Paper

So We Think You Can Learn: How Student Perceptions Affect Learning

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ABSTRACT

We are researching the traditional culture of dance making in higher education. Dance majors are required to rehearse for performance with faculty or guest artists. What are they learning? Anecdotal evidence from students presented goals that do not fulfill the desired course learning goals. One example: "But I should stand in the front!" comes from an anonymous online journal from a college performance class. Many other journal entries echoed this sentiment and similar desires related to perceived status and feelings of entitlement within the group. Many students expressed frustration that the choreographer does not recognize their ability. Casting for specific roles within the larger cast were viewed as "winning." We are interested in how these perceptions affect learning, and how the influence of shows like "So You Think You Can Dance" affect student expectations.

Are there specific ways to ensure optimal learning in a rehearsal process? Are our learning outcomes based on an outmoded understanding of the current dance culture as portrayed by the media? How do trends of competitve dance in the media influence students' approach to learning in a rehearsal setting?

How might these questions uncover the perception of students involved in a rehearsal process? How do students progress in this model if they have conflicting goals from our own? Recent experiences in rehearsals have led us to question how student dancers perceive the culture of rehearsal, and how these perceptions and personal goals my conflict with the learning outcomes for the course.

A qualitative evaluation will be used for this research, utilizing interviews and surveys to collect data. These interviews will be conducted with students enrolled in a "Rehearsal and Performance" course at two separate institutions to broaden the scope of the data collection. A qualitative approach is valuable here due to the wide range of experiences among the population and their perceptions of the culture of rehearsal within an educational context. We will then analyze the data derived from interviews and surveys to present the themes that emerge from the data.

Our research outcomes will add to the current knowledge of the field by analyzing the learning opportunities in a rehearsal culture and how it intersects with student perceptions and experience. Our findings will broaden the scope of teaching dance in higher education.

We began this work after many conversations about what is being learned in the college dance rehearsal setting. Questions about hierarchy, competition, expectations, entitlement, identity, empowerment, and the impact of reality dance TV repeatedly came up. We began to examine the relationship between student, choreographer, and educator. When do the aims of one bump up against the goals of the other? Specifically, how do shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* model the student-teacher relationship and influence students' perceptions about learning?

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study stemming from our own questions about what students are learning in the rehearsal environment. As such, we realize our own biases enter into the inquiry, in that questions we pose to students will generate a guided response. We also acknowledge that our own interests and experiences play a role in how we make meaning of the data collected. Recognizing this, as well as our connection to the subject we are studying, we adopt a phenomenological approach in which we identify and pull emerging themes from subjective knowledge, and carefully make meaning from student language. Phenomenological inquiry draws from lived experience. "A phenomenological study…is one that focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (Patton 1990, 71).

Because this project does not seek absolute truth, but is rather a qualitative study, our post-positivist approach acknowledges the existence of subjective and multiple realities, constructed by individuals. Hence, we use multiple methods of interacting with the student participants and we focus on the meaning, and our understanding of emerging themes, while framing the context.

Diverse data collection from participants in rehearsal settings at Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina, Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, and Florida State College at Jacksonville, Florida included one or more of the following:

- Anonymous electronic journal entries on Blackboard Discussion Board (not viewed by researchers until post-performance);
- Journal entries on Blackboard Assignments (not viewed by researchers until post-semester final assessment) or
- Video journal entries (not viewed by researchers until post-semester final assessment).

Students were either:

- Enrolled in a Dance Repertory class, working with a faculty choreographer;
- Participating in a non-graded rehearsal process, for performance, working with a faculty choreographer or
- Enrolled in a Dance Repertory class, working with a guest choreographer.

Participants composed reflective responses, in writing or verbally (video entries) to prompts they selected from a menu of questions we authored. These prompts were designed to help students reflect on their learning in the rehearsal setting, and their experiences with motivation, challenges, movement and physicality, peers, and competition within the rehearsal environment and reality television shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* (SYTYCD). Students were also given the option to create their own prompts.

Subjects

Participants ranged in age from 18-26. There were 51 females and 7 males, 43 Caucasian, 34 African American, 1 Hispanic, and 1 Japanese participant. Students in the rehearsal process were not required to engage in the reflection component. All students opted to participate, and each signed a release form. Because the methodology implemented was qualitative, there was an interest in obtaining a broad range of data, to offer triangulation (or cross-reference). While there is some triangulation with regard to type of rehearsal, digital data collection, and location, we recognize, for future studies, implementing other means of collecting data–interviews, for example, can offer more. We both collected the data from our blackboard sites. Susan Haines transcribed all video data. We both reviewed the data several times to see what themes emerged. After establishing themes, we categorized each entry.

