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# Decolonizing Dance Curriculum in Higher Education

## One Credit at a Time

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Most dance departments in the United States require rigorous study of traditional Western dance forms. This is common; many developed countries cultivate the art forms that reflect the aesthetics and philosophies of the majority culture in that nation. However, demographics in the United States have changed greatly over the past 50 years, with people of color now reproducing at higher rates than whites (U.S. Census 2013). Yet, even with this shift in population, the focus of dance departments in the United States remains Western-based. Kerr-Berry (2012, 48) noted the difficulty in diversifying dance curriculum in higher education in her article “Dance Education in an Era of Racial Backlash.” In another article, “Progress and Complacency: A ‘Post-Racial’ Dance in Higher Education?” Kerr-Berry (2010) pointed to the multicultural and multifaceted dance outside of higher education. She stated, “[s]ystematically, leadership in dance in academia is being ‘whitewashed’—increasingly underrepresenting the American dancing body” (3). Kerr-Berry’s point is evident in the curriculum structures of many dance departments that require a smaller number of courses for dance forms outside modern and ballet. I argue that departments should embrace a more inclusive system that does not privilege particular dance forms.

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at [www.tandfonline.com/ujod](http://www.tandfonline.com/ujod).

### MISSION TO DIVERSIFY

For the purpose of this article, I chose to focus on the intent of dance departments regarding the issue of cultural diversity. I used mission statements as an entry point to understand each department’s agenda. Efforts to diversify curriculum are demonstrated in the mission statement of Arizona State University Dance Department (ASU), which states, “We aim to produce artists who can thrive in diverse contexts, and make singular and unique contributions to the evolution of a vibrant dance culture around the globe” (ASU 2010). The mission statement of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) embraces “a commitment to cross-cultural understanding through the arts. By looking to world arts, the department seeks to decenter Western perspectives by recognizing that visual and performance arts and other ways of knowing are situated locally and often made and distributed globally” (UCLA 2012). Similarly, Swarthmore College Dance Department states, “The central intent of our program is cross-cultural study focusing on Africa/African Diaspora, Asia (both South and East), Europe/North America, and Latin America” (Swarthmore College 2012).

The intent to provide a diverse educational experience for students is evident in these mission statements and many others throughout the country. Mission statements describe the goals of an entity and often the desired means to attain the goal. However, even as many institutions seek to build this diversity in dance education, they also lack the

resources to overcome decades of monocultural aesthetics, programming, and curriculum structures.

In 2010, I conducted a six-month qualitative case study on cultural diversity in three dance departments in higher education. Herein I extrapolated the data pertaining to curriculum design and supplemented findings with information available on various college and university websites. The research presented in this article is preliminary and indicates a need for further research. Each department in the study granted degrees in dance, offered a non-conservatory-based program, and included values of cultural diversity in the mission statement. One of the schools selected was located on the West Coast, one on the East Coast, and one in the Midwest. Two of the schools in the study were private and one was public. The three schools represent three curriculum configurations of technique classes in higher education.

Through the selection process for the 2010 study, I examined more than 100 mission statements. I found many institutions that proclaimed a commitment to diversity, yet they were bound by curricular requirements to uphold traditional Eurocentric programming. Thus, the curriculum requirements of a department were a greater determinant of a department's commitment to cultural diversity than the mission statement. Each of these departments had a number of course offerings outside of Western-based dance forms. However, in two out of three departments, a hierarchy was evident. Degree requirements were structured in a manner that privileged Western-based dance forms.

