

*Dance is full of connections to our everyday lives and loves.*  
**And other thoughts on Teaching and Learning Dance**

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Jennifer Emerson Foreman

*Teaching & Learning Vision Statement.*  
12/10/2008

*Dance is full of connections to our everyday lives and loves.*

I believe in the power of communication inherent in the human body. Dance is a means of uniting humanity through our common emotions and desires. In this way, dance may be seen as a global art form in that it has the potential to transcend boundaries. As outlined in the National Dance Education Organization's (2005) Standards for Teaching and Learning Dance in the Arts, "the byproducts of learning dance include the instrumental benefits of physical health, emotional maturation, social awareness, cognitive development, and academic achievement" (p. 5). Dance Studies imparts discipline and awareness, not only to dancers, but to all those who are interested in gaining tools toward reaching their full potential.

For me, teaching and learning dance is about building a trust with oneself and drawing a greater awareness to the awesome capabilities that lie within us. Dance education pioneer H'Doubler (1940) acknowledges that movement can be both a vehicle for communicating meaning, as well as a source of that meaning. We hold wisdom and experience in our bodies. Yet it must be sought after, examined, and reflected on. I recently started to watch Sesame Street with my son, and have discovered the brilliance of the Muppet Elmo. Elmo is always curious. In every episode he says, "Elmo wants to know more. How can we find out more?" I find myself quoting Elmo to my classes in order to encourage them to continually work to find deeper physicality and meaning in their movement. This curiosity is what Freire (1998) emphasizes as the "creative force of the learning process" (p. 32). We must not take experience for granted but use it towards productive ends, recognize the valuable tools it provides (Dewey, 1938). H'Doubler (1940) says, "Although movement sensations are important to all life activities, with most people they escape recognition" (p.77). My goal as a teacher of dance is to urge these

recognitions. However it takes an incredible daring to explore dance in this way; you must reveal something of yourself to achieve and fully appreciate this way of dancing.

Students enter the classroom with many preconceived ideas about what dance is and varied levels of technical training. I stress that dance is something that lives within each one of us. My process is to guide the discovery of our common language. The theme is: this is not movement you don't know. This is movement you have known since you took your first breath, your first step – since you as a newborn held onto – or let go of – your mother or father's finger. In this way, dance becomes relevant training/experience to all ages and all levels – professional, pre-professional, children and lay persons.

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Artistically and intellectually, I have led an integrated life, where seemingly disparate elements nurture one another and give a sense of unity to my work. The communities I have been a part of have upheld a strong belief in artistic and academic development as interdependent goals for individual growth. Both my high school and college programs valued an “artist-scholar” model of education – and the notion that life experience is perhaps the best training for a performer. Like Goodlad (Remer, 1994), I believe that “the arts are a means of expressing and interpreting human behavior and experience” (p. 27). Being able to infuse your work with the real stuff of living can bring the greatest depth to artistic expression. Furthermore, just as our lives are a continual process, so is the process of making and practicing art. Baldacchino (in press) observes, “Art is never static... It returns into itself and refolds back and forward, and is never contained by or within a fixed and objectively defined meaning” (243). This is why art, and for my purposes here, dance, is such a useful tool for applying broadly across disciplines to

the ‘stuff’ of our lives. It promotes the notion that possibility has no bounds so long as we are willing to fold and “refold” back into ourselves.

As a learner, I have always been driven, disciplined, and able to ‘make connections.’ Cross-disciplinary integration has been essential to my living; I believe it is an important goal for the livelihood of humanity in general. Having the arts as a central part of my childhood and having attended a performing arts high school, I know how special it is to have an environment rich in the arts, from which one can develop imagination, curiosity and sensitivity to the world around them. I believe that the arts are an important aspect of educating the whole person. The creative process is inherently educational – and it stretches the imagination in such a way that you are given the opportunity to explore and discover deeper parts of oneself. As well, it can foster a greater compassion for the human condition and therefore promote greater tolerance (Remer, 1994; NDEO, 2005).