What Sparked Our Interest

We were mentored by dance scholars, Ann Dils, Jan Van Dyke, Jill Green, Larry Lavender, and Sue Stinson, whose writing and research is imbued with concerns about student learning and empowerment, as well as studio faculty B.J. Sullivan and Gerri Houlihan, who offered us rigor in bodily thinking and empowerment through our own achievement of physical skills. Our developing pedagogy is rooted in the ideas of our mentors. We note this in order to be clear that we offer both challenge and support to our students; no raging fits, punitive practices, or demeaning attitudes toward student dancers. We offer students a way to interpret new movement challenges from a somatic perspective. We want them to be making discoveries with the group and individually–intellectually, physically, and conceptually. We employ our developing pedagogy in our approach to a rehearsal process.

Lavender and Spencer assert that choreography and dance-making in higher education are based on narrowly defined historical models, "…which situates the choreographer as a single person, one who has or who develops an idea/image/truth that (whether gently or with force) should be pressed upon the willing bodies of dancers" (Lavender and Spencer 2011, 3). This view posits that a hierarchical structure, which places the choreographer at the top, is inherent in most choreographic processes employed by college dance programs. While we do agree that "pressing one's ideas forcibly upon willing bodies" can be oppressive and limiting, we assert that learning new movement vocabulary and new approaches to physicality can offer an empowering learning experience for students, not because they learn to "move like we do" but because they must make personal, bodily discoveries about momentum, initiation, timing, balance and strength as they learn to move in their OWN bodies.

Yes, we are directing the rehearsal process with our ideation and vocabulary, but within the vocabulary of movement offered to students, they are free to make choices, through troubleshooting structural issues, solving choreographic problems, and interpreting the movement with their own bodily thinking.

Our rehearsal pedagogy is aligned with the "Learning and Innovation Skills" from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills: a national organization advocating the teaching of "the skills, knowledge and expertise students should master to succeed in work and life in the 21st century" (www.p21.org, 2013).

These "Learning and Innovation Skills for the 21st Century" are: Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills refers to them as the "4Cs". We believe that making a dance with students can offer deep, engaged learning and skill development in all the "4Cs". However, we had many comments from students who seemed unable to engage in the process, primarily because they are focused on another "C": Competition.

Outside the Academy – Models

Many of the students we teach are born into the millennial generation, "Trophy Kids" (born between 1980-2000), as described by Ron Alsop (Alsop 2008, 3). This generation is now entering into college, the workforce, and our dance classes. It makes sense, as we examine our teaching strategies, to consider the learning profile specific to this population of students, though we want to be clear that this is a generalization about a group that has multiple voices and behaviors. "If there's one overriding perception of millennials, it is that they are a generation with great—and sometimes outlandish—expectations…. Many millennials feel an unusually strong sense of entitlement" (Alsop 2008, 24).

Entitlement and extrinsic motivators may be the result of competition in learning. Educational theorist Alfie Kohn asserts that we have been programmed from an early age to believe "my success requires your failure" (Kohn 1992, 4). Even with our attempts to maintain cooperative learning in a rehearsal setting, students programmed in competitive learning environments may be conditioned to work for extrinsic incentives, in this case, a solo or featured role in the dance. Kohn cautions against competition in the classroom, but what about competition dance studios, where many of our students have trained? John Holt puts this into an educational context:

We destroy the love of learning in children, which is so strong when they are small, by   encouraging and compelling them to work for petty and contemptible rewards—gold stars, or papers marked 100 and tacked to the wall….in short for the ignoble satisfaction of feeling that they are better than someone else. (Holt 1982, 274)

Karen Schupp writes about college dance majors from competition studios:

In general, members of Generation Next expect instant gratification and are very self- interested (Taylor 2005). This characteristic is repeatedly reinforced in some students' early dance experiences, especially if they come from competitive studio dance backgrounds…students from this background lean toward setting short-term goals, such as learning a routine for a performance, versus setting long-term goals, such as developing a unique personal movement vocabulary. (Schupp 2010, 23)

We note that competition, as a method of education, is troubling, yet we ourselves may be unable to escape it. The context of making dance for performance, as it exists for most of us, involves judgment, and quite possibly offers us

rewards of our own. The competition we face is not addressed, as no one leaves the theater jumping up and down proclaiming, "My dance is better than yours," and it rarely comes up on the agenda at faculty meetings.