In the study there was one department that equalized technique credits; that is, it assigned equivalent value for dance technique courses or required the same number of credits for various dance techniques. This was as opposed to requiring students to invest more credits of study in privileged Western dance forms, with less required study of diverse dance forms. One of the dance departments counted all technique courses as one-credit classes. Students were required to take 18 dance technique credits; students then selected their chosen dance technique within those parameters. Another department in the study required students to take six credits of modern, eight credits of ballet, two credits of jazz, two credits of Pilates, and two credits of world dance (one credit was awarded per course). In the third department, major technique requirements were limited to modern and ballet. Students were required to earn 48 major technique

credits (each technique course was valued at two credits). Students were also required to take 17 credits of additional dance electives. These courses included but were not limited to jazz, African, tap, composition, historical dance, Pilates, yoga, directed teaching, production, and repertory. Because all the additional dance electives were in the same category, students could select from the other offerings such as dance history or yoga and thus never take a diverse dance technique within the four-year program (McCarthy-Brown 2011).

Analysis of these three department dance curriculum structures demonstrated that status quo structures are antiquated in their monocultural focus. This is not to say that Western dance forms should be eradicated from our institutions. It is simply to say that other dance forms should also be given the potential to grow, thrive, and attain academic legitimacy. Although this traditional structure of privileged dance forms is the widely accepted norm, it is beginning to be challenged. Individual departments are stepping forward with a new approach to dance in higher education. The University of New Mexico offers a concentration in Flamenco dance and includes in its mission statement the goal to “provide an educational landscape that develops multicultural academic and artistic perspective” (University of New Mexico 2013). UCLA, Swarthmore, Denison, and several other institutions are finding ways to equalize technique courses. This is a monumental step in changing the stigma around non-Western dance forms. Curricula structures that equalize courses are needed to dismantle racist and classist hierarchies in dance. In a decolonized and truly diverse dance department, all dance technique courses would be given equal value in the curricula.

Figure 1 provides a visual display of how many ballet, modern, and other elective dance courses are offered by the three dance departments in the study (McCarthy-Brown 2011).

At New World School of the Arts (NWSA) in Florida, the “Progressive Program” reads as follows: “Dance majors participate in a progressive program of intense technical training which is grounded in classical ballet and modern dance techniques and leads to jazz and ethnic dance studies as well as exposure to newer dance forms” (NWSA 2013). I was particularly surprised by the dated use of the term *ethnic dance*. Additionally, within the NWSA curriculum, there are no technique requirements outside of ballet and modern. There

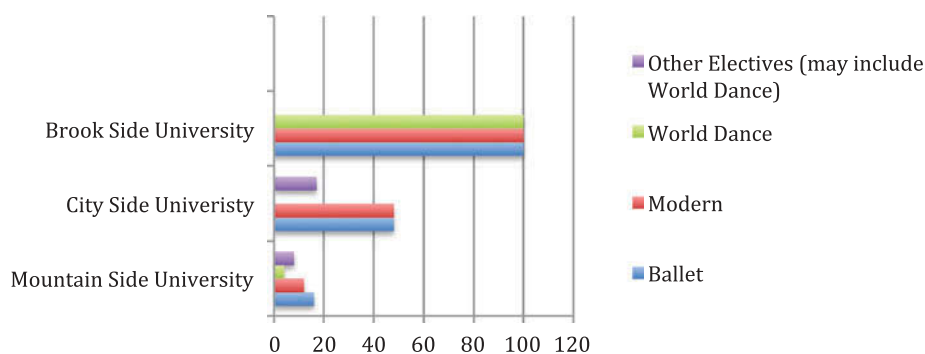


FIGURE 1 The ratio of modern, ballet, and additional elective courses offered by the three dance departments in this study.

is, however, an optional, one-semester residency in world dance each year. The limited offerings outside of ballet and modern are typical of a conservatory-based program like that of NWSA.

One dance department moving toward a more inclusive and equitable structure is Denison University. Three levels of modern technique, modern dance aesthetics, and modern performance are offered alongside comparable courses in African dance technique, African aesthetics, and African performance (Denison University 2013). Denison's new curriculum structure might indicate a shift in the paradigm of dance in higher education.

