

## **Student performance in a dance-based humanities course at “Diversity U”**

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### **Abstract**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Temple University Department of Dance pioneered the development of dance courses for the general undergraduate university population. This paper reports on research being carried out in the latest version of a dance pluralism course developed by former Temple Dance faculty Edrie Ferdun. Titled “Embodying Pluralism,” the course is held in a dance studio and satisfies Temple’s race and diversity studies requirement. Multiple sections are offered each semester, filling quickly with students from across the University. The co-authors have each taught the course eight times and mentored graduate interns to teach it. This paper provides historical background, an overview of previous research conducted in the course, and preliminary findings of a study on students’ collaborative learning carried out in four sections during the 2011-12 academic year.

Examination of class presentation videos from a group multi-modal research project shows that individual interests cohere around dance as an agent of healing and change, for individuals, and for society. We also see students’ fascination with gender issues and with other (and one another’s) cultures as explored through dance. Further, students’ frequent choice to present on dance and disability demonstrates the broad conceptualization of multiculturalism in “Embodying Pluralism.” An important component of the multi-modal research assignment is that students are required to incorporate movement in class presentations. Approaches to this aspect of the assignment fall into broad categories of peer teaching and performance. Notably, through peer teaching, movement invention/performance, and collaboration, groups of largely untrained dancers become authorities in the dance classroom. The paper concludes with pedagogical reflections.

*Keywords:* dance pluralism, diversity, collaborative learning, radical pedagogy, multiculturalism

### **Historical Background**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Temple University Department of Dance pioneered the development of dance courses for the general university student. Edrie Ferdun and Sarah Hilsendager began to advocate for dance as a humanities course, and mentored research students interested in general education (Gen. Ed.) dance (Ferdun, 1992; Ginsburg, 1996; Frichtel, 2012). Four dance-based humanities courses were implemented in the University Core Curriculum<sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>2</sup> Courses included “Entry to Dance as Art,” “Dance in Human Society,” Dance, Movement & Pluralism,” and “Pathways in American Dance.”

by the time it was phased out in 2007, more than 6,000 students had taken part.

The predecessor of “Embodying Pluralism” (EP), created by Edrie Ferdun, was titled “Dance, Movement & Pluralism” (DMP). Bond began teaching DMP in 2001, a year after joining the Temple Dance faculty, and forged an enduring passion for its mission, content, and pedagogical challenges as represented in this excerpt from an early syllabus:

Dance, Movement & Pluralism focuses on movement and dance as a means of gaining insight into personal and cultural identity. Elements such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation will be addressed as aspects of identity that constitute the fabric of American society. Students will be actively engaged in movement activities and dance. The course will also involve viewing videotapes and live performances, reading relevant literature, doing on-site observations, writing in several genres, creating and performing movement studies, and participating in class discussions. The content of the course may evoke strong feelings and opinions.

In 2006, Bond updated the dance pluralism course for reaccreditation as part of Temple’s new General Education Curriculum. DMP’s holistic epistemology has been retained, with a greater emphasis on ethical discourse, parity of assessment across sections, and active, collaborative learning in small groups. We work with two ethical assumptions, which appear in the syllabus: (1) participants will be open to question their personal opinions and beliefs; (2) participants will show respect and tolerance for differing points of view in group work and class discussions. We acknowledge the challenge (for both students and instructors) of upholding these values. As noted by Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul (2001), “Ethics has to wake up every morning ... there is an element of drudgery to it” (p. 66).

In EP, the challenge of ethical self-scrutiny is balanced by regular opportunities to fulfill our human predilection for creating aesthetic expressions and meanings that illuminate personal and communal identity, mutuality, and difference (Dissanayake, 2000). By the end of each semester, all students have performed in solo and group studies that highlight the potential for personal and social change. We suggest to students that practicing course assumptions in class and in daily life may enhance their ability to live an artful, ethical, and meaningful life.

