

N. C. DANCE EDUCATORS ORGANIZATION CONFERENCE
JANUARY, 2017

Greetings Everyone-

First of all, I would like to thank Mila Parrish and Marissa Nesbit for inviting me to participate in this wonderful conference! The variety of classes offered and the enthusiasm of all the participants is inspiring to see.

I know it has been a long and very full day, and that dancers' minds at this point will invariably turn to food...but I would like to share some insights with you and pose some questions for us to consider before we head off to dinner and the performance.

Teaching is something I have been doing as long as I can remember- first in my studio as a young dancer, then throughout my time as a member of the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, and eventually in academia beginning in 1977 at Beloit College. I have never thought of myself as a particularly inventive, creative or visionary person- but I have been passionate about dance since childhood. So much so, that I managed to persuade my high school guidance counselor to allow me to skip gym, homeroom and study hall to go and study at my local dance studio every afternoon. In exchange, I taught a modern dance component in our P.E. class and choreographed the junior musical. I graduated from high school at the end of my junior year, and began studying at The Juilliard School at the tender age of 17- reveling in classes with my amazing teachers Antony Tudor, Jose Limon, Alfredo Corvino, Mary Hinkson, Betty Jones and Louis Horst- whose mere presence, I must admit, filled me with terror.

I wonder if something like this would even be possible today? We seem to be so limited by academic rules and regulations. We're required

to check boxes, jump through hoops and comply with often arbitrary standards while the essence of our potential to contribute creatively as educators often seems undervalued. For me, creativity has its roots in the spirit...and in academia we are hesitant to penetrate that source too deeply. It is often easier to teach some “cool” dance moves, fill out rubrics and call it a day.... limited by structures that have been put in place to seemingly conspire against our best efforts.

However, I honestly don't believe that dance educators are satisfied to be defined by those objectives. I think it is essential that we remember training in the arts includes the training of values, the training of attitudes and the training of our student's human as well as artistic habits. When I think of my teachers at Juilliard, those names and the lessons I learned from them still resonate so deeply and continue to inform and inspire me. We, in turn, have the potential to become inspirational teachers to our own students.

I love that the theme of this conference is- ENGAGE, EDUCATE, EMPOWER. I'd like to take a moment to look at each word-

ENGAGE-

As teachers we are constantly engaging with our students. But it is equally important that we also find the time to engage in our field- to see performances, to attend conferences such as this one, to perhaps study something that is just outside the direct focus of our students and then to share that interest with them. One summer at ADF, I took a class called Voice and Gesture, and it had a tremendous impact on my teaching. Currently, I'm studying Tai Chi- and I'm just now beginning to discover the ways that it can inform my work. I know these pursuits take time, and sometimes money, but they are an investment in ourselves.... and our own curiosity and enthusiasm can serve as a terrific model for our students. Sometimes it can be as simple as sharing a book or a movie that resonated in a profound way for you. The writer Paul Auster

recently wrote in the New York Times about reading the collected stories of Isaac Babel- “It opened a door in my mind, and behind that door I found the room where I wanted to spend the rest of my life.” How glorious! And we can be the ones to open those doors.

Moving on to – EDUCATE-

Well.... that one is easy. That’s what we do. I’d like to quote Merce Cunningham on this. “Since the dancer works with the body- the strongest and at the same instant the most fragile of instruments- the necessity to organize and understand its way of moving is urgent. The daily workout, the continued keeping of the elasticity of the muscles, the constant control of the mind over the body’s actions, both new and renewed, is not a natural way. It is unnatural in its demands on all the sources of energy. But the final synthesis can be a natural result, natural in the sense that the mind, body and spirit function as one.” This brings me to two questions that were posed by the National Association of Schools of Dance-

- 1.) Is there a difference between “teaching” and “training”?
- 2.) What are the responsibilities of teachers when it comes to teaching the “whole dancer”? In other words, what strategies should be in place for teachers when questions arise relating to the psychology of dance training, biological/anatomical questions, long-term planning for dancers’ futures, etc.

These are important questions, and the more we know, the more complicated they become. Perhaps these are topics for the next conference!

Lastly, I’d like to look at the word- EMPOWER

Such an important word. And now, more than ever, it is a word that needs to be at the forefront of our thinking. If you look in the dictionary, a definition of empower says –to make someone stronger and more confident. How can we go beyond teaching our students to enabling them to see themselves succeeding in this precarious dance field? How can we support our students- ALL of our students- as they explore the possibilities that the study of dance might offer them? It is so often true that the early training period of a young artist and those initial experiences with dance are when the imagination becomes ignited. If you ever had one of those teachers- thankfully, mostly back in the old days- that could only see your faults and point out your inadequacies, you know how discouraging and debilitating those words can be. I speak from experience, unfortunately.

But I believe that we have become wiser, more thoughtful and more inclusive as we teach and empower this next generation of dancers. We need to recognize their individuality and the uniqueness of their particular gifts. We need to encourage them to do that Pilates certification, or the arts administration class, or the course that will show them how to use technology to further their ambitions... because the goal of getting into a company and supporting one's self solely from that endeavor will be a reality for a very few. We need to be mentors, and in turn we need to find and cherish our own mentors. Turning to Merce again- "The technical aim is not to do a few things or many things spectacularly, but to do whatever is done well. Not to show off, but to show; not to exhibit, but to transmit the qualities of the human spirit through the disciplined action of the human body."

Engage, educate, empower...a tall order, but one that brings with it countless rewards. I would like to leave you with one last quote. I apologize. I don't have a record of the source, but I've kept it in my desk drawer for many years now-

A great teacher is a friend to your intellect, to your potential, and to your imagination, and will be with you in your mind's eye for life.
Amen