## MOVING TOWARD EQUITY

To assign the same credit to all technique courses can send a positive message to students who have experienced a traditionally less inclusive catalog of choices. For instance, there is one program where students need eight credits of modern, four credits of ballet, and one credit of world dance; this structure devalues world dance courses and sends a message to students about the limited importance of these courses. If students are interested in pursuing a dance form that falls within the world dance category, these messages imply that employment in this field is difficult. Students notice when there are no tenured or full-time appointments for dance professionals with specialties outside modern or ballet. For students of color, in general, finding faculty of color to identify with in many dance departments is challenging. On a larger scale, those interested in ballet will find a limited number of ballet dancers of color employed throughout the United States (Kourlas 2007). Traditional dance curriculum structure implies that traditional Western dance forms require more focused study than world dance forms. At the same time, students of color will find few faculty of color teaching ballet or modern, and even fewer dancers of color employed in ballet. Further, the structure suggests to students that study of dance forms other than ballet or modern is too insignificant to warrant a degree from an accredited institution. In many cases where this situation exists, the departments that promote these ideals (even unintentionally) are predominately white. A more egalitarian curriculum structure would serve to demonstrate tangible actions to decolonize and diversify Western dance aesthetics in higher education.

Dance departments need course offerings that will allow students to study the dance form of their choice beyond an introductory level. For example, one school in my study made the progressive step of equalizing all technique courses. However, this department offered only enough levels of study for two years of course work for the classical Indian dance. Thus, within a four-year bachelor's program, students were required to take more ballet and modern courses because course offerings in other dance forms were limited. In reality, although a dance department might wish to expand its curriculum to include multiple years of dance styles beyond modern and ballet, there are limitations

related to department resources and access to qualified faculty. Because modern and ballet are the primary dance forms studied in higher education, most individuals qualified to teach in a college or university have a background in modern or ballet. The problem is cyclical; one cannot study diverse dance forms to a level of proficiency in colleges or universities in the United States and thus cannot teach such courses as tenured faculty. As a result, these courses are often not taught or are taught with limited offerings.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

For many institutions, offering four years of study in multiple dance forms would be impossible. Requirements for space and faculty would make such a vision unrealistic. For departments that would like to diversify program offerings, I suggest the following: Assess the needs of students. How could your course offerings reflect the cultural affinities of your students and your college's surrounding community? Instead of attempting to offer one hip-hop, one African, and one classical Indian class, select one dance form that you have the resources and support to build on. Plan to build the curriculum up to a concentration within four years of study. That is, each year over the course of four years, the department would add another level of that particular dance technique. This will allow the department to grow over time and establish a new course of study that will meet the needs of the student body.

Ladson-Billings has been a leading scholar on culturally relevant teachings for more than 20 years. In *Dreamkeepers* she writes, "[c]ulturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. The negative effects are brought about, for example, by not seeing one's history, culture, or background represented in the textbook or curriculum or by seeing that history, culture, or background distorted" (Ladson-Billings 1994, 17). As educators, we have a responsibility to offer students opportunities to develop their full identities in a manner that relates to their education. Additionally, we have a responsibility to uplift other cultures to ensure that students do not adopt a monocultural perspective. Kerr-Berry (2012) states that as educators "we can question our assumptions about the superiority of one dance over another and consider how whiteness factors into such self-investigation as dance educators" (49). If we allow students to believe that only traditional Western dance forms are worthy of full study, we ultimately fail our students, and consciously or unconsciously, we reinforce the racist and classist ideologies that we claim to have overcome.

Donnor, scholar of critical race theory, examines race in education policy and practices in the *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*. In the chapter "Education as the Property of Whites," Donnor (2013) highlights a history of "White racial hegemony/White supremacy" determining black people's access to education. This includes the denial of education throughout slavery, segregation in education

thereafter, and even the questionable equity in education today when achievement is looked at across racial demographics (195). The United States holds a legacy of whitewashing history to the detriment of its citizens of color and their heritage. Native Americans (Spring 2007) and Hispanics (Gándara and Contreras 2010) in the United States have experienced such injustices. In terms of dance education, these questions remain: Why are Eurocentric dance forms worth preserving and good for all students, but the dances and cultural heritage of other peoples are not? How is monocultural dominance in dance education not another example of education as property of whites? I argue that one reason diversifying dance in the academy has been a challenge is that stakeholders lack a willingness to relinquish space for people of color in significant ways.