So here we are, in the thick of our dilemma: we as choreographers are existing within an unspoken competitive context; creating dances with our students, who are devoted to competition dance and reality TV shows that glamorize the winning of contestants. How do we proceed?

To begin, how do we define student-empowerment? To us, an empowering pedagogy places life-long learning over immediate satisfaction. We want students to understand and value long-term goals, rewards, and consequences, rather than the immediate gratification of a *featured role*, for example. We now wonder if our students even want an experience that is empowering, as WE are defining it?

Meeting the Challenges

In statements taken from surveys, many students express the desire to show the choreographer what they can do, described by Stinson, Blumenfield-Jones, and Van Dyke as a "forum for proving themselves" (Stinson, Blumenfield-Jones, and Van Dyke 1990, 17). Their research also states that student dancers involved in their study, "Feel alternatively full of deficiencies and limitations, trying to improve themselves; or strong and full of power, as they meet challenges and exceed the expectations of others" (Stinson, Blumenfield-Jones, and Van Dyke 1990, 17).

Lee Knefelkamp, a recognized authority in developmental education, describes learning as an ego-threatening task, in which students can either retreat or progress (Knefelkamp 1982, 390). Our data shows that many students are able to embrace challenges, draw on their previous knowledge of bodily thinking, and achieve new skills as they engage with "ego-threatening" learning. The following quotes are from students expressing their satisfaction at being challenged by the movement, feedback and new experiences.

"The choreographer has pushed me to expand my comfort zone and really go for the movement."

"Every day, as I learned new movements that I haven't done before, I was very engaged and thrilled to be learning something new."

"This week was physically challenging but I enjoyed all of the different skills that I learned from the choreography." These students have found success and excitement in exploring challenging movement ideas and embodying their new skills. *"I like to try things that seem potentially impossible initially but eventually can be mastered."* This student expresses pleasure and pride at accomplishing the challenging movement vocabulary and new ideas of physicality.

This sense of accomplishment is derived from overcoming obstacles and meeting challenges. Learning is a chance for them to meet a challenge, be confronted with a "threat to the ego" and successfully push through. This is evident in the following quotes:

"I like learning new things, so the unknown, while sometimes fearful, is exciting and engaging for me."

"My goal is to overcome this obstacle and take the risk...I feel like once I overcome that fear then I will be able to feel confident and accomplished with this material."

Looking for Affirmation

However, our data from student surveys also presented many who express frustration and uselessness because they are not recognized, or not granted special status within the group. They are dissatisfied with their perceived place in the hierarchy, reveal great frustration, and describe "shutting down" when they are not recognized for their abilities.

This is what is most unsettling to us. From their comments, we are most certainly NOT empowering these students. Their words seem to reveal that they are primarily interested in having their current abilities recognized (rewarded), as they "compete" with others for status. These students are not engaging with Knefelkamp's "ego-threatening" task of learning. Rather, they seem to need ego-affirmation, with a tangible reward. The following quotes taken from survey data reveal strong feelings about their perceived status in the group:

"Honestly this piece is really frustrating for me being one of those people who is almost never highlighted either in a small group or as a solo dancer."

"Having the feeling of if I wasn't in the dance nothing would change is extremely discouraging for me."

"What makes a good rehearsal? Getting a compliment, then getting placed in the front of the formation."

"I will shut down if I feel like none of my abilities are being used in a situation where they are useful."

"There are other people who feel as though they could walk right out of rehearsal and not be missed, because their 'part' in the piece is so insignificant, and who cares if they don't know the details about the steps because no one will see them in the back row anyway."

Alfie Kohn asserts that the use of rewards and reinforcements to aid in learning have made students focus primarily on receiving the reward, rather than exploring the learning potential of any given situation (Kohn 1993, 49-67). This supports our findings; that students are focused on a personal goal unrelated to learning. Many want to be placed in the front as a reward.

The goals of the dance, and the "sink or swim together" attitude of a successful cooperative learning environment do not seem to matter as much as these students' personal goals of earning a reward.

As for ego-affirmation, we recognize students' need for positive reinforcement as a good thing! But, we may underestimate how much affirmation they desire. Our survey data reveals that some students are unable to progress and emotionally remove themselves from the situation when these ego-affirming criteria are not in place. Have we, as educators, disrupted these students' attempts at learning because we have not given enough praise? Although many students express a need for recognition, we wonder if it also reveals that they do not trust our framework for the creative process.

