Approaching Curricular Equity in Tertiary Dance Education

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Tertiary dance education in the United States and internationally is at a crossroads: professional dance practices are rapidly changing, the student body is more demographically diverse and universities—particularly public institutions—are being called upon to radically rethink how college educations unfold to serve a broader range of student interests in relation to the current economic and cultural landscape. In this liminal space, many within tertiary dance education are questioning the conventional conservatory model that privileges White, European aesthetics and practices and siloed career paths as the best—or indeed the only—way to educate college-level dancers.

In the current landscape, tertiary dance programs must question their relationship to professional practice. No longer can dance educators ethically promise their students that jobs in dance companies and careers based solely around choreography are awaiting them upon graduation. Yet the majority of programs continue to implicitly, if not explicitly, reinforce professional performance opportunities as the pinnacle of a dance career by centring curricula on modern dance and ballet; distinctly separating programs of study into performance, choreography or education; and narrowly defining student success.

Concurrently, universities, including dance programs, need to question their institutional practices as they enrol a more racially, ethnically and socio-economically diverse student body with a broad range of backgrounds, interests and career aspirations. While almost every dance program highlights the importance of advancing diversity in their mission statements, website media and/or marketing materials, the predominance of White, European aesthetics embedded in curricula raises questions about how

intentions of equity actually manifest (Schupp and McCarthy-Brown 2018).

If tertiary dance programs are to both seed change in professional practice and respond to the social, economic and cultural growth of their communities, then faculty and administrators must reflect upon how the values embedded in their curriculum relate to issues of equity across course offerings. Approaching curricular equity is an iterative process aimed at equalising culturally diverse perspectives in relation to physical practices, historical development and contextual frameworks as well as acknowledging how an intercultural comprehension of dance broadens the conceptualisation of dance careers.

In my own practice as a scholar, leader and educator, I refer to *approaching* curricular equity because of my positionally and my professional expertise. As a White woman with expertise in modern dance and ballet, I do not think it is for me to say if/when curricular equity has been achieved within my own program or within other programs. Approaching curricular equity in tertiary education requires that those in positions of power—such as leaders, faculty members and those who determine dance curricula—to reflect upon how assumptions and practices either hinder or advance equity. After providing a brief overview of the current discourse around equity in US tertiary dance education, this article outlines questions and tools for dance educators to consider in relation to approaching curricular equity.

Paving the way forward

Approaching curricular equity requires an awareness of how White privilege and White supremacy operate within dance training and education. While the

majority of dance programs continue to prioritise ballet and modern dance as the keystones of their curricula, scholars and practitioners are critiquing and questioning current practices and offering alternative approaches, many through a critical race theory lens. In this way, they are charting the territory toward curricular equity.

Currently, there is a clear disconnect between the intention and the impact of diversity and equity in tertiary dance education (Schupp and McCarthy-Brown 2018). Because most dance programs expound values supporting cultural diversity in their mission statements, attempting to understand students' lived experiences with cultural diversity in their programs represents a means of better aligning principles and practices. A recent study found that even in programs that included dance forms beyond modern and ballet, students felt that aesthetic values from modern dance and ballet were dominant (Schupp and McCarthy-Brown 2018). The students reported that most of their dance history and choreography content, for example, focused on modern dance and ballet. Further, the dances presented in their department concerts privileged Western theatrical aesthetics and assumptions, and the word 'technique' was often used in a non-specific way that privileged these same Western values. This gap between stated intentions of equity and practices that continue to reify White notions of dance is where the journey toward curricular equity must begin.

Notable scholars in dance education have interrogated issues related to equity and White supremacy, both in relation to the visible components of dance education as well as the hidden assumptions that perpetuate the dominance of ballet and modern dance as the cornerstones of tertiary dance curricula. The following examples demonstrate how ballet and modern dance continue to be elevated in tertiary dance education's curricula, course content and pedagogy.

The majority of US tertiary dance programs require multiple semesters of ballet and modern dance

in their curricula while simultaneously espousing the importance of diversity. In a curricular sense, diversity is most often addressed by offering elective coursework in dance forms outside of the Western theatrical canon, such as West African, Bharatanatyam or Capoeira. Nyama McCarthy-Brown (2014) has exposed this disconnection between stated values of diversity and curricular requirements, particularly in relation to how different dance forms are situated within curricula. She calls upon dance programs to be cognisant of how the credit hours assigned to dance forms indicate a dance form's worth within a curriculum. For example, what message do students receive about equity amongst dance forms when they are required to take multiple semesters of a three-credit ballet course but can only take African Diasporic forms as one-credit electives? Here, the inequitable distribution of credits and requirements indicates that ballet has more value than African Diasporic forms in students' dance education. McCarthy-Brown has urged dance educators to consider and create alternative paradigms for tertiary dance education that embrace a broader range of physical practices as equals.

Julie Kerr-Berry (2018) has long advocated for greater inclusion of African Diasporic content in dance curricula. Recently, her work has focused on 'challenging the white body' in dance history courses. Using a critical race theory lens, Kerr-Berry asserts that 'whiteness as property manifests itself in the ownership of dance history content and the right to exclude other narratives, including aesthetic perspectives' (139). Here, Kerr-Berry is problematising a well-known but rarely mentioned fact about dance history courses in the US: Although the course title is generic, the course content primarily if not exclusively focuses on modern dance and ballet and the White artists who were key figures in these forms. To challenge this, Kerr-Berry advocates the use of counter-stories to prioritise the contributions of Black dancers and choreographers and to draw students' attention to the racialised

development of modern dance and ballet in the US and internationally.

Several researchers draw attention to the predominance of Western theