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David Dorfman's "Here"

A Community-Building Approach in Dance Education

Mila Parrish, Ph.D.

Abstract

Over a three-month period, Arcadia High School and Arizona State University formed a community partnership with the help of New York modern dance choreographer David Dorfman to create an original dance titled "Here." Dorfman's community-building approach is based on personal reflection, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, genuine caring, respect, and honesty. This essay illuminates Dorfman's pedagogical practice and teaching methods employed in relation to pre-service teachers' thoughts on teaching. Learning modalities discussed are motivation, professionalism, authentic expression, and personal connections. Driven by their own experiences and perceptions, dancers shared vital issues that affect them, which became the springboard for Dorfman's dance-making process.

This article presents an understanding of community partnerships in K-12 dance education. It points out that a socially responsive constructivist methodology can transform K-12 dance teacher education by celebrating the importance of student voice and culture in dance making.

The Meaning is Fluid (MIF) residency—with the idea of forming a community partnership between Arcadia High School and Arizona State University

in collaboration with David Dorfman—was the brainchild of Arcadia's dance teacher Denise Rapp. Rapp chose Dorfman, a professional dancer and choreographer based in New York, due to his extensive experience in community dance projects. Over a three-month period, Dorfman united a diverse population of students, creating an original dance, "Here," which celebrates these students' lives.

Dorfman's goal in community dance, as he states, is to "create a dance/theater work which will establish new bonds between participants; shed light into areas of life not easily touched upon, such as intimacy, self-worth, and personal expression, and allow both audience and participants alike to be empowered by the passion, honesty, talent, and dedication displayed by the performers."¹

Artist in Residence Programs

Artist in Residence (AIR) programs affirm that the arts are part of everyday life and indeed fundamental to all education. The rise in AIR programs throughout the United States came through funded endowments, legislation, and research. In the 1930s, the Carnegie Corporation funded the Owatonna Art Education Project, which became a prototype for community programs for the arts in general education and Artist in Residence programs.² In 1963, the establishment of the Arts and Humanities Program in the U.S. Office of Education and later the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Artists in the Schools program in 1969 continued to broaden their focus to include all arts. NEA's mission has been to promote quality arts education experiences using professional artists as resources in schools and communities, to foster "excellence, diversity, and vitality for the arts...and to help broaden the availability and appreciation."³ In 1973,

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a study conducted by the National Research Center for Arts identified that Americans wanted more art opportunities in their communities.⁴ In 1973, the Alliance for Art Education was created under the auspices of the Kennedy Center; and in response to Public Law 85-874, it developed an arts program for youth.

Preparation

The MIF residency was funded through grants and support of the Arizona Commission for the Arts, the Scottsdale School District, Tax Credit Donations, the Arcadia High School PTO, and Arizona State University (ASU) Department of Dance.

The MIF residency served the participants in different ways. At the onset, high school students were eager to increase their technical proficiency, while university students favored learning choreographic processes from a master teacher. The participants in each group were nearing the completion of their schooling, and these rites of passage offered compelling content for dance making as both groups gazed into unknown futures sharing their hopes, dreams, concerns, and questions.

As the high school dance teacher, Rapp's goals were to inform her students about the artistry and creative potential of modern dance and in the process encourage them to break away from the jazzy trick-based popular dance found in local studios and on MTV. She wanted to increase the stature of dance, especially modern dance, for administrators, fellow teachers, and parents in her school. And lastly, she sought to improve the level of commitment and professionalism of her students studying alongside college students with a premiere professional choreographer.

For the dance education pre-service teachers' learning processes, forming positive community partnerships was a key component of this project. Therefore, the university's goals of the MIF residency were twofold: to provide students with first-hand knowledge of Dorfman's ambitious pedagogical and choreographic methodology; and to examine the dynamic, responsive learning environment's effect on pre-service dance education students. Dorfman's assignment was to create a new work with high school and university students, culminating in performances of the dance at both schools.

