

Constructing empathy: Perspectives and biases in classrooms abroad

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Abstract

This research was sparked by separate experiences of two American dance educators who taught internationally, and was driven by their shared desire to understand how dance is used to cultivate empathy among youth in conflicted regions of the world. As disseminators of Western dance education, the authors question the role of exported Western pedagogies – either those mandating a teacher-focused hierarchy within the classroom, or else those advocating a student-centered, democratic model – to effectively address the needs of youth living in conflicted regions, many of whom are unfamiliar with the principles and practices of democracy.

This paper compares the aims and approaches of several dance artists and organizations working with youth in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, assessing effective teaching methods used to cultivate empathy among youth during times of conflict. The dance organizations included are implemented and administered locally by those familiar with political dynamics, cultural norms, and educational models of the region. Through interviews with program directors, dance artist-educators, and participants (occurring June-July 2012), presenters reflect on potential conflicts between cultural norms in regions of conflict, and assumptions about empathic pedagogy as influenced by democratic, capitalist, or Christian values. These principles and others, as discovered in partnership with local dance artists and organizations, will help broaden and refine methodologies for those individuals and organizations working with youth in conflicted regions around the world.

Keywords: Middle East, empathy, pedagogy, conflict, democracy

Introduction

Empathy is generally understood as the ability to see things from another's perspective, or to feel and share similar emotional responses. Empathic pedagogy, those teaching practices and philosophies that cultivate empathy within the classroom, has developed through work of scholars and practitioners in fields of arts and education over the past century. The English term "empathy" was translated in 1908 from the German "Einfühlung," first used in 1873 by German aesthetician Robert Vischer (as cited by Foster, 2011) to describe the process of viewing a painting or sculpture. This process, Vischer claimed, involved a distinctly physical experience whereby the viewer, through imagination and kinesthetic sensation, would "enter into and inhabit" a work of art and respond emotionally to the physical sensations of shape, weight, space, gravity, or sense of momentum the body felt within the work (pp. 10-11).

Meanwhile, in Western education, the 20th century experienced a shift away from a Cartesian model of learning that separated mind and body and privileged rational thought over emotion. Pioneers such as John Dewey (1916, 1934), Michael Polanyi (1958), and Heinz Kohut (1959) embraced the emotional, interactive, and even embodied aspects of learning. No longer was learning defined as information transmitted to students and recalled by rote memorization. Students were encouraged to learn through lived experience, interpersonal relationships, and engaging facilitators. Such tenets are embraced in the writings of 21st century dance educators.

Roslyn Arnold (2003), a scholar in the field of empathic pedagogy, defined empathy as the “ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of self and others” (p. 13). It means “being able to imagine, often intuitively and instinctively, how the other feels” (p. 20). While Arnold’s definition perhaps lacks the original physical underpinnings of Visser’s *Einführung*, “empathy” in art and education continues to imply a type of intersubjective experience, a decentering that occurs in order to find a common point of engagement with others. A three-part model proposed by American education philosopher Martha Nussbaum (as cited in Arnold, 2003) offers another framework in which we can understand empathic practices:

1. **Critical examination** of oneself and one’s traditions;
2. **Citizens** [who are] bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern;
3. **“Narrative imagination,”** meaning, “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.” (pp. 9-11)

Our research compares insights from personal teaching experiences with information gleaned from interviews with seven dance educators from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Through these interviews, we seek to identify the needs of youth living in regions of conflict, and the empathic teaching practices used by local dance educators to address these needs. By doing this, we seek to understand the practices, aims, and objectives of empathic pedagogy from a more global perspective, and to explore the politics within our own teaching practices in order to become more effective, empathic dance educators when working abroad.

Shared experiences, diverting objectives

Generally, most of the examples of effective teaching practices shared by dance educators in the Middle East paralleled teaching practices used in our own classrooms when building empathy. Individual and group improvisation, cueing and coaching techniques, student-led warm-ups, codified techniques rooted in tradition, and student-centered choreography were similar, sometimes identical to those practices we use in our classrooms.

However, we found it difficult to discuss the principle of empathy. When asked specifically how empathy is taught, we sensed a divergence from our assumed objectives of empathic practices. Sometimes, “the other” simply could not be accommodated in regions of conflict. This difficulty surprised us and redirected our research to question whether the concept of understanding the “other” as presented in Nussbaum’s model is a product of Western values

of tolerance, individuality, and ideals affiliated with peace that ultimately may not be applicable for classrooms in regions of conflict.

Arnold (2003) acknowledged, “The concept of empathic intelligence is an outcome of liberal, democratic, student-centered educational philosophy” (p. 5). Echoing Arnold’s acknowledgement, we suggest that empathic pedagogy cannot be an assumed amoral experience. Upon examination, empathic pedagogy may actually be driven by democratic, capitalist, or Christian ideals, unknowingly altering goals, aims, and outcomes when teaching in non-Western classrooms.