In South Africa, the University of Cape Town Dance Department has been able to diversify its curriculum, overcoming a history and infrastructure of racism. The department offers three tracks of dance studies: ballet, contemporary, and African dance. As a component of the curriculum, African dance history and Western dance history are offered, as well as Western dance musicology and African music levels; all four of these courses are offered at Levels I, II, and III (University of Cape Town 2013).

There is no solution that will fit every dance department. Curriculum changes should be tailored to each department, to serve the students of that particular institution. Some departments do not have the resources to implement a number of suggested reforms. However, giving equal value to various dance credits is a solution that is within the reach of most departments. Further, dance departments that have included cultural diversity in their mission statement should consider what that means and how what they are offering is different from other departments.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The United States is a multicultural nation that embraces diverse nationalities and ethnicities. As such, the institutions of higher education in this country should reflect the diversity that thrives within. Dance is an expression of culture and, through dance, cultural traditions are preserved, lived, shared, and explored. Failure to provide real opportunities to study different dance forms maintains the dominant Eurocentric ideologies and dance forms in our programs. When curriculum requirements are evaluated, non-Western dance forms are excluded from many course requisites. Offering only introductory courses in diverse dance forms is not a commitment to diversity. It is equivalent to an academic way to make diverse cultures exotic for the purpose of exhibition and exploitation. Marginal course offerings in diverse dance forms fail to demonstrate a sincere commitment to diversity.

As the current leaders of dance education, we can choose to acknowledge all dance forms equally without making personal favorites the center of our programs, perpetuating Eurocentric dance hierarchies. As humans we have a right to

our own personal dance aesthetic values. As educators, it is our responsibility to share that right to choose one's own aesthetic with our students. Eurocentric dance aesthetics should not be enforced through degree requirements. Students should not be rendered unable to matriculate because they hold culturally informed dance aesthetics that are different from those of their instructors or department. Yet today, in most colleges and universities, only students who choose to devote themselves to the study of the dominant culture's dance aesthetics can matriculate.

The dominance of Western-based arts aesthetics permeates beyond the field of dance. Many of our arts disciplines struggle with these challenges. Koza (2008) wrote about similar issues at the University of Wisconsin in her 2008 article "Listening for Whiteness: Hearing Racial Politics in Undergraduate School of Music." There she discussed the dominance of Western music aesthetics in the audition process that led to the perpetuation of a Western-focused music department.

Cultural diversity in dance education cannot truly be valued in this country without reshaping our infrastructure. Students deserve the opportunity to study, perform, and teach diverse dance forms with the legitimacy of higher education degrees. To proclaim a commitment of cultural diversity and yet not make space for such courses in sequential four-year curriculums is to bear false witness to the call for multiculturalism. More important, such structures deny diversity within our programs. Diversifying dance education is a multifaceted problem including the recruitment of students and faculty of color and diversification of course content. However, equalizing courses is one step that can be addressed through an administrative directive. It is a step that can lead to the building of an additional concentration area and simply sending a message to students that no one particular dance form is valued over another. Such a change would not only equalize department curriculum, but it would be a step toward dismantling hierarchies.

Scholars who promote social justice in education advocate for equity in all classrooms. Editors of the text *Rethinking Our Classrooms* (Au, Bigelow, and Karp 2007) describe a socially just classroom as "Grounded in the lives of our students; critical; multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice; participatory, experiential; hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary; activist; academically rigorous; and culturally sensitive" (x). I believe that just as educators can omit these qualities from their teaching, educators can also provide them. Lessons of antiracism, hope, and cultural sensitivity are plentiful within the participatory, experiential world of dance. Why not enrich students' education with academic rigor that calls on a critical, multicultural, and activist agenda?

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