Traditionally, community residencies occur at the university. High school dance programs are less likely to have access to an artist of Dorfman's stature due to financial limitations and academic scheduling. It is also rare for dance education students to participate in residencies due to audition processes and departmental budgets that favor technicians and performers.

The dance education students were eager to work with a well-known and admired modern dancer and

choreographer, so if they *had* to work with some high school students in order to gain access to Dorfman, then they were ready to join. These college students would soon discover that a remarkable benefit of the MIF residency was learning how to empathize and truly *see* these high school students and how to both witness and value their ongoing development, especially in non-technical ways.

Dance education student Marlene Strang was so motivated by working with Dorfman and Rapp that she used the residency as her Senior Dance Education Capstone research project. Strang interviewed high school students, looking at the pedagogical, sociological, and emotional impact of working with Dorfman. Strang and Rapp's insights into the high school student experience were invaluable to evaluation and assessment of this residency project.

Scope of the Project

Nine high school students and eight university students participated in the residency. Over a three-month period, rehearsals occurred Mondays through Wednesdays after school and over the weekend. A rehearsal schedule was instituted allowing Dorfman time to work with each group separately and together. The entire residency, including all rehearsals, staging, and three performances, totaled over 100 hours of contact time. Multiple methods of data collection were employed during the residency, including participant journals, questionnaires, observation notes, video documentation, and interviews. Rapp, Strang, and the author analyzed the data for a research presentation and the following themes emerged: students' process of self discovery; personal investment; and social exchange. The following illuminates Dorfman's pedagogical practice as an artist and educator during the residency by looking at the teaching methods employed in relation to the pre-service teachers' thoughts about teaching.

Forming Community

Dorfman emphasizes that the dance making process has inherent value in strengthening and connecting individuals and groups. While partnering diverse age groups and levels of experience, he invited certain critical issues and significant problems for joint consideration. His highly collaborative approach is based on the values of personal reflection, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, respect, and honesty. Learning modalities used in the MIF residency included: motivation, professionalism, authentic expression, and personal connections.

Motivation: Negativism is Taboo

"Motivation" is defined as the "process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained."⁵ In cre-

ating the motivated learning environment, Brophy suggests that teachers create a learning community where all students can learn from each other and work cooperatively; teach students to understand, appreciate, and apply content knowledge; and attend to students' expectations.⁶ A master teacher, Dorfman implements Brophy's theories and further constructs a learning community through inclusion, openness, and positive reinforcement.

Dorfman's philosophy of community dance making is founded on the premise that all participants influence, guide, and own the dance-making process and product. In our workshop, placing priority on group sharing and the act of listening had a transformative effect on the participants. Prioritizing the voice of the group allowed all participants to feel valued and essential to the dance's outcome. In giving over choreographic control, students had to be responsible to themselves, to one another, and to the process as a whole.

Genuine, concerned, and sincerely interested in each of the students, Dorfman talked openly about professional choices, family, and other facets of his life. Students were amazed at his "realness." As they said, "He never acted like a high and mighty professional choreographer. He spoke fondly of his life in New York and his family, even showing photos of his son and wife. He was real with us.... He offered guidance in a genuine manner, never in a contrived way. When he observed us struggling, he always came by to offer help." And, "Each day, either at the start of the day or the end of the work session, he checked in with each one of us, showing real care and concern."

Supportive listening and well-chosen suggestions can motivate students to work harder and smarter. Positive reinforcement and motivational instruction impact the formation of students' self-esteem and more accurate self-perceptions. Researchers explain that teachers support their students' successful transition into new peer groups when they show interest in their students, care for their students, appreciate their students' endeavor, listen to their students, and when they are actively involved in learning.⁷ In our program, creating an attentive, positive, and supportive environment allowed students to risk looking foolish in front of their peers (or more advanced dancers) and was essential for artistic growth.