### **Researching dance pluralism**

Temple’s dance pluralism course has been a research site since 2001, when Bond first taught it. She and another instructor, Indira Etwaroo, collaborated on a book chapter illuminating student engagement, as well as overriding pedagogical values, during the semester of “9/11,” when two hijacked passenger jets were crashed into the “Twin Towers” of the World Trade Center in New York City (Bond and Etwaroo, 2005). The authors describe students’ verbal and nonverbal responses to the tragedy. Bond reflects on how course values of inclusion, tolerance, and embodied learning provided her anchor to facilitate students’ open disclosure of wide-ranging feeling states, stating, “I am now able to envision more concretely Norman Denzin’s (1992, p. 23) notion of ‘a radical, nonviolent pluralism that represses no one and liberates all’” (Bond and Etwaroo, 2005, p. 91).

Other publications include a Ph.D. dissertation (Frichtel, 2012), two Master's theses (Narva, 2004; Jasmin, in process), and five conference presentations (Bond, Frichtel, & Gerdes, 2009; Aleman, Frichtel, Gerdes, & Warchal-King, 2010; Frichtel, 2010; Frichtel & Jasmin, 2012). Sara Narva (2004) presents her analysis of embodied education through the "lens of experience" teaching DMP and in-depth dialogue with educational theorists and feminist writers. She shares vignettes in which students "generated knowledge through embodied conversations about issues such as race, gender and personal identity" (p. 3). As a high school dance teacher, Narva (2009) continues to develop her model of embodied education in exploration of social justice issues. Frichtel's (2012) doctoral study extends the literature on students' meanings of dance, specifically the underrepresented population of general education students in higher education dance classes. Rigorous phenomenological analysis of 64 students' reflective writings identified three themes of student engagement: freedom, transformation, and community. Perceiving a connection between experiential findings and values of critical pedagogy, the author theorizes this relationship, making a major contribution to course scholarship to date.

During 2011-2012, we, the co-authors, studied student collaborative learning in four sections of the course (120 students, including 100 females, aged 18-26). Ethnic backgrounds spanned the globe, and students also represented diverse majors, career goals, interests, family demographics, and religious backgrounds. In Fall 2011, the course was approved by Temple's Academy of Adult Learning for placement of students with intellectual disabilities. In Spring 2012, we admitted the first Academy student, a 26-year old female with Down Syndrome.

The purpose of the study is to examine student participation in a group multi-modal research and presentation project<sup>3</sup> that fulfills General Education information literacy requirements. Sources of data include students' written reflections on assignment process and performance, video-recordings of presentations, assignment artifacts (e.g. PowerPoint presentations and photographs), and an anonymous student evaluation survey. For this major assignment, students in appointed groups of four or five research and create a presentation (15-20 minutes) based on a topic of shared interest that is relevant to the course content and objectives.

Each group works with a selected topic, divides work equally, and incorporates text, movement, and images. Students are assessed overall on their thoughtful selection and effective use of information and media. The remainder of this paper offers a preliminary analysis of one source of data (video) for one portion of the multi-modal group presentations – the movement section; a small, yet comprehensive sampling of student reflections on the assignment as a whole; and concluding pedagogical reflections. Assessment criteria for the movement portion ask for "embodiment of the topic" and "commitment to performance." Among the 23 presentations, movement sections highlighted two approaches: teaching and performing.

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<sup>3</sup> We use the term *multi-modal* to encompass movement as content and method in research and inter-textual presentation.

### **Teaching**

Peer teaching took a range of forms: some groups taught movement that they had learned from their video research. For “Gender dominance in ballroom dance,” students taught pairs the basic tango steps through demonstration. Another group in the same class researched gender roles *across* genres related to their own cultural backgrounds (ballet, waltz, hip-hop, Irish step, and Scottish Highland dancing).

Students also taught each other through guided improvisation. A student group that focused on the therapeutic effects of contact improvisation asked the class to divide into four corners of the room, then simply instructed, “Contact improvise and meet in the center.” During “Originality in dance,” students slightly altered a movement as it passed from person to person around a circle. Students also employed a spontaneous group composition structure involving a simple instruction, a short work time, and sharing with the class. For example, “In a small group, make a gesture that is a stereotype of an ethnicity,” or, “In a small group, dance a sexy movement.” In “Glam rock: Sex, drag and rock and roll,” students created and shared their glam rock album covers (body sculptures).

