individual artist is pitted against all others, where process and product are pitted against each other. She asserts that if we, as both artists and audience, subscribe to the romanticised notion of artists as isolated creative beings, we potentially rob ourselves of our own ability to create and view art as social commentary, relevant to those outside of our own bubbles. Furthermore, such a view denies others the same right, robbing the potential of those who do not consider themselves as artists, yet nonetheless also have something to express. To this end, I'm reminded of Lerman's questions that are central to the mission of her company, the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (2008): 'Who gets to dance?' 'Where is the dance happening?' 'What is it about?' 'Why does it matter?' These are the inquiries driving the work of the Dance Exchange, an inter-generational company of dance artists seeking to continually bridge the gap between the concert and community arts worlds. As such, the company's mission is one that seeks to bring dance to the doorstep of communities outside the arts world, broadening our sometimes-narrow views about the nature of dance and who gets to participate.

Community arts practitioners have often sought out collaboration with those outside the arts world in reaction to this 'artist in a creative bubble' scenario. Lerman (2002, p. 6) writes again:

We are still having to explain over and over that sparks of genius lie everywhere, and are often dormant until odd ideas and people move together. They come alive in combination with each other. I find much inspiration, pleasure and challenge in my collaboration with company members, other artists and members of my community, just as I enjoy the moments of individual creative leaps. It would be good if we could find a language that supported the idea of artistic vision crossing back and forth between collaborative genius and individual brilliance.

Lerman rallies against the hierarchical aesthetic ladder and against the idea that artistic value and community work are mutually exclusive. She argues instead for viewing dance along a spectrum where 'form and content, process and product, nurture and rigor, individual vision and collection creation' (2002, p. 7) all have important and interesting contributions to make, where art is essential all by itself and equally critical to the social well being of our societies.

Where does this view then, a shift from the dominant paradigm, leave community-based work within the university system? From a historical perspective, universities in America have played an important role in the progression of art-based community development, mostly through extension or outreach networks within the land grant based system. Land grant universities, which are publicly funded state run institutions, were created to provide equal access to educational opportunities for those who could traditionally not afford them (Shifferd & Lagerroos, 2006). In that same spirit, these institutions are a ripe setting for providing opportunities in community practice. Programs centered on reciprocal community partnerships give students the chance to leave the relative isolation of the college campus and engage in an experiential learning environment with the surrounding community at large (Hutzel, 2008). As college itself can be a kind of disorienting experience where students find themselves searching for their place in the world, a partnership based on mutual respect and shared artistic dialogues can provide a sense of belonging, camaraderie and empowerment, so important for both the students and community participants.

Speaking again from personal experience, I can attest to this notion in my graduate studies at Arizona State University. It is here that I've encountered a more collaborative service learning model of engaging artistic and community practice. In 2006, I came back to academia to attend graduate school after a number of years in the professional world where I ended up working with a wealth of populations, from hyperactive New York City elementary school kids to nursing home residents who were barely mobile. In retrospect, I am keenly aware of the challenges I faced on a daily basis while engaging in this kind of community-based work. I was forced to learn on the job, improvising my way through because, although I had performed in numerous educational works, I had little experience in actually facilitating movement sessions with various populations.

As the graduate teaching assistant for Dance Arizona Repertory Theater (DART), I was immediately thrust into the role of facilitating the experiences of

the undergraduate students, both in the studio and in how they interacted with our community partners. DART was also a company model, indeed with a focus on giving the students a chance to perform. However, it was also a model based on a more integrated and collaborative educational and community curriculum. Within this model, I realised how lucky these students were. For all the fantastic things that I was exposed to as an undergraduate, I wish I could have had this kind of practical hands-on experience. It certainly would have saved me a lot of headaches later on in my role as teacher.

Our main mission in the company was to give our students the confidence and tools they needed to lead and facilitate a number of situations, both related and not related to the practice of dance itself. We sought to mentor the students, to instill in them the kind of information they could only get through practical experience. I came to see our community partnerships as a kind of laboratory, where with the benefit of feedback and mentorship, the students could test out the kind of leadership and communication skills that would inevitably be applicable to their careers, regardless of what path they would eventually follow.

The directors of DART had spent years fostering these partnerships with youth groups from throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area. These youngsters often comprised under-served populations from low-income areas who nonetheless had a strong desire to move and express their way of life. We coached our students in how to best communicate their respective artistic visions for their projects as well as the details of the actual movement or improvisations we were teaching at the time. For example, our collaborative projects were often based on the students' own curriculum, such as a movement piece we created inspired by the students' poetry studies. We also coached them in how to handle discipline issues, strategising effective ways of dealing with disruptive behavior from the younger students, such as incorporating movement or rhythmic cues to re-focus their attention, and if necessary, explaining and instituting a time out policy. We reflected on ideas of mutual respect and how to listen to those they were working with in that they may also have something artistically valuable to say. The students were challenged to consider their role outside the university by learning about the lives of those community members who surround it. For all of the political lip service that universities often give to the notion of community outreach, DART was a program that actually implemented this notion into a concrete 'real-world' learning experience.

While DART as a company model has since been dissolved, a similar service learning model has been recently integrated into the overall student curriculum. With the help of Elizabeth Johnson, Associate Artistic Director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, students have implemented many of that company's tools into their residencies. They have also worked to expand the scope of their partnerships. The curriculum is still in its infancy, but its mission remains vital to the role that community arts can play in connecting university dance students with the greater community and in leading to a greater understanding about their craft within and beyond the academic environment.

In conclusion, I see the role of community-based dance and other arts programs as essential to the curriculum of higher education. This notion includes viewing the arts not as peripheral, but as an immediate and necessary tool to bridge the gap between those who have access to the social capital the arts can create and those who do not. In terms of dance, it also includes valuing not only performance, but also the multiple tools and aesthetics we as artists and educators have at our disposal as relevant to the art form, influencing the myriad ways we have of engaging the greater community. As arts educators, we need to give students the opportunity to hone their craft and to share their skills with the community, both through performance and also by continuing to cultivate and support service-learning programs within our curricula. Well-crafted programs that receive the kind of funding and support they deserve require students to take responsibility for their own learning and that of others. They require that we invest in the potential of students to truly be the leaders they will soon be called upon to be.

## References

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## Biographical statement

**Kristin Tovson** recently graduated with a Master's of Fine Arts degree from Arizona State University. As a dancer, she has performed primarily in New York and Boston working with Sara Sweet Rabidouh/hoi polloi. She is the recipient of a 2009-10 Fulbright grant to collaborate with Berlin-based artist Thomas Lehmen, researching choreographic forms and improvisational tools and making a new piece while living in Berlin for the year. She continues to be inspired by her work with dance in a variety of community arts contexts and hopes to continue documenting the importance of community-based work.