Based on Brophy's motivational strategies, teachers need to create learning communities to address students' confidence in learning and to stimulate students' desire to learn. Expressing the influence that Dorfman's teaching style had on her motivation, commitment, and dedication, one student shared, "He motivated the high school students to try hard and accomplish the challenge.... I believe everyone wanted to meet his standard, partially because of

his positive words and amazing direction.... no one ever wanted to let him down. I believe that students wanted to please him because he offered them so much."

Contemplating the value of the positive energy extending from Dorfman's disposition and personality, students described him as approachable and affirming and reflected on the value of constructive support and the need to be mindful of it in all aspects of teaching. Considering collaborative community building, one high school student revealed, "Mr. Dorfman brought us all closer together and unified us as a group." A university student addressed the safe nurturing environment, "Not only did he learn everyone's name in minutes, but only after five minutes...I was surprised by how comfortable and secure I felt in such a short time."

The students were intrigued with Dorfman's methods and pressed him to share his reasoning. Dorfman explained that his use of positive comments is in direct response to his belief that negativity is rampant especially in the dance profession and that people need to support one another, "I think [being positive] is a super-conscious choice. I just feel that there is enough negative energy in the world in general and also in teaching and particularly in dance training. I don't want to get near it.... When I wake up in the morning and teach a class, for me it [negativity] is taboo."¹

Professionalism: We Want To Move Forward, Not Backward

Dorfman's professional experience with numerous community groups undoubtedly informed his ability to clearly affirm his goals, performance objectives, and expectations during the MIF residency. Jones addresses the need to establish and articulate consequences and expectations, "Setting forth clear outcome standards requires that they are embedded in the curriculum and that both the students and teachers are clearly aware of and culpable for the content and the expected outcomes. Assessments must be aligned and reflective of the expected outcome."⁸ These are essential skills for the novice teacher to attain. During the residency, students witnessed Dorfman institute a code of professional responsibility that was agreed upon by all of the participants.

Dorfman asked the students to be fully present, to watch closely, and to observe the details in the dance. Establishing an inquiry approach to learning, he used questioning techniques to guide student experience and focus ownership of learning on the student. Examples of guiding questions included: "What do you need to learn?" or "What do you need to know to do a [difficult movement]?" When students struggled

with a particular movement or in finding solutions to movement challenges, he would say, "Watch [me] closely." When the students were vague, he would say, "Ask me better questions." Such well-articulated expectations led the students to look more closely, define what creative ideas and effort they brought to the group, and assess their own participation. Dorfman would ask the high school students to focus on themselves in the process: "Where are you today?" He encouraged them to "attend to what you *can* do and what you *are* doing not what you *cannot* technically do yet." Clear outcome and directives combined with inquiry methods allow Dorfman to create a democratic learning environment, while at the same time maintain his high expectations and professional goals. This environment sharply contrasts with the prevalent autocratic environment found in many professional dance companies, high school programs, and dance studios.

Amazed by their maturity and capacity for learning challenging material, the university students were profoundly shaped by the practice of learning alongside high school students. In their journals they spoke of the high demands and professionalism Dorfman expected of the younger students. "He [Dorfman] had very high expectations of them; he did not baby them, which I think drove them to do well. When he would get less from them than he wanted as far as attitude or drive, he would say things like, 'Be positive –I don't want any drama.' 'We want to move forward, not backward.'"

Clearly articulating expected behaviors and following through with comments and actions served as influential pedagogical examples. Dorfman defined some "illegal body attitudes" which hindered the students' availability to be present in the class. These mannerisms include hands in pockets or arms across the chest. Classroom management, while challenging for all teachers, is especially difficult for novice teachers. The MIF students were privileged to observe first-hand Dorfman's "tough love" and "high responsibility" management style at work.

Authentic Expression: Revealing Culture

During the residency, the foundational improvisation and exercises included contact and weight-sharing games and exploring the basic body movement activation of folding, lengthening, diagonals, and spiraling. By stripping away characteristic movements and taking risks through improvisation, students formed a wider vocabulary capable of expressing their own ideas.