### **Performing**

Still other groups crafted and performed choreography. In a presentation on global warming, students performed a creative dance based on the Mayan civilization’s attunement with nature. “Dance and violence” offered performances of cowboy gun fights/duels, Krumping, and street dance. We noted that this group did not include American slavery as one of their examples, such as when slaves were forced to dance on ships during the Middle Passage, a historical phenomenon discussed in the course (Allen, 2001).

Some students performed role plays. For example, one group depicted a club scene in which a female protected her friend from a male’s “advance from behind.” In life, the male actor is gay; in class, he spoke openly on the experience of performing “other” (i.e. a heterosexual male). “Body image in dance: Ballet, salsa, hip hop” combined teaching a hip hop motif with performance of a salsa duet and role play of a mock ballet class, complete with the privileged male stereotype with two left feet. An entire presentation highlighted “Stereotypes in ballet.”

### **Collaborating**

One of the goals of researching this particular assignment is to learn about our students’ experiences of collaboration, an oft-cited 21<sup>st</sup> century skill (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2012). We observed a close collaboration in this assignment in all four sections: most students chose to work in groups and appreciated the efforts of their peers. Further, through the choices they made to perform, teach, and guide dance, they envisaged their peers learning in collaboration, not by themselves. None of the observed working groups asked their peers to create movement in solo, nor did they pursue the common technique class model of unison, yet self-focused, movement. Instead, they performed for their peers, guided group improvisation, or initiated a group experience, much like the group that set up a dance performance “rave” in the classroom.

During the movement components of the multi-modal presentations, we observed much talking, laughter, and interaction between students, including peer feedback. “Embodying Pluralism”

students teach each other in a dance classroom where ideas and movements emerge from questions, discussions, reflections, and open structures. Further, in its current embodied learning model, the structure of the course itself values dance as knowledge. Unlike many dance classes, the teachers (both the students and the instructor) offer no critique of the dancing; feedback is primarily descriptive and empathic.

Looking at the range of presentation titles, we can readily see how individual interests cohere around dance as healing and as an agent of change for individuals and for society. We also see students' fascination with gender issues, and over the years, an increasing incidence of feminist values. For example, in "Stripping and pole dancing," five female students developed a nuanced discourse on the topic, highlighting female empowerment in these genres. Students are fascinated with other (and one another's) cultures through dance, realizing that one's cultural (or gender) identity need not limit bodily expression or understanding due to difference. One group researched multiple perspectives on hip hop dance across five countries: the USA, Germany, France, Korea, and Japan. A cultural/historical overview of Zumba illuminated sources in hip hop and geographic locations in Africa, India, and Colombia, while another group studied gender roles in Salsa, African dance, American modern dance, and Bollywood. "Vogue: A cultural dance sensation," "What is America – through the lens of dance," and a presentation simply titled "Culture," added further texture to the course's collective meanings of dance pluralism and situated multiculturalism.

Notably, students demonstrate their understanding of dance as a mode of expression and meaning-making through the movement segments of the multi-modal presentations. As they plan their presentations, they must imagine their peers learning via embodiment, considering how best to illustrate their research. This is the point in the semester when we talk about the course running itself. During these presentations, the students become experts on their topic as well as on embodied learning. Both research topics and movement choices show us how students understand the possibilities of dance.

We are currently in the preliminary stages of analyzing student questionnaires and written reflections. While assignments requiring collaboration have an intrinsic logic in a course about pluralism, a fair number of students entered the assignment with a dislike for group projects. Here are a few examples of students' post-assignment perspectives on the value of the group multi-modal assignment as a whole, as well as on collaborative learning:

Our strengths were our abilities to compromise and make the project fun; it didn't feel like work since it was enjoyable. (male, 18, undeclared major)

The assignment was unclear and we had to do excessive, unnecessary research. More dance! (anonymous)

If I could do the presentation all over again, I would because it is fun to educate those who don't know. (African-American, female, age 21, Broadcasting)

Group collaboration was unequal and inefficient. (anonymous)

The university would be the last time that I am absolutely required to do a group project. Perhaps I will be in group projects in the future, but it will be totally selected people who see the same goal at high level. I understand that it is important to have experiences working in groups; however I think it is enough by now having those experiences. (Japanese, female, age 22, Painting and Glass)

People usually dread group projects and find them annoying. I've done at least four this year and this was definitely the most enjoyable one and the least stressful. I believe it's a combination of not only the people, but the class and what we do together. Every presentation was intriguing to watch – I loved it. (Irish-American, female, age 21, Biology)