Democratic empathy: Self-expression, individualism, and diversity

Western democratic frameworks support freedom of self-expression and tolerance of diverse opinions. In dance, these freedoms are manifest in activities rooted in improvisation and choreography. Dance educators often guide students towards “thinking outside the box,” “being different,” or “breaking new ground.” The value of individuals may be assessed for their ability to “stand out from” the group; indeed, individual development may be encouraged while group cohesion is minimized.

Like Western dance classrooms, organizations we interviewed also value creative self-expression and improvisation. In El-Funoun, a dance company preserving and promoting Palestinian culture, outreach sessions held with youth in the West Bank generally begin with a dabkeh-inspired improvisational warm-up, and participants take turns leading the group in improvised variations of traditional dabkeh steps. Group members watch and model, with little speaking taking place. Leadership roles transfer spontaneously and frequently. Movement phrases generated through improvisation might be developed by an individual participant and taught to small groups (N. Baker, personal communication, June 6, 2012).

Although improvisation is used frequently within El-Funoun, the purposes for utilizing self-expressive activities are focused primarily on building group interdependence rather than individual diversity. Anas Abuoun, an El-Funoun trainer, uses group discussion and opinion-sharing with improvisation to create a fluid, equitable relationship between dancer and choreographer, “to cross boundaries *with* each other and give (them) a chance to feel, learn and share *with* each other” (A. Abuoun, personal communication, June 7, 2012). El-Funoun’s website describes its mission as “present[ing] the long-suppressed Palestinian culture before other nations” and suggests that members of the mostly volunteer-based organization are “motivated by the vision of the Troupe more than by any other factor” (<http://el-funoun.org/about/about.html>). El-Funoun also uses a highly organized system of verbal feedback assessment accompanying outreach workshops, company rehearsals, public performances, and international tours (H. Awwad, personal communication, June 11, 2012). This assessment process generates an ongoing feedback loop that keeps members connected to one another and accountable for a group goal. We see a traditional hierarchical structure, one that might support an individual artistic agenda, being turned on its side to promote a shared vision, in this case, preserving and exporting Palestinian culture through dance, and developing leaders that can represent a group voice.

When we compare the purposes of self-expression within Western and non-Western classrooms, the focus on individualism in Western dance education reflects and perhaps perpetuates a more general cultural tendency to value the “one” over the “group.” Frequently, the individual is celebrated and given full freedom while the group is expected, possibly even discouraged at times from offering edits, corrections, or adjustments. Often, self-referential activities may reinforce the idea that diversity is more highly valued than shared commonalities. In David Brooks’s book, *The Social Animal*, he referenced a study by Richard Nisbett that found that American six-year-olds make three times more references to themselves than non-American six-year-olds (Brooks, p. 141). Other studies have found that when asked about themselves, Americans tend to exaggerate ways in which they are different and better than the crowd, whereas non-Americans in the same study exaggerate the traits they have in common and the ways that they are interdependent (Brooks, p. 142).

In Western pedagogy, a democratic focus on self-expression and individualism is often the way in which empathy and tolerance is fostered in groups. It is assumed, that by sharing such individual explorations, the group is exposed to multiple perspectives and aesthetics that will develop qualities connected to empathy, such as tolerance, acceptance, and non-judgment.

According to our interviews, however, youth living in regions of conflict may be better served when unity, rather than individualism, is cultivated. Western dance educators teaching there should consider how to minimize those democratic approaches that overemphasize individualism and instead structure such self-expressive activities to cultivate greater group cohesion and commonality.

Capitalist empathy: Self-examination through choice-making and multiplicity

Like democracy, capitalist frameworks can also help illuminate approaches to, and assumptions about, teaching empathy. Arkadi Zaidas, an independent choreographer working in Syria and a former dancer with Batsheva Dance Company, suggested that students coming from thriving capitalist economies enjoy an abundance of opportunity and exposure to many choices that develop individual preferences, interests, and even at young ages, a strong sense of love and hate. In a dance class, privileged students may be able to more quickly evaluate multiple options, select a favorite idea, and find ways to develop that idea. Within a capitalist framework, empathy, and the Western approach for acceptance of diverse ideas and perspectives, is served through multiplicity, or the abundance of choices (A. Zaidas, personal communication, July 8, 2012). Capitalist consumers, Zaidas suggested, have the opportunity to simultaneously manage numerous options, choose a product that best meets their needs, and respect the choices made by others, even if different from their own. Likewise, as Western educators, we may also offer a multitude of choice-making opportunities with the intent to cultivate tolerance for diversity, a quality of empathy.

Yet, in his work with underprivileged youth in Syria, Zaidas suggested that students from depressed economic backgrounds lack exposure to options, making the task of creating and selecting movement ideas challenging. From his experience, these youth had not had practice nor opportunity to explore multiple choices or to determine individual preferences through multiplicity.

