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Speak Out: Dancing into Problem-Based Learning

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Introduction

In recent years, Problem Based Learning (PBL) has been applied in medical and psychological areas of professional education. The PBL approach requires students to move past traditional choreographic methods toward making dances informed by real world issue. In PBL, students work cooperatively to solve complex problems. Rather than being presented technical dance steps, they develop critical thinking abilities, acquire problem-solving skills, and communication dexterity. PBL can be effectively adapted for teaching high school and university dance classes, where problems are used to unlock the student voice and fuel the collaborative choreography process. This can be done in part by having groups meet in one dance studio with a roving teacher/facilitator and by using a problem as impetus for the creative process. This study describes a four-day PBL dance workshop and performance.

In response to the formative ideas on art and activism of the 1960s, Arizona State University Assistant Professors of Dance Education Kathy Lindholm Lane and Mila Parrish wanted to develop a high school – university community partnership in Phoenix, Arizona. One of the fastest-growing cities in the nation, Phoenix has over 1.3 million people. A capitol city, it is home to vibrant Native American and Hispanic populations, and most high schools in the Phoenix metro area have one or two full-time dance teachers.

The Process of PBL

Letters were sent to 15 different high school dance teachers asking them to identify a student to participate in this community partnership. Teachers were asked to consider carefully the type of student representative they would identify. We were looking for students interested in choreography, modern dance, and 1960s history. The students needed to have the capacity for a collaborative creative process, be articulate, and be able to work with other students of varying technical skill levels. In addition, students needed to demonstrate maturity, responsibility, and commitment to an 18-week schedule. Selected students were not expected to be the premier dance technicians or choreographers at their school; rather, they were to be smart and dedicated dance students.

Working side by side with college students can be intimidating for high school students; so we established that the University students would assist as compassionate, considerate co-collaborators. The value of university students' active listening and encouraging support of the high school students' artistic expression cannot be underestimated. Seven pre-service dance education undergraduates and three graduate students were selected to participate.

While 10 ASU students and 11 high school students initially agreed to participate, after the first three workshop sessions our numbers diminished to ten, and then down to eight high school students. Several factors

contributed to this, including student over-commitment and injuries from other sports. However, after we spoke with the students and their teachers, it became clear that these high school students were uncomfortable with the improvisational and creative activities presented in the workshops. We had expected to lose a few participants, but the disappointing reality was that the high school students were unable to appreciate the value of the creative process and valued only the technical skill in dance.

With this minor setback, we grew more committed to the importance of creative, problem-based pedagogical approaches. We wondered whether the remaining high school dance students would find the activities engaging and rewarding. Would they find personal investment in their choreography? And, later, would they share the strategies they learned with their high school teachers?

With our participants on board, we began to discuss the content for each workshop. Theoretical perspectives that guided our curriculum design were the value of individual inquiry, the collaborative creative process, problem solving in motion, and historical context. Students were expected to identify the issue/problem and the conditions needed for a solution in dance. Torp and Sage (2002) describe PBL as practical learning organized around the investigative process and resolution of challenging real-world problems. While they don't speak about art education, we felt that this practice could be used successfully in dance education instruction. We

embraced a pedagogical shift from a professional "technique only" model to a process-based model of dance instruction. It was assumed that this model would allow the students a forum to share and communicate their ideas from a more personal viewpoint and combine other concepts across the curriculum with what they learn in a dance lesson.

Goals for the curriculum included comprehensive artistry in the dance discipline, which is comprised of dance inquiry, dance making, dance sharing, and dance reflection; knowledge of 1960s history in dance, art and culture; as well as personalization of the work through critical thinking and creative problem solving. This pedagogical method is articulated in the recent research by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) on the transfer of skills learned through PBL to a real-world context. This approach is one of the new models for arts instruction that we utilize in our university dance education classes. It also has the advantage of creating new ideas by drawing information from students' personal, historical, and cultural backgrounds.

In November, the height of ASU football season, our 2.5-hour workshops began. The ultimate goal of the 18-week workshop was to design and implement a curriculum to support a dance reconstruction of *Chair/Pillow* (1964) by Postmodernist Yvonne Rainer. Our high school students came from different schools and different cultural backgrounds, and from a variety of definitions of dance and choreographic expertise. We

wanted to first cover some essential dance content. In the first four workshops, the students learned the elements of dance composition (body, effort, space, shape, and relationship), as well as the framework for communicating what is seen in dance. Short collaborative compositions and trust-building activities were also part of the daily workshop experience.