### **Pedagogical reflections**

After multiple experiences of teaching “Embodying Pluralism,” we have reflected often on the rich diversity inherent in each student group, as well as the ways in which the course connects dance to social activism. However, this study has highlighted an aspect of course epistemology that we have tended to overlook; specifically through peer teaching and collaboration, groups of largely untrained dancers become authorities in the dance classroom. As we reflect, we realize that not only is this an “introduction to dance” course that uniquely investigates personal, social, and cultural aspects of dance, but it is also an environment where general education students teach each other to dance.

A number of writers have stressed the importance of student agency and equality in the construction of course content. bell hooks (1994) writes, “Acknowledging that we are bodies in the classroom has been important for me, especially in my efforts to disrupt the notion of professor as omnipotent, all-knowing mind ... We are all subjects in history” (pp. 138-139). In EP, students complete biographical questionnaires at the beginning of the course. Instructors draw on this pool of information about students’ backgrounds, interests, and visions to design content that acknowledges the inherent and specific diversities of the class (Bond, 2010).

Theorists have commented on the dearth of multicultural content in higher education dance programs in the United States (Bond, 2010; Musil, 2010; Risner & Stinson, 2010). Risner and Stinson (2010) highlight the lack of courses, such as “Embodying Pluralism,” that not only teach appreciation of non-Western dance forms through mere exposure, but also “adapt a multicultural perspective or integrate wider multicultural identities” (p. 5). As evidenced in the above-described presentation topics, EP students research a wide range of genres, including social and popular dance forms. Our students’ frequent choice to present on dance and disability demonstrates the broad conceptualization of multiculturalism in EP classes. This more pluralistic understanding of diversity education can also be seen in the K-12 sector. Oxfam’s *Curriculum for Global Citizenship*, for instance, attempts to facilitate understanding and knowledge in social justice and equity, diversity, sustainable development, co-operation, and empathy (Oxfam Education, 2012).

Bond (2010) acknowledges the challenge of integrating multicultural content in dance major programs that emphasize ballet and modern dance, asking “how many multiple dance cultures can be represented with integrity ... which cultures should be included and who decides” (p.

129). It seems inexcusable, for example, to neglect contributions of the US's most prominent racial (African American) and ethnic (Latino/a) minorities in higher education dance curriculum, as well as the core ecological values of indigenous dance (Doolittle and Elton, 2001).

Regarding African sources of American dance, Monroe (2011) finds that current curricular choices and pedagogies communicate to her college students that African dance is not a legitimate technique as compared to modern and ballet. Kerr-Berry (2004, 2012) calls for a paradigm shift that draws from the history and culture of students of color into dance curriculum; she acknowledges Temple University dance for its efforts in this direction (Kerr-Berry, 2012). McCarthy Brown (2009) advocates for an exploration of culture in teaching methodology, not just content: "Create a class culture that incorporates other cultures and establishes new customs," and "openly dialogue about the impact of stereotypes in dance" (p. 122). Such strategies have been employed in Temple's dance pluralism courses since their inception.

For their multi-modal presentations, students face many of the same challenges that we do when teaching this course. It is not easy to build a lesson that moves seamlessly between video viewing, discussion, and dancing. It can feel daunting to lead a discussion of sensitive topics of body, gender, race, and sexuality through movement and readings that address racism in the United States. Can students connect swing dance steps to the idea that African American vernacular dance has been appropriated by white America (Dixon-Gottschild, 2002)? If we ask them to explore oppression through a single movement, can they actually feel it? Frichtel's (2012) research suggests that, with practice, students can develop empathy for historical phenomena of oppression:

In the beginning I took it as a silly activity, a joke. However, as time progressed, I actually felt the weight of the hammer as I swung it to the ground and was forced to keep picking it back up in fear of a whipping. I was able to feel this burden. (18, freshman, white, female. End-of-semester reflection. p. 230)

Through the movement section of the presentation, our students explored other cultures, practiced ethical pluralism, critiqued their society, and expressed social change they hope to see. While we are the first to admit that we can over-romanticize the "promise of embodied pluralism," for us, this is nothing short of special.

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