Zaidas suggested that presenting students with multiple options too quickly can overwhelm their creative processes and choice-making experiences. He suggested the giving of simple and well-structured movement ideas to help under-privileged students gradually experience multiplicity of movement options and to allow time for students to develop their individual preferences. He explained:

When [students] don't have enough opportunity in their lives, they don't have enough frames to hold onto. In a way, you try to create a ... frame or connection that they can trust ... I use a simple task of "stop, go, sit, run," which is fast, striving ... fun, and free. Something really simple that has fast changes and different stimulations that help the students focus and it gives them ... good hooks to [connect] to. In the end, it was quite amazing. I gave them the most complicated assignment with the movement, music, and they were all very on top of the challenge. (A. Zaidas, personal communication, July 8, 2012)

Western educators may expect students to experience empathy through skills associated with capitalism, as referenced in Nussbaum's first factor, Self-Examination. These skills include building preferences, managing multiple options, and navigating complex choice-making activities. Western educators should consider their own economic frameworks and references in the classroom, and how those values parallel the realities of students unaccustomed to abundant living.

Other capitalist traditions, such as commodification and competition, may negatively impact students' ability to empathize. Commodification in dance occurs whenever students are encouraged to market, sell, or produce a product for an audience seen as consumers. Commodification shifts dance content, aesthetics, technical skill and virtuosity to satisfy consumer demands. Students may view their art as products and themselves as objects, rather than subjects capable of meaningful, interpersonal relationships. Likewise, competitive practices such as awards, special recognition, auditions, selections committees, and final performances for profit or other kinds of "currency," such as popularity and prestige, can foster an environment of inequality, inferiority, or resentment, all of which redirect students' understanding of dance and its value. While healthy competition within the classroom may at times increase motivation or even artistic quality, we propose that these capitalistic-based teaching practices inherently decrease the intrinsic values of students' experiences, and possibly stunt empathic sensibilities that process-oriented, community-centered dance practices might better cultivate.

Christian empathy: Morality and transcendence

Discussions of empathy inherently walk alongside discussions of morality. As any moral code influences practices and aims of empathic teaching, we are specifically interested in how Christianity from a Western perspective may shape empathic experiences in the classroom.

Although religious influences were not discussed directly in our interviews, dance artists and educators did express a desire for aesthetics and pedagogy to represent local issues and attitudes. Omar Rajeh, artistic director of Maqamat Dance Company in Beirut, described the quest among a young generation of Lebanese dance practitioners to understand "how we are in

our bodies” (O. Rajeh, personal communication, July 4, 2012). Western educators should consider how their own aesthetic preferences and pedagogy may be shaped by their own religious teachings of the body. Such teaching may include the nature of the relationship between the body and spirit, or definitions and experiences of transcendence.

For example, the concept of spatial placement of heaven and hell might translate into preferences given towards the high space, detached from the earth. Similarly, ideas of sacredness, modesty, and morality related to specific body parts may encourage or discourage certain physical expressions. The concept of an immortal spirit housed within a mortal body informs definitions and experiences of transcendence within Christianity. Such experiences are described as being “filled with,” or “carried away by,” the Holy Spirit and may translate into aesthetic preferences given towards large use of space, or movement that radiates from the center-out, beyond the distal ends, as if energy, or the spirit, could escape the bounds of the physical body.

Religious tenets may also inform the very definition and experience of empathy. In Christianity, this framework is shaped by a belief in the unique worth of each individual as a “child of God.” The creating/choreographing student may be seen as an embodied microcosm of a Supreme Creator, the originator of all beauty, art, and dance, and empathy within the classroom may become a way to model the principle of mercy, taught by an Atoning Christ, who commanded, “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:39, *King James Bible*). Within this context, Nussbaum’s third factor of humanity in which one seeks to imagine the “emotions and wishes and desires” of “one different than oneself” seems to parallel the Biblical commandment to “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44). Do language or activities used within the classroom unintentionally further a Christian agenda without taking time to fully understand the complex dynamics in regions of social or political conflict? Or is “loving your enemy” an over-simplistic remedy used to build peace?

Of course, most educators hope their students experience a change of heart, a transcendence or transformation altering the physical, intellectual, artistic, and social self. Empathic experiences of any kind can be seen as a transformative, or conversion, process, convincing students to empathize with others whose moral codes may be different. Western educators should carefully consider how these moral codes are explored and reinforced in the classroom, realizing that religious cultures, subscribed to or not, may influence individual interpretations of right and wrong, mercy and justice, and ultimately, empathy.

Conclusion

Empathic practices of Western dance educators may be shaped by the nuanced perspectives of democratic, capitalistic, or Christian ideals. Identifying purposes and goals behind empathic practices in conflicted classrooms abroad can help expand frameworks and construct new pedagogies that better meet the needs of those with whom we work. Honoring local perspectives and experiences is key in this effort. We look forward to continuing research to help us adjust Western assumptions, teaching methods, and views about empathy when working abroad.

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All citations of this paper from this source should include the following information:

In S.W. Stinson, C. Svendler Nielsen & S-Y. Liu (Eds.), *Dance, young people and change: Proceedings of the daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit*. Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan, July 14th – 20th 2012. <http://www.ausdance.org/> [Accessed on xx date]
ISBN 978-1-875255-19-1