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I grew up in a family of educators. I swore - and I think my parents (both teachers) encouraged me – **not** to be a teacher – you won’t make enough money, your work will never be truly valued, the system so often works against you. Yet here I find myself – a teacher at heart - and hopeful about it. Freire (1998) asserts that teaching and learning are processes constantly in dialogue: “It is the process of learning that made (and makes) teaching possible” (p.31). Teaching and learning evolve from human activity, the necessity to figure things out – through our human nature to share. Perhaps this is why I could never avoid the role of teacher as I engaged with the world around me.

I love to collaborate; I love to help others arrive at a new place, a more fulfilled place. In performing, what I love is the exchange of energy, thoughts, imaginations between myself and

my fellow performers, the audience, the music, and the space. This exchange is the same in teaching – particularly in teaching dance, where the medium of our expression is the body – a dialogue emerges in the classroom. For I cannot simply “teach what I know.” That is a part of it; I have worked and trained and thought long and hard about what dance is to me. I do bring a certain authority to the classroom; yet as with living, one must remain open to change, new perspectives, and the unexpected – this all comes into play when I teach a class (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1998).

Baldacchino (in press) says, “We do art by engaging with a world of possibilities that is operated by the imagination... Imagination is at the heart of praxis” (p.243). If I use my imagination, and insight the imaginations of my students, we are all the richer for it. There are so many ways to approach teaching dance. Creativity is primary as I try to reach each student in a way that will be accessible and useful to him/her. Mosston (1998) discusses several “modes” of teaching, as well as the importance of setting goals, making adjustments, and assessing lessons. His discussion is particularly important in bringing to light the amount of awareness I must bring into the classroom. I find that I move between command, task and reciprocal styles depending on the particular type of class or my specific goals. For example, if I am teaching class that meets regularly over a period of time, I may start off with command in order to build a movement vocabulary, then I may incorporate some assignments and activities where the students work together to create dance studies or teach elements of the class to their peers. This kind of variation helps me both in assessing how the students are internalizing what I have taught, and also gives me a glimpse into another side of their personalities I may not otherwise have known. Occasionally I assign written work/reflection on videos, readings or classroom experiences. We

may have fewer post impact discussions as a class, but through our actions I am able to gain a clear picture with which to assess their learning.

On the other hand, when I see a group of kids in a school for a “one shot” lesson, I tend to incorporate much more discussion. Interestingly, I tend to use less command style with these types of classes and try to incorporate the student’s creativity right away in order to engage with and know them better, given the short amount of time we have (Mosston, 1998). This also reflects, I think, my priority of giving them the tool of movement as language, as a means of expressing themselves. My emphasis with these classes is not a kind of technical mastery. I try to “get their hands wet” right away with structured movement composition tasks, educating, as Graham (1991) suggests, by pulling the movement out of the students, having them discover how their bodies speak.

There is a spontaneity and instinctual aspect to my teaching as well. While I believe I am clear about what my goals and intentions are, I would say that one of my greatest strengths as a teacher is my ability to make adjustments in the moment to help keep students engaged, make new connections I may not have seen before, and introduce concepts in new ways depending on how receptive to my original method the students seem to be (Mosston, 1998). This also adds to the sense of exchange between teacher and learner. By “exchange” I mean that I perceive the student/learner as an active participant in the process. Without the mutual agreement to “play the game” of teaching and learning, it can easily become frustrating. The teacher as guide (Dewey, 1938) can only be one component of the student’s learning. Ultimately it is the student who must “take” what is given to them and make it their own (H’Doubler, 1940). This notion, again, brings me back to the courage and daring it takes to explore dance – and ourselves – in this way; in the

spirit of ELMO, we ask ourselves, “how can we find out more????” While this is hard work, I also want it to be FUN!!!

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My background and the structure of many of the classes I teach is rooted in the legacy of Martha Graham, though I shy away from calling what I teach a true “Graham” class for fear of all the rigid notions of the technique and style of dancing that come with that label. I am truly inspired by Graham’s early writings and impetus for the dance. She once said that dancing requires “grace”:

Grace means your relationship to the world, your attitude with whom and for whom you are dancing. Grace means your relationship to the stage and the space around you---the beauty your freedom; your discipline, your concentration and your complete awareness have brought you... (Armitage, 1937, p.101)

I always try to convey these aspects of dancing – of living – to my students, so that they may gain ownership over the movements and so that they discover ways of knowing themselves and the world that is beyond doing this step or that step correctly. This aligns with Goodlad’s notions of “self-concept” and “self-realization” as goals of schooling (Remer, 1994). Students make connections through dance that help them recognize aspects of themselves, extend these aspects to others and not only to how they dance, but how they interact with the world. Through every experience our sense of time and space are expanded. Fully engaging in movement, in discovering and building ourselves, and in reaching out to each other fosters a sense of responsibility and can ultimately build a better world (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1998).

