

Teaching Dance History with Access to Primary Materials

A White Paper for the Dance Heritage Coalition's
National Dance Heritage Leadership Forum
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Abstract:

This paper explores issues surrounding the teaching of dance history as they relate to preservation and access of primary resources.

Purpose:

To explore the benefits associated with expanded teaching of dance history, with dance history defined as a cultural study of contemporary and past practice, and increased access to primary materials. It is designed to elucidate the issues identified by the field and to form the basis for discussion at the Forum's national planning forum in January 2010. The goal is not to solve problems or describe specific solutions, but rather to consider the issues, discuss alternate strategies, and "think big" about what success would look like at the end of the DHC National Dance Heritage Leadership Forum 10-year planning horizon."

Working Assumptions:

The term "teaching dance history" refers to educational practices within structured curricula, including, but not limited to, such settings as K-12, colleges/universities, conservatories, professional schools and companies.

I make a point to emphasize this assumption because one of the issues that emerged from the 2009 DHC survey of the field was concern that "...the definition of 'dance' is too narrow, excluding folk traditions and popular dance, for example." (Results of Field Survey, p. 11) Therefore, it may seem hypocritical that I define "teaching dance history" within the "canon" of American formal educational models. While many other strategies for preserving a culture's dance history exist and are considered equally valid and effective endeavors, I have chosen to focus on formal curricular models because they provide optimum potential for reaching broad constituencies and interfacing with other core issues of the Forum, including creative uses of technology and finding common ground.

History of the Topic and Available Data:

- ❖ How might the lack of attention to teaching dance history be more clearly defined? Is the problem solely “curricular,” i.e. is it simply that not enough space is created in the curriculum for teaching history? Or is there a philosophical “driver” behind all this that values the “doing” and practice of dance over academic study and writing? If so, where is the root of this controversy, and where is the system open to influence by DHC and/or others interested in strengthening the study of dance history?

Cycle of Indifference to Dance History

Although the benefit of studying dance history has gained increased attention in recent years, it still lags far behind other arts disciplines. While literacy in the historical record is *de rigueur* for artists in other fields, studying dance history is often considered by aspiring dancers to be a distraction from their mission at best, and a danger to their creative integrity at worst. Tragically, for an alarming number of dancers, the idea of studying dance history doesn't cross their minds at all until they are required to take a course to complete a formal degree. Likewise, while the study of disciplines such as art history and literature are widely valued as providing insight into human culture, dance is still stigmatized as an inconsequential pastime, its place in academe questionable and lacking rigor. Because disciplines like art history are culturally valued and widely taught, an infrastructure of documentation and access to materials for study is well established. Consequently, large holdings of primary source materials and relative ease and diversity of access to them, allows for continued development of curricular offerings. This sets up a cyclical, reinforcing process: valuing a cultural form leads to documentation and collection of primary sources and access to them, leads to potential and incentive for creation of history curricula and a body of literature in the field, leads to reinforcement of value of form, leads to increased capacity and access to sources, and so on. In the case of dance, an inverse situation is at play: lack of value of dance leads to lack of documentation and collection of primary sources and lack of interest in accessing what does exist, leads to diminished potential and incentive for creation of history curricula and a body of literature in the field, leads to reinforcement of devaluation of dance, leads to continued lack of capacity and access to sources, and so on.

Defining Lack of Attention to Teaching Dance History

According to the Dance Heritage Coalition (DHC) and the National Dance Heritage Leadership Forum regarding its 2009 survey of the field:

The competing priorities of teaching dance practice and educating students about the history of dance were cited by survey respondents as a significant obstacle to creating an informed, diverse and contextually rich dance field. Training programs, said many, tend to emphasize technique and practice at the expense of “learning and creating in context,” that is, developing a firm understanding of the traditions, cultures and history of dance and employing them in hands-on learning, in much the same way that visual artists, designers, and composers study the history of their fields as a means of informing their own aesthetics or creations strategies. (email to author, November 2009)

The lack of attention to teaching dance history is actually a logical outcome of the historical context in which dance, as both a practical and academic subject of study, has been regarded in American culture and how it came to be included in the American educational system. Dance in American higher education has a very different history from the other arts, and therefore developed a unique philosophical and curricular relationship between artistic practice and scholarly investigation. Defining the lack of attention to teaching dance history must take into consideration underlying “philosophical drivers” that lead to logistical foils. Following are some of the issues at play:

