Chapter 11

Story Dances: Identity and Power in the Dance Classroom

Julia Ann Crawford
J. Crawford Dance, USA

ABSTRACT

The motivation of this chapter is to add to the literature about the practice of teaching dance with a critical and somatic approach and to contribute to illuminating the reality of negotiating power in the dance classroom and the complexity of the influence of cultural values on this dynamic. This chapter reflects on the process of teaching a dance curriculum that explores identity to three different cultural groups in order to gain knowledge of best practices for nurturing somatic authority and providing meaningful choice opportunities while developing dance skills.

INTRODUCTION

Dance has always been a vessel for healing and transformation. People and communities have engaged in dance as part of rituals for healing, war, and celebration throughout all of time. As the more performative traditions of dance from the European world developed, forms such as Classical Ballet and Modern Dance, which is steeped in the appropriation of the aesthetics and costuming of other culture’s dance rituals, so did an authoritarian teaching tradition. In this tradition dancer’s strive to perfectly mimic the command of the teacher rather than experience catharsis through movement. When dance is taught and engaged with in this way, it is stripped of its healing attributes and the dance classroom perpetuates oppression and manifests disorders with social, psychological, physical, and spiritual ramifications.

This chapter offers an approach to invite healing possibilities into the dance classroom and spaces where dance is utilized through nurturing the whole person, cultivating artistic voice, promoting ownership of story, and nurturing people to reconnect to their body as they develop and explore dance skills. The author’s primary goal is social justice in dance through teaching approach, class content, inclusion of bodies, and access to excellence in dance. The author strives towards a critical and somatic teaching approach in order to promote healing, wholeness, transformation, and holistic development (Shapiro, 1999; Friere, 2000; Green, 1998).

Western dance education has a long-standing custom of authoritarianism in the dance classroom. A common outcome of authoritarian teaching in dance is the systematic breaking down of dancers to be built up in the image of the teacher (Smith, 1998). As dancers submerge their unique identities and surrender their authority in the dance classroom, ‘docile bodies’ are created (Green, 1998). The dancers become objects that the teacher or choreographer uses for their personal artistic creation, shaping and molding them into their own image and vision (Smith, 1998). Dancers as objects build their skill from the outside in without attaching the depth of their experience, story, and expertise of their own body and self.

In the authoritarian tradition, dance teachers often hold absolute power over dance students in deeply harmful ways. Smith (1998) writes, “I understood the dance classroom to be an ideal climate for authoritarian behavior. The student has already consented to being in a situation in which he or she is usually attempting to replicate as perfectly as possible the example and the demands of the teacher” (p. 128). The definitive power exerted over dancers often includes a predesigned mold the dancer is expected to make him or her self fit. This mold often includes very specific body types and the perfection of skills that are not necessarily anatomically possible for all bodies.

However, in order to continue participating, dancers must obey and adhere to the rules determined by those in power (Kelso, 2003). Smith (1998) offers, “Because dancers are generally scantily clad, evenly distributed in space, and eager to please, they are easily observed and controlled. A dancer who will not or cannot participate at the general group level is easily picked out” (p. 128). This predetermined perfection limits those that may participate to only the elite few that are able to fulfill the requirements. Clement (2007) writes, “The body is under constant scrutiny and within the dance discipline, failing to acquire the ideal body shape and mannerisms is grounds for exclusion” (p. 51).

There is an ever-present comparison to perfection that is perpetuated by constant surveillance and correction from the teacher and the obligation to observe oneself in the mirror and consistently “fix” one’s self throughout dance class. The experience of constant surveillance leads to self-surveillance (Smith, 1998). Smith (1998) writes, “The dance classroom, with its mirrors, watchful teachers, and self-critical students, is a key site for both the external and internal surveillance of dancing bodies…” (p. 131).

These norms in dance education provide that dance students are often not given the opportunity to think critically or truly engage their creativity. The teacher decides the values of the classroom culture, requiring dancers to submerge their own values and life stories upon entering the dance classroom. Through this paradigm dependence on the dance teacher is created: “Dancers rely on their teachers for support and guidance, but also for approval and selection of parts in ballets. This leads to a generalized fear instilled in the dancers” (Kelso, 2003).

The depth of this control is alarming as dancers begin to interpret attention that tears them down as positive, “…a criticism, even a hurtful one, can be taken as a compliment because at least the management is not ignoring her” (Kelso, 2003). Smith (1998) also offers, “In addition, because dancers are typically dependent on the teacher’s feedback, any comments or lack of comments take on exaggerated import… Unfortunately the line between what we as dancers term a correction and what others might call an insult can be quite thin” (p. 128). Largely, dancers have come to accept abusive treatment as normal.

While this describes the worst of authoritarianism in the dance classroom it is important to note that it is present, albeit at varying degrees, in many dance classrooms even those that aim to implement holistic development teaching practices. Clement (2007) writes, “Even in dance classes where collaborative learning is encouraged, students ultimately do not question their teachers or the information they are supposed to unequivocally accept” (p. 41). This is in part because there is great importance placed on specific
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