Praised nationally and internationally for his capacity to spark mutual investment, Dorfman's work promotes participants to move out of their comfort zones. Improvisational strategies used in

the residency required exposing limitations, building trust in one another, and promoting self-discovery. This knowledge would later be applied to the performance of technical dance movement. Where traditional dance training keeps students perfecting steps, Dorfman believes improvisation pushes the student to new levels of focused investigation, which can later be applied to technique. Dorfman articulates, "When people get to the end of class and they [students] are doing a technical phrase, they are going to bring much more of themselves to it because of what they have already experimented, with where they are that day, through improvisational work."¹ Such improvisational strategies required students to dig deeper to reinvent movement material in other contexts.

Novack speaks to the value of contact improvisation as being culturally revealing:

Conceptions and practices in American culture construct the body and its techniques; we learn what our bodies are and how to move them in all our social interactions. Dance focuses on techniques of the body directly and extensively. Although sometimes viewed as sets of skills, dance techniques provide movement experiences, body images, and conceptions of body, self, and motion with far-reaching implications. Contact improvisation, as one American construction of the body and of ways in which the body can and should move, constitutes a commentary which is culturally revealing.⁹

Martha Eddy addresses the importance of improvisation as an instrument of curricular reform: "As we teach skills of improvisation we find we are helping men and women to be more fluent and at-ease in a culture of disruption; we are providing skills for leadership in the change process"¹⁰ Dorfman asked students to look around and to watch closely what other dancers were doing, guiding them to try on each other's movements. Encouraging observation for inspiration, attention to detail and experimentation supported dance education students' acquisition of pedagogical strategies for choreographic problem solving.

While it was difficult at first, improvisational strategies became comfortable, allowing students to expand their movement palette, ultimately giving them the confidence to create their own movement signatures. In their journals, university students discussed Dorfman's methods and their transformative effect on the high school students' ease of movement, confidence, and ability to take risks. One high school student spoke of her newly discovered capacity to move beyond traditional opinions saying, "I really grew. Not just my dance vocabulary

but in myself as a person; I am much more open to new ideas and experiences.” Addressing newfound kinesthetic acuity, a high school student shared, “I think my movement is more fluid...letting bending and folding happen...[this experience] will really help me with all types of dance.”

Personal Connections: Investing Myself in the Process

Tomlinson notes that “students will learn best when they can make a connection between the curriculum and their interests and life experiences.”¹¹ By soliciting students’ views on issues touching their lives and examining their values and goals, Dorfman made real connections with these students. While this may sound a bit “touchy-feely,” resembling a group therapy session, this was magical for the students. Consider what it must have felt like when a “Big Time” New York choreographer asked the students, “What is important to you?” or “What is going on in your life?” In group discussions such inquiry processes developed into a familiar community building and choreographic method. Malcolm Manning discusses improvisation’s ability to express personal ideas in dance. “How we dance with others is an indication of personal and cultural values. The motivation for the dance is inspired by individual feelings and imagination, and universal principles of weight, momentum, velocity, and flow...with the primary sense of focus on shared personal power.”¹²

Constructivist theory ascribes that students play an active role in engaging learning and acquiring new experience to retrieve or revise their previous experiences. Gary Goldman, an advocate for youth and community empowerment, suggests that educators “cultivate youth’s creativity in real-life problem solving.”¹³ He notes the benefit of “open dialogue between youth and adults through leadership activities that reflects individual and community values [and] results in more caring, safe, and sustainable communities.”¹³

In the workshop Dorfman employed constructivist principles, asking students to share their writing, poetry, artwork, stories, and ideas with the group. As one participant put it, “Dorfman is really interested in creating work with the participants that is relevant to each of them.... This was extremely motivating for me. It made me want to work that much harder and invest as much of myself as I possibly could in the project.”