➤ Philosophical Drivers

- Ambivalent ideas about dance in American culture (due to such influences as Puritan disapproval; 19th century acceptance of dance as physical exercise to address health reform but non-acceptance as an end in itself; post-Colonial dismissal of the arts as frivolous in comparison with the serious task of founding a new nation; association of dance as effete, inconsequential, etc.)
- Entry of dance in early 20th-century American public school curricula through physical education programs set up dance as a physical and/or extracurricular activity rather than an “artistic” or scholarly one. This remains the case in most k-12 curricula, with the exception of occasional specialized course offerings and individual arts-focused schools such as performing arts high schools.
- Desire to further develop dance as an art form within the university system led to mid-20th-century establishment of dedicated dance curricula that moved out of P.E. and into arts units such as theatre, music, studio art. Perhaps due to origins as a physical practice, and the hard-won battle of practitioners who constituted the faculties to gain respectability for dance as an artistic endeavor, practice became and still largely remains privileged over scholarship.
- Due to the ephemeral nature of dance and consequent challenges in documentation and access, particularly before recent technological advances, much of dance scholarship focused on developing “hard copy” (e.g., notation systems) rather than contextualized historical studies. Subsequently dance scholarship was undertaken by, created for, and accessible to, a small group within studio dance programs. For example, literacy in notation systems is limited to a very small minority of people within the field, in comparison with, for example, music notation in which fluency is expected of virtually all students in formal curricula. While extremely important to dance studies, the limited appeal and application of this scholarship did not encourage interdisciplinary dialogue. Nor did it lead to development of dedicated dance history tracks or departments equivalent to, for example, art history degree programs.
- Because faculty and students have not usually been engaged with, or exposed to, dance history as a serious pursuit the focus on physical practice has been reinforced and dance history is not considered central to a dancer’s training. There

seems to be a continuing lack of appreciation for how the study of history might inform a dancer's artistic endeavors.

- Lack of dialogue with other fields, compounded by a long-term trend in American education away from interdisciplinary work and favoring more specialized foci, normalized the idea of dance in education as an artistic practice with a focus on training artists but not scholars.
- Lack of visibility of dance as an academic pursuit, along with mainstream, preconceived notions about dance as a “lightweight” subject reinforce lack of appreciation for dance as having intrinsic value and as a viable academic discipline.

➤ Logistical Foils

- Studio programs, focused on training dancers, leave little room in curricula for other offerings.
- Dance faculty in studio-based programs generally have little or no formal background in dance history, so few qualified personnel are available to teach it. It would be unheard of for an inexperienced person to teach technique or composition courses, yet history courses are more often than not taught by faculty with little knowledge of dance history or its related pedagogy. This situation leads to a lack of quality of content and rigor of investigation in the instruction of dance history, as well as a general lack of enthusiasm for including a substantial dance history component in the curriculum. Faculty lines are considered too valuable to the studio component of the curriculum to give up for dedicated history positions. The current economic climate exacerbates this issue.

❖ What are the *problems* created by a lack of attention to teaching dance history?

A lack of exposure to the history of the field has profound affects on the quality and scope of artistic work being created by dance students, as well as on the value placed on preservation, collection building, and access to dance materials. Among the problems created are:

➤ Artistic Work:

- Limited scope of choreographic content and approach.
- Limited scope of movement vocabulary.
- Recycling of a limited amount of dance “information” so that choreography lacks variation, originality, and a sense of historical and/or cultural context.
- Dance aesthetics become self-referential, defaulting to a limited amount of information and personal experience. (There is a well-known syndrome, known as the “college dance,” which refers to the idea that work created in college dance programs all looks alike.)

- Lack of appreciation for formal planning and research in service of artistic work (e.g., art making is considered best and most authentic when made as a spontaneous gesture of artistic inspiration).
- Lack of interest in broadening scope of aesthetic philosophies and practices.
- General sense of anti-intellectualism among dance students and many faculty.

➤ *Scholarship:*

- The lack of widely available, quality courses in dance history has significant ramifications. It means that relatively few people take courses, become proficient, and enter the field with an academic focus. Subsequently there is less scholarly work being done in dance than in other arts disciplines, resulting in less interest, visibility, and respect for dance as a significant subject of study.
- Lack of/diminished respect for the diverse history of dance.
- Lack of training in dance history, compounded by a significant lack of general academic preparation at lower grade levels in academic skills such as English composition and research methodology, creates anxiety among dancers who lack confidence and enthusiasm for dance scholarship.
- Lack of a significant body of quality of work in dance history produced by students reinforces low standing of dance as a serious and rigorous field of study.