Philosophical underpinnings were shared as well. These included the value of process sharing: what is experienced, seen, felt, and understood; the importance of taking risks personally and choreographically; and the significance of individuality in voice and actions. Students were given journals and assignments to encourage their self-investment as well as an ongoing tool for our assessment.

We assumed that the students knew a little about the 1960s owing to the resurgence of the musical icons of the time – the Beatles and Jimmy Hendricks. We wondered if they were as well versed in the social, political, and artistic struggles of the time. The idea of creating PBL dances emerged to respond to student attrition and to offer them a challenge, to follow the ultimate journey to investigate the period of time and culture influenced by the social, political, and artistic beliefs. In order to provide a contextual understanding of the complexities of the 1960s, we created a homework assignment: Between workshops, students were to visit historic websites and read a three-page handout summarizing historical facts that align art, culture, and activism of the 1960s.

We began the lesson with a series of Circle Dances. Circle Dances were popular group improvisations in the 1960s. Done in circular formation, each participant contributes a movement for all to dance. Popularized by choreographer Deborah Hay, the non-technical movements (skips, jumps, shifts of weight, arm gestures, and unison breathing) allows everyone to participate in the dance. Kathy led the students in three circle dances by Hay, and then the students created their own Circle Dance. To prepare for this activity, the high school students were asked to bring a CD they would like to share with the class. After breaking into three groups, students formed circles and began to dance. In unison, they repeated each movement several times, the effect being a yoga-like trance resembling a huge expanding and contracting lung. After dancing in silence for a few minutes, the students' "popular" music was played as accompaniment for their dances, resulting in a dramatic shift in the classroom atmosphere as the dancers' movements and joyful faces transformed the dance studio into a nightclub where favorite dance movements were tried out and exchanged. Rooting these Circle Dances in the popular music of the high school community asked the students to consider how dance is taught, shared, and indeed celebrated.

Arizona State University and Phoenix high school students warm-up in a Circle Dance.

Some Results of PBL

Breathless, the students sat in a circle and discussed dance and art in the 1960s. Mila began this discussion by asking the students to consider, "What do you stand for? In what ways do you take a stand for something important?" Then we examined the historical timeline, and students articulated the parallel directions of art and politics. Sharing their realizations and impressions of the websites presented new perspectives and opinions. Students began to identify with the issues, and, as the discussion continued, voices and opinions began to emerge. This discussion was followed by a PowerPoint presentation containing images, quotes, and movies to further position the students' awareness of the complexities of the 1960s culture. Next, the students were asked to relate these problems to our world. Striking similarities were apparent, including the war in Iraq and

ethnic cleansing in Africa, as well as highly publicized court cases involving violence against women.

With this discussion as a jumping-off point, students formed three groups and were asked to identify an issue to advocate. While referencing 1960s' issues and activism, they began idea mapping and focused on the questions, "What do I stand for? How would I take a stand for something important?". Several students brought written notes from their homework assignment, and we brought additional historical books as research materials for the students. Engaged in the process, groups of students worked fervently researching their topic, holding animated conversations, and forming dance sculptures of their issue.

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Students discuss issues of power and how to represent them in dynamic movement.

Once the students had completed their webs, they were asked to identify the most prominent ideas and discuss how they could demonstrate them in motion. The following learning outcomes guided the dance making to (1) demonstrate the issue in both stationary and traveling movements; (2) show

the complexity of the issue from multiple viewpoints; (3) identify dynamic

movement qualities to correspond with the issue, such as moving quickly to

escape danger or to move forcefully in protest; and (4) utilize all members

of the group in the activity. Each group solved the problem in its own way.

Some groups needed more discussion, mapping and/or research before they

considered a movement; others needed to physicalize their thoughts first.

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"Speak Out" a dance of protest and activism challenged and empowered student voice.

Since all groups needed additional time to develop their dances, we

held a discussion rather than an informal presentation/sharing of the dances,

as originally planned. The students shared the issue they were investigating

and the processes employed by their group. Through brainstorming,

personalization, research, creation, and discussion, the students had

completed an artistic cycle of expression. Satisfied with the day's events, but

looking for more personal connections, we asked the students to examine

their position on the identified issue and to list five ways that their lives

related to this issue as homework. This assignment required the students to dig deeper into the problem and articulate their opinions surrounding it. These salient personal connections released the students' inner voice as an expression of the issue.