Now the danger is that with this kind of philosophical emphasis, class could become a structure-less exploration of “feelings”. I, however, agree with Smith-Autard’s (1997) Midway Model for teaching the Art of Dance, which simultaneously promotes process and product. Instilling an interaction between the artistic, aesthetic and cultural takes subjective experience to

a new level. It is not enough to simply understand a concept intellectually; there is a point where that intellect must dialogue with the physical. So the process of learning a vocabulary of movement, of understanding the goals of a movement task, or of having a personal, inner revelation should ultimately lead to a product – one must strive to give that process a voice in the world. I believe this is what Smith-Autard means when she speaks of the importance of “interactions between the pupil’s intuition or feeling and knowledge” (p.14).

The notion of “dialogical” learning (Freire, 1998) connects to Dewey’s (1938) definition of a “sound educational experience [involving] above all, continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned” (pp. 10, 35). I have always prided myself in being a ‘thinking dancer’ - that is, able to take in information as I am moving, think about what I am doing both as it unfolds and in the in between spaces. I offer this as a challenge to my students, as I believe this is what we must do in life. We are constantly evolving; we must be able to act and reflect on our “unfinishedness” (Freire, 1998) and revel in the process of doing so. We build up store of knowledge from the “doing” of dance (Baldacchino, in press) and through this we acquire tools, “purposes and desires” that will later, as Dewey (1938) says, “carry us over the dead places” (p. 38) in our lives. Adhering to this more cyclical or spiral idea of learning, I tend to avoid pedagogically what Warburton (2008) describes as a hierarchical model or “vertical domain” for teaching dance, but strive to use the “horizontal domain” where there is more possibility for individual input and interpretation. For example, even in teaching the Graham technique, I will introduce elementary and more advanced concepts simultaneously, using a variety of different cues, from kinesthetic, to rhythmic, to imagery, in order to offer many ways “in” to dance.

Imagery is a very important aspect to my teaching, as I believe it helped me to achieve many physical/technical leaps in my own training – offering a direct line to the intent of the



movement rather than a fragmented understanding of the placement of each bone and muscle separately to make a shape. This imagery can include a connection to music, to space, to an idea or thought. (H'Doubler, 1940) The technical mastery can follow – and is important to the professional dancer – but, to me, it is not the essential aspect of dancing.

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Working with young people has always been a passion of mine. I have a long-standing commitment to dance education, with diverse credentials ranging from Graham-based modern technique, to arts education, choreography, as well as teaching and coaching repertory. Below I have attempted to outline some of my more specific priorities for each type of class while remaining true to my overall vision of dance as communication. \*\*

#### UNIVERSITY TEACHING

I have taught at the University level for the past eight years, most notably at Barnard College. There, however, I am mostly teaching lower level (1 and 2) modern dance. So many of my students have either never had dance before or never been exposed to modern. I include Graham's (1991) renowned "I am a dancer..." quote on my syllabi, not to impress upon the students the Graham idiom, but to empower them with the notion that this practice is to reveal, to explore, and to communicate something of themselves. Often dance students (and teachers) view technique as something finite. But I believe that it must grow and adapt with experience. Not that there are no 'rules' (Dewey, 1938). In fact I find that using a form as specific as the Graham technique, which I feel a strong affinity for, can allow for greater depth of exploration. While I have authority over a structure with which I can guide the students' experience, I am continually

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\*\* I have debated keeping this section in my vision statement for the sake of length, but it has been important to my process to extend my thinking to the several types of classes I teach. For this reason I am leaving it in this final draft version.

negotiating and renegotiating what I know about dance as I teach. Through the exchange connections are made and curiosity grows (Freire, 1998).