Issues discussed in the residency sometimes hit close to home and affected participants in personal ways. Students discussed the impact of being entrusted with the personal stories of the group as heightening their sense of responsibility: “Ongoing conversations and communal sharing at the begin-

ning of the rehearsals was essential to the formation of friendships.” “Checking-in” meetings gave participants time to express their challenges, concerns and breakthroughs. After Dorfman returned to New York, a buddy system was implemented, which gave participants a means of remaining close and staying connected. Throughout the residency, university students began to see themselves not as distinct age groups from the high school students, but as one dance company formed to express their place in the world.

Residency Challenges

Conflict can occur between the schools and the artist when the goals are not articulated and apparent. Some challenges were encountered in the David Dorfman residency. Hidden costs often surface in such programs, and we encountered difficulties with costumes and travel expenses. These were relatively easy to resolve through strategic costume loans and additional fundraising. In a project this size, detailed planning cannot be overemphasized. Working with multiple calendars presented numerous challenges. Given the length of this residency, Dorfman needed to commute from New York to work with his company and overcommitted students struggled with classes, homework, jobs and equally active calendars.

Other challenges were personal and required facing internal obstacles. I previously discussed the expectations of the students and the choreographer, but often neglected are the needs and management procedures of the host teacher. Bringing another teacher into her classroom was risky for the host teacher. Concerns that the choreographer might undo the creative work in the classroom or disrupt the expectations of the students are typical. Additionally challenging is the fact that host teachers must adhere to school codes of conduct, which might be very different from the choreographer’s methods of working. The host teacher must consider how the AIR experience will complement the established curriculum and meet the administrators’ expectations while supporting student learning. Further, an AIR project is just one of many school-related responsibilities a teacher must juggle throughout the process.

There will undoubtedly be uncertainty: “Will the students prefer his or her teaching style?” “Will I lose the students’ respect?” “Will the administrators and parents support the project?” “Will I have to pick up the pieces of my students when it is all over?” Interpretations of the goals of the project, philosophies of dance, and artistic expectations are essential conversations to have with the artist before the residency begins. Dorfman was professional,

prepared, and incredibly flexible. He adhered to the high school's codes of conduct, praised the prior work done by the students and teachers, and more importantly, considered the needs of the members of the community at all times. Rapp made *people* a top priority, creating a welcoming and nurturing environment, and providing dinner for the group during late night rehearsals.

Dance education communities may wisely consider the possibilities of this new kind of AIR partnership. When we unite university teacher preparation programs with high school dance programs, all have the potential to benefit from the friendships formed and the one-on-one contact with a serious professional who has devoted a lifetime to his or her art. The Dorfman residency encouraged participants to use pedagogical innovations, specialized resources, and varied approaches to choreography that required teamwork, collaboration, and a sense of adventure. Yet, as will be seen, it resulted as well in crumbling dancers, a paralyzed teacher, and an enraged choreographer.

"Here" was performed at three different venues: a premiere for parents and friends; a high school assembly; and as part of a main stage university dance concert. After the premiere performance, the performers understood that their personal, physical, and social risks were worthwhile and supported. However, the high school assembly experience was something altogether different.

School assembly crowds can be tough to manage, especially with over 650 15 to 18 year olds and their teachers. At the onset it appeared to be a typical assembly with murmurs and laughter as the students settled into their seats. The dance began with an introduction by Dorfman and two students; but shortly thereafter, the audience began whistling and heckling the dancers. There were sporadic whoops and catcalls which grew progressively louder. I had never seen anything like it. As I watched this performance unfold, I hoped that the speakers on stage were loud enough to limit the dancers' abilities to hear the crowd's unruliness and disrespect. Sitting in the audience, I was furious but powerless. I wondered how these students could behave this way. Why did they think it was acceptable? I watched as the dancers' fragile stories got debased by their peers' uncaring comments, and my frustration grew. Remarkably, the dancers did not let the chaos hinder them, but kept dancing strong and united.

Following the performance, Dorfman came out on stage demanding respect for the creative and deeply personal work that the dancers had shared. He was bombarded with further shouts. The dancers left the stage sobbing in disbelief at how they had been treated by their peers. Dorfman was enraged. Ms.