The next two workshops were marked with enthusiasm as the sensations, emotions, and kinesthetic expression of ideas united the groups. Debate, discussion, and differing opinions were encouraged as multiple viewpoints demonstrated the complexity of the issue and ultimately would make a superior dance. Students shared personal connections, and we spent time giving voice to those students who diverged from the majority views. We reminded them to postpone concluding and to consider the dance-making process in stages. This can be challenging for some students who feel the need to keep the creative process ordered and tidy.

A single directive further guided the choreography. The students were asked to reveal opposing sides of the issue. After the dancers shared their phrases, we worked with each group to clarify the students' artistic intent by asking, "What concept are you expressing? Is your movement effectively expressing the concept?" During the issue dance workshops, students followed a modified PBL plan where they identified an issue, researched and established questions surrounding the issue, devised an action plan to find necessary information, investigated personal connections to the issue and

how to carry out the action plan in movement, revisited the initial questions, created the response in dance, and then performed the dance.

At the end of the workshop, we asked the students to consider, "What is it that you don't know?" and "What do you think should be done next?" Not only were the students able to identify what they needed to learn and to apply their new knowledge to the issue, but also to reflect on what they had learned and the effectiveness of the strategies employed. Lively discussions and student journals offered insightful commentary on the process. An additional workshop was necessary for the students to refine the dances, while incorporating feedback from the class. Later we would respond by ordering, sequencing, assembling, and incorporating the students' phrases into one dance.

The three dances addressing the themes of war, slavery, and girl power turned out to be visually powerful, emotionally charged expressions of the students' combined knowledge of their lives and the issues of people in the 1960s. Students were proud of their immense accomplishment in such a short period of time. During our sharing, one of the high school students asked if we could present the work at the upcoming Arizona High School Dance Festival. Students discussed the viability of this venue; and while most were eager to perform, concerns were expressed that the work was "too different," "too modern," and might not be accepted and/ or respected by the high school audience. The class affirmed that the dances that they

had created were indeed dramatically different from the traditional jazz technique and popular-music themed dances found in typical high school performances. One student expressed pride in working with college students: "Our dance is so cool because we come from all over [Phoenix], and we get to make dances *with* ASU students." Another student spoke about the value of performing something different: "Kids in my school never see this type of dance … they will expect to see kicks and splits … to them, dancing is 'sexy' and 'entertaining'; *this* will be SO different." This sentiment was elaborated on by another student: "Before this workshop, I could never imagine myself making a dance about freedom and girl power … it is so cool. I realized that so much more is possible in dance … we can make dances about our world, our experiences, and our hopes for the future."

The group voted unanimously to combine the three dances and to perform at the High School Festival, if there was room for another dance in the show. We learned a few days later that the festival coordinator had space available, and that we would be opening the concert. At the risk of ostracism from high school peers, the dance "Speak Out" was born. The students buzzed in anticipation uniting the three dance phrases' artistic intent, revising the movement sequences, and selecting corresponding costumes and music. As we sat together after our final rehearsal, our conversation turned back to student concerns that their peers would not be able to understand what the dance was about. We asked, "What is the

impact of the dance for each of you? … And for the group? What could your teacher and fellow students learn by viewing our dance?" One student expressed the value of creating dances from the personal viewpoint of teaching high school students:

> It's very important to be aware of the movement as it relates to your body and what you want to say, rather than just thinking about how it looks from the outside. By doing this, one can be more confident in one's movement and work better in a group.

It was decided that we would make an announcement prior to the show to introduce the dance. Two high school students presented a description of the process and meaning of the dance.

Without a glitch, the dancers shared their ideas through provocative and touching sculptures, connected and disconnected struggles, and by lifting each other's weight. The audience of high school dancers and teachers supported the performers. Afterwards, the teachers came backstage with us and spoke about the depth of content and the clear ideas expressed. This performance affirmed the strength of PBL in association with collaborative community-based choreography.

"Speak Out" provided an opportunity for students to share social concerns

and connections to real world issues.

The Speak Out performance motivated high school students and future

teachers to consider alternate dance-making strategies. In attempting to

understand the influence of PBL through dance, we became aware that

students were challenged, learning to learn on their own and developing

skills more often used in academic areas. Students were able to appreciate

the ways that the dance could serve as means of real self-expression. Able

to recognize new possibilities with dance and art more broadly defined, high

school students began to see themselves differently: "I am going to ASU and

study dance education; I want other kids to have this kind of experience in

their dance classes."

The creative collaborative PBL process freed the high school students

to move past traditional stereotypical dance performances toward self-

expression of ideas in dance. One of the most dynamic and eye opening

features of the project was the value of the collaborative creative process.

The strategies implemented supported the building of trust, increased

student-student interaction, as well as heightened student-instructor

interaction. This in turn made the students feel safe that their thoughts,

feelings, and movements would be respected as they created the dance. We

were struck with the way the PBL changed the creative environment and

unified the group to form an ensemble of creative thinkers. Students

expressed the value of this experience as self-esteem building. Their

opinions and ideas became something visible and performable and in the

end respected by their peers in the performance.

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Participants relaxing and socializing during workshop lunch break.

Illuminating theoretical constructs, the pre-service teachers

experienced first-hand the issues, questions, concerns, and creative

potential of high school dance students. Our workshops did not end with this

performance. We had discovered that Speak Out illustrated the ways in

which ideas, issues, and personal experiences can shape artistic voice and unite communities through dance.

Conclusion

This research highlights new perspectives on pre-service teacher education and PBL in the formation of a dance performance. Unlike university classes, this applied pedagogical practice provided an opportunity for pre-service teachers and high school students to share social concerns and connections to real world issues. ASU pre-service students were able to see the artistic impact of community dance and practical view of PBL. In our final focus group interview, several ASU students stated that their Speak Out dance classes were the most valuable experiences of the entire workshop. Describing the impact of historical content integration they said,

> The issue dances were a defining moment that made us bond as a group, feel comfortable with each other, and dance about something important. It was great to perform at a high school festival because it got other high schools to see what we are doing and offered a different type of dance.

Students wrote in their journals about the sensation of performing personally meaningful issue dances:

> Our Speak Out performance is not one I will ever forget. It was both terrifying and treasured. I now understand what my future students are going through. Because of the workshops I am now aware of the

importance of stepping back to observe what is going on in my classroom... Asking questions is important way to let the students discover more about themselves in dance.

In thinking about the implications that this research raises for high school students and pre-service teachers and for considering the place of PBL in the high school dance classroom, a number of issues come to the fore. What topics, issues, and problems are appropriate and meaningful for the student? How much time is needed in the process? Which strategies are most effective in bringing student voice to the dance making? What is the impact of community collaboration?

The PBL in dance approach is based on the assumption that lived experience provides teachers and students a form of knowledge that facilitates the sharing of societal concerns and individual experience. This research demonstrated the value of active listening, asking what is going on in students' lives, and what issues, ideas, and concerns that are central to their lives can be topics for dance making. By asking questions and allowing adequate time for the students to question, research, sequence, organize, assess, and reevaluate, students' analysis can deepen before they begin to dance.

The general absence of this type of instruction in Arizona dance classrooms reflects the value placed on dance as technical prowess, and not as an expression of ideas. Our collaborative research and choreographic

problem-solving strategies situated the experience in the culture, politics, and art of the time. Group discussions, self-reflection, and inquiry assignments celebrated each individual voice as an essential part of the creative process. Unlike typical high school choreography, linking historical orientation with real-life issues added depth and meaning to the students' work. Interesting team-building activities unified the group as equals and gave younger students the confidence to contribute their beliefs and opinions. As the teachers/researchers, the PBL approach allowed us to step back, observe, and guide the process, and we were able to see the students more fully and to assess and evaluate more accurately what was happening in the workshop.

Following the performance, we had to ready ourselves for visits from Pat Catterson and Yvonne Rainer who would teach us the postmodern masterwork, *Chair/Pillow*. PBL prepared our students for an informed performance and set in motion a paradigm shift in dance pedagogy. Since the workshops, ASU dance education graduates have moved on to create and implement a modified PBL curriculum on a variety of topics, including the Underground Railroad; liberty and freedom; ethnocentrism; forming healthy relationships; and managing stress in *their* high school dance programs.

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