Of course my classes are designed to strengthen students' awareness of their own body placement and physicality, build a strong center, and improve flexibility and coordination. I do spend a significant amount of time just working on the "remembering" and "understanding" side of the cognitive process dimension (Anderson, Krathwohl, Bloom, 2000). However, students are encouraged not only to gain a technical understanding of the movement vocabulary, but also to add intent and joy to their dancing. Through the use of video, readings, discussion and task oriented assignments, I spend a significant portion of the later part of a semester exploring students' ability to apply, analyze and create. I find that this is a good way for me to assess how much they are taking in and able to articulate, and identify areas where there is a gap in what I am aiming to teach and what they are actually learning.

#### PRE-PROFESSIONAL/PROFESSIONAL TEACHING

I have also taught on the more pre-professional/conservatory level for both dancers and actors. For this kind of class, in general, I have less of a task of convincing them of the physicality, or of the rote memorizations of the steps and timings. My greatest challenge is to get them to approach dance as something they do not fully know – as a place open to greater depth of interpretation and clarity in intent and feeling. It is a similar process in coaching or setting repertory – I aim to help them to analyze and create something that is beyond the steps and the form they are learning and make it something that is 'theirs' (Anderson, Krathwohl, Bloom, 2000).

#### TECHNIQUE AND COMPOSITION FOR KIDS

I have been associated with *The Nest*, a not-for-profit company in Buck's County PA for which I serve on the Board of Directors and Faculty for an annual summer dance intensive. For the past 8 years, I have been teaching young dancers technique, repertory, dance composition and original choreography. I also teach for the *Usdan Center for Creative and Performing Arts* in Huntington, NY where I run the modern program for the 7 week summer session. These interactions with young people have been very valuable for me as a teacher, as I have struggled to keep their interest piqued day to day and week to week. I have found that really getting students involved in the creative process is the key. I always mix some composition in with their study of technique. It allows students to view dance in a broader scope than just as steps you have to memorize and “perform” but rather, we learn to think of dance as a vocabulary of possibilities for expression (Anderson, Krathwohl, Bloom, 2000).

#### ARTS IN EDUCATION/CURRICULUM BASED WORK

Through the Graham School's Empire State Partnership for the Arts program in the Port Washington school district, I was part of a core team in developing and implementing arts education into the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculums. Collaborating with the classroom teachers and other arts partners, we created and piloted lesson plans to reinforce specific areas of difficulty in the school curriculum – in math, social studies, English, and science. These have now become standard school-wide workshops and activities.

I am particularly proud of the Port Washington program because it truly uses dance in a way that is accessible to all – and totally integrated into the curriculum. This program introduces dance to the students as another medium through which one can learn and interpret their learning. It is not that dance for dance's sake is not relevant/enough/important – I just love to see dance valued in more than one way – so it is not separate from our lives – dismissed as a ‘hobby’

or something ‘a regular person can’t understand’ – but something that gives one a greater sense of life. For example, interpreting a poem about migrant farm workers into movement allows the children to embody the experience on a level that reading the words of the poem cannot.

Students must literally imagine themselves in the shoes of another. This “multidimensional” point of view on learning is an amazing thing to see in action as kids make connections you thought they would never make upon the first read of the poem. (Koff, 2000)

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I think that dance is undervalued in this country and would love to see it continue to emerge in general education curriculum as well as in the popular performance venues across the States. Dance has great potential to become an important component to culture once again – one that can draw us away from being hunched over our computers and enliven us to the knowledge and energy we hold in our bodies. I hope to develop community programs that incorporate dance and promote an appreciation for the art form – and for the power of the imagination.

My high school history teacher had the following quote prominently displayed in his classroom:

The most visible creators I know are those artists whose medium is life itself - the ones who express the inexpressible – without brush, hammer, clay or guitar. They neither paint nor sculpt – their medium is being. Whatever their presence touches has increased life. They see and don’t have to draw. They are the Artists of being alive...

I do not know who to attribute this quote to, but these words have always been very dear to me. Somehow I have always understood this to be the goal of all that I do – to be an artist of being alive – to infuse all of my work with a sensitivity to the beauty and grace all around us. As a teacher, learner, dancer, “live-er” I strive to extend the knowledge and passion I have to others, to hear what their ideals, strengths and goals are and through dialogue encourage “increased life.”

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