Rapp, shocked by the assembly students' behavior and teachers' and administrators' lack of action, reflected, "Where were the teachers and administrators whose job it is to protect all students? What damage had this done to the dancers when their choreography met such disrespect and cruelty? What impact did this have on their fragile self-esteem?" Still more questions remained. After the "dance incident," as it was subsequently referred to, new policies were established for audience behavior.

In their journals the students discussed teacher apathy, shockingly inappropriate behavior, and advocacy for change. One student sympathetic to the plight of the high school dancers commented, "The Arcadia students' lack of respect and just complete ignorance is appalling. The worst part was that it really left a negative taste in everybody's mouths, including David's, and especially the dancers' who had to go to class after that. They had to keep defending themselves for over a week, getting ridiculed and disrespected, not only by the students, but by their teachers. That's just not fair, and I'm still angry about it."

On a positive note, several students wrote about the unity they felt both during and after the performance. The assembly experience consolidated the group, and a more tightly-knit group performed at the university several weeks later.

Conclusion and Discussion

The residency experience grew out of real-life situations, problems, and incidents derived from the direct concerns and experiences of students. Dorfman's socially responsive, constructivist pedagogical practice placed the students as leaders, while he served as a guide. The participants were personally engaged in issues, seeking concrete and immediate means of examining real problems. The methodology of community building used during the residency stressed personal connections, genuine caring, concrete expectations, risk in creative inquiry, and professionalism. Dorfman himself served as an exceptional pedagogical model for the dance education students.

I present this community partnership with the belief that other teachers will benefit from this research and envision replication in their schools. I found inspiration in this research. As a result, the K-12 teacher preparation curriculum was modified to include more extensive materials on motivation, activism, constructivist practice, and student self-assessment as it relates to classroom management and choreography.

One thing that makes Dorfman's work unique is his focus on bodies creating social change through personal interactions in intimate relationships.

Watching the high school students flourish under Dorfman's compassionate leadership supplied a consciousness grounded in the real experience of co-creating with the students and an understanding of the limitations and challenges facing high school dance students today. Further, students learned that openness, support, and camaraderie could heighten students' creative potential without jeopardizing the quality of the work.

In the residency, dance students were able to view a window into the lives of their future students and discover their goals and dreams, concerns, and realities. When asked to identify personal discoveries, one student shared, "Overall, one of the most exciting parts of this residency was bonding with the Arcadia population and witnessing them grow into amazing dancers as a result of this experience." Another shared, "They weren't afraid to express themselves emotionally and abstractly. They were proud of their work and they stood up for it. ...I will do whatever I can to make my students feel the way that I know David made those kids feel."

The personal connections formed through improvisatory activities and sharing their writing and stories became inspiration for the students' choreography. The students developed a shared story about straddling major changes in their lives, going off to college, graduating from college, and getting their first *real* jobs. Dorfman used change as a catalyst and began the complicated process of forming a community out of strangers and making a dance out of ideas. The experience of watching the high school students take ownership of the choreography was extraordinary. As one participant put it, "I remember many people telling me after they saw 'Here' that they could not tell the difference between the college students and the high school students. I was truly amazed at the journey David took the high school students on. It was wonderful to see the students mature as people and as modern dancers."

Jean Houston uses the term "social artist" to describe one who can "move us beyond the polarities of right and left...and promote cooperation, understanding, and networks of mutual aid."¹⁴ Risking failure, such artists challenge participants to understand themes of difference, identity, self, and place. Committed to using the arts to address universal issues such as racism, homophobia, sexism, ageism, classism in all forms, they seek to create change, which is both personal and political in scope. Social artists play an active and central role, taking action for meaningful understanding and creating lasting change through their art. David Dorfman is a consummate social artist. All through the residency, he asked students to let go of old patterns, value and express their culture, and support and appreciate one

another by creating a safe community for students to experience themselves in the dance. Dorfman's pedagogy ignites the power of the human spirit, transforming K-12 teacher education one student body at a time.

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