➤ *Preservation, Collection Building, Access:*

- Lack of interest in, and demand for, dance preservation, diversity of content, and access.
- Low numbers of people accessing dance information further imperils development of, and access to, materials. For example, university libraries that get few “hits” on dance databases often consider discontinuing these subscriptions. Dance is a relatively small field to begin with, so even if every student in a given department regularly accessed materials, the amount of use looks low. Compound this with very few of those existing students utilizing dance history materials and you have a recipe for disaster. Another example of a consequence of low use has been the recent purging, due to storage space shortages, of hard copies of periodicals from university libraries when these same items are available in digital format. Often, items with low traffic are the prioritized for removal. In many cases the hard copies, in addition to having intrinsic value as historical artifacts, contain illustrations, figures, etc. that are omitted from the digital versions; often, if they are included in digital versions they are incomplete, illegible, or scanned at too low a resolution to be reproduced for republication. In an ephemeral form such as dance, it is particularly important that we preserve visual records in the best possible formats. These are only two examples, but illustrate the far-reaching implications of a lack of attention to dance history on the preservation of our dance heritage.

- ❖ What contextual materials are necessary and appropriate, and how might they be developed and preserved?

- Teaching dance history within historical and cultural contexts is essential to illuminating the intrinsic value of dance and its unique contributions to society. Contextual materials developed for dance history courses, into which specific examples are embedded, provide entry points to both dance and the broader historical record. There is a need for development and sharing of curricular “modules” that do this. They could be developed by dance history teachers and by students for class projects using primary sources. Primary sources are most likely to be preserved if associated with curricular materials that are widely studied and accessed.
 - Broader commitment to developing and *sharing* curricular materials is crucial to increasing commitment to teaching dance history, and training the next generation to do it better. A general reluctance to share syllabi and other teaching materials hinders creation of a body of quality pedagogical resources. It is understandable that pedagogical materials are often considered to be intellectual property, just as scholarly and artistic works are. Therefore, expanding the Forum’s investigation into “Finding Common Ground: Building Meaningful Partnerships Between Artists, and Archivists” to include meaningful partnerships between **scholars** (dance history teachers and authors) and archivists seems appropriate and constructive.
 - Contextual materials can make dance history appealing and accessible to a broader audience if aligned with subjects that resonate across disciplines. For example, dance during the American Revolution could be illuminated by featuring George Washington. An avid social dancer Washington sought dance instruction in order to climb the social ladder and thereby make possible pursuit of his political ambitions. He also used dance as a tool of state; dancing the minuet flawlessly impressed the French, who came to his aid and helped win the Revolutionary War. In this example dance could be seen as relevant across disciplines and to the population at large; appeal to a broad range of students from k-12 to post-graduate; and foster in dance students an appreciation for the connection between social and concert dance (the minuet was a precursor to classical ballet) thereby encouraging an appreciation of dance in diverse forms and contexts.
- ❖ What are the existing limitations of the educational system, and what must be done to build competency, experience and commitment? How can PhD dissertations move away from a “close reading” of one dance, even one performance of it, and how can MFA programs find an effective way to integrate academic study of a range of dance techniques/performance repertoires and cultural contexts for dance? Do DHC and the Forum have a role to play in influencing dance curricula and teaching methodologies that place the study of history on equal footing with technique and practice?
- Limitations
- Currently dance is still considered to be a primarily studio-based area of study within the American educational system. Broadening the definition of what it

means to be in the field, and fostering the value of training not just performers but also historians, administrators, managers, presenters etc. could have a positive impact on the visibility of dance as well as on an appreciation within the field for the diversity of its makeup.

- There continues to be a pervasive assumption that the MFA is the ultimate achievement of the dance student in higher education. An appreciation for the diversity of the field and ascribing value to the contributions of other members of the dance community could stimulate diversified curricula that would support the field as a whole. For example, there is a serious need for dance administrators (both inside and outside academe) but there are no dedicated dance administration degree programs in the country.
- In recent years the first Ph.D. programs dedicated to dance history have been established in the U.S. This is a very significant achievement for the field and has established dance as a recognized field of scholarly study. However, dance skipped a crucial phase in its academic development likely due, at least in part, to the lack of adequate attention to training dance historians and lack of a substantial infrastructure of quality dance archives. There continues to be a dearth of research that documents and analyzes dance within cultural and historical contexts. The literature in dance, to broadly (and perhaps over-) generalize, went in a short time from very general survey studies that gave little attention to cultural or historical context outside dance, to highly specialized theoretical studies that either contain little concrete reference to the actual dancing, or extremely close readings of individual dances or performances. Much of the new dance theory is characterized by lack of attention to, and interest in, historical data.