We take note of our students' developing definitions of dance and dance art. Millenials who have been exposed to competition studio experiences may have difficulty accepting "ego threatening" events as learning opportunities. Alsop states, "They are finding that some millennials don't respond well to criticisms and failure….this generation was treated so delicately that many schoolteachers stopped grading papers in harsh-looking red ink" (Alsop 2008, 107).

Although this set of students may find it difficult to hear criticisms, they do seem to appreciate shows like *So You think You Can Dance*, where performers are constantly subjected to critical feedback. Perhaps this is due, in part, to how the performers are presented.

So You Think You Can Dance

SYTYCD sends a very clear message that the choreography exists as a vehicle to showcase the performers. This modeling could influence dancers to assume that the purpose of a dance is to promote the performers. Many of our colleagues are reluctant to admit that SYTYCD has any bearing on our dance culture in higher education, but many of our students are fans of the show. The dancers and choreographers from SYTYCD are the names our students quote by first name; Twitch, Lacey, Mia and Travis are now upstaging Martha, Merce, Paul and Doris!

What is the appeal? The following quotes are taken from video interviews and reveal that most students find SYTYCD inspiring.

"I love how it shows the rehearsal process; maybe there is something hard for that week but they still practice, practice, practice, and for the performance it's perfect. That's really inspiring."

"It inspires me to better myself and work harder when I see how they push themselves."

These remarks exhibit work ethic, commitment, and discipline. But competition is at the center of this show, highlighting clear consequences for the *loser*. As we have stated, we do not support a competitive learning environment; we work to create a cooperative and supportive group dynamic. Yet as we look closer at our students' experiences in rehearsals, we may be missing an important point. Competition may be embedded in all dance training, whether we like it or not.

Competition with Peers

Dancers are subject to a constant awareness of a visible hierarchy of ability. In most learning environments, evaluation happens privately through teacher-student feedback via grades and/or written response. In dance, it is all out in the open and the protective veil of privacy is lifted. This may affect students' motivations, confidence, and overall ability to learn.

The nature of dance training, even a "low stakes" rehearsal where everyone is just learning new material—can be a stressful, competitive environment, despite our best attempts at creating a supportive group dynamic. Dancers are working with their own bodies, their own beings, as they build skills. They do not turn in a separate piece of paper with their name on it; THEY are the exam. The following quotes taken from video interviews address how students feel about competition with their peers in a rehearsal:

"It's hard not to notice who is better than you. It makes it really hard for me to learn since I get so distracted by my own

frustrations that it's just coming so fast to them and not as fast for me. It's hard for me to learn because I can't focus."

"When rehearsing, everyone looks at each other, oh who's doing this really well. I feel big competition."

"I am competing with others. Everyone wants that one part in the dance. You want to be on stage the most often, you want to stand out."

"I get really jealous but I try to take it in and learn from it."

These students are affected by their perception of group rank, as well as the speed with which their peers are learning material. Despite our attempted avoidance of competition and commitment to empowering students, we have not overcome the basic nature of learning a dance in a group setting. Our rehearsals still contain the hidden competitive environment, with special roles. Despite our supportive stance, or quite possibly BECAUSE we are not addressing these hidden judgments, our students may feel betrayed by our pretense.

Can our pretense be overcome? Even in Lavender and Spencer's "horizontal" rehearsals (Lavender and Spencer 2011, 9) where there is no authority figure and everyone shares the making of the piece, won't some students be noticing who comes up with the most creative or original ideas, or who is generating ideas the fastest? Is it even possible not to have an authority figure?

Conclusions and Implications

In a research study titled: *Exploring Student Expectations*, Jan Donald and Jim Wilkinson state:

> The central point that has emerged is the need to clarify expectations of both faculty and students and for faculty to present a rationale for the kind of learning they expect students to undertake. This may seem obvious. Yet the evidence of our participants is that it all too seldom happens. This insight into the learning context may be the most important teaching we do. (Donald and Wilkinson 2001, 5)

We may need to shift our thinking, and seriously consider our students' perspective. We initially attribute their frustration to the lack of "reinforcement" and "praise in the form of a solo," but as we look further, it may be that students who shut down are doing so because they have not been prepared for this context of rehearsal practices. Do we need to explain the learning objectives, the purpose of making a dance, how we view our role, and that there may be a few dancers chosen for solos and duets from within the group? Would this clarity help them accept our framework and embrace an "ego-threatening" event?

We hope to use the ideas presented here to further the study of dance pedagogy, to extend it to the rehearsal process, and to allow for educators and students to find ways of coming together, to think critically about identity, ego, hierarchy, competition and expectations of both educator and student.

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