➤ Strategies

- Encourage broader definition of dance and appreciation for diverse contributors to the field.
- Encourage development of curricular offerings and/or degree programs dedicated to dance history and other aspects of dance in addition to studio work.
- Encourage development of a body of contextualized dance history.
- Encourage development of quality dance archives and strategies for diverse access to them.
- Encourage development of theoretical models that may borrow from other fields, but that are organic to dance.

❖ Where is the system open to influence by DHC and/or others interested in strengthening the study of dance history?

- In American university curricula, most dance historians study and teach within fine arts degree programs. While other fields have made curricular separations between studio practice and historical and theoretical investigation --for example there are separate departments for studio art and art history, and literature and

creative writing -- dance history, as a relative newcomer, remains within fine arts departments historically focused on dance practice. Rather than seeing this as a limitation to the development of dance as the subject of serious academic inquiry, it has the potential to enhance the scholarly activity of the field and make it distinctive by keeping it close to the actual practice of dancing. In other words, studio programs offer primary sources in and of themselves, but also the opportunity for hands-on training in documentation, preservation, analysis, and archival and retrieval techniques.

- ❖ What resources and partnerships might DHC leverage to build demand for preservation within the educational system? [For example, how could the DHC enhance the historical learnings of programs like the NEA's National College Choreography Initiative (which supports reconstructions of historical pieces.)
 - Encourage building into existing programs, or creating new programs specifically for, history-based projects. For example, NCCI projects could encourage accompanying documentation of choreographic processes and/or products, oral histories, etc.
 - Create awards/incentives for development and dissemination of contextualized teaching materials.
 - Open dialogue with the national accreditation body, National Association of Schools of Dance (NASD) for college/university dance degree programs in order to broaden support for diversified curricula, and establish qualification guidelines for dance history teachers.

- ❖ What obstacles exist that must be addressed if DHC is to work through the educational system to create access to dance materials?
 - Access, Fair Use.
 - Lack of interest in dance history as a central component of dance training, and concern that emphasis on dance history might "dilute" the curricular mission.
 - Lack of interest in, and funding for, development of dance holdings.

- ❖ What are the specific challenges associated with the use of primary materials, and what reasonable role might DHC play in addressing these challenges?
 - Access and Fair Use
 - Funding for acquisition and maintenance of primary source materials.
 - Contextualizing sources.

- ❖ How could access to primary materials be expanded, particularly for undergraduate and high school students? What policies, including Fair Use, should govern access to primary materials, and how might DHC serve to promote shared values, build consensus and encourage broader practice?

- In addition to suggestions in sections above, limited/controlled access (such as password-protected sites) to contextualized primary sources.

Options for Moving Forward:

- The work of the DHC and its National Dance Heritage Leadership Forum initiatives have made an impressive and effective start in addressing issues of preserving America's dance heritage. Continued work in these programs is essential. Broadening awareness of, and participation in, these initiatives promises to make them increasingly effective and will hopefully stimulate other, related and synergistic activities.

Recommendations:

Develop strategies to:

- Encourage appreciation of dance as intrinsically significant to American culture, and therefore its preservation worthy of investment.
- Encourage interest in, and an appreciation for the value of, dance history both within and outside the field.
- Support teaching of dance history through development of, and access to, quality curricular materials and pedagogical training.
- Broaden DHC initiative to “mediate intellectual property rights so as to honor creators’ and performers’ rights and access rights” (*Sustaining America’s Dance Legacy*, October 2000, p. 19) to include mediation of property rights so as to honor **dance history teachers’ and scholars’** rights and access.
- Develop more inclusive definitions of dance (e.g., that do not devalue non-concert forms), to encourage broader preservation and access initiatives.
- Develop mutually beneficial relationships between dance training programs and the profession that could lead to preservation and access initiatives (e.g., preservation projects as part of dance history curricula; inclusion of dance historians and dance history teachers in preservation initiatives such as NCCI residencies)
- Develop mutually beneficial relationships between dance training programs and the profession that could lead to appreciation of the importance of “academic” skills such as writing and historical literacy to working artists (e.g., execution of company mission statements and grant proposals; conduct of formal planning and research for artistic endeavors (dramaturgy is a recognized component of the theatrical artistic process), etc.
- Open dialogue with NASD concerning possible roles of colleges/universities in dance preservation and access

Summary:

Teaching dance history has broad implications for the preservation and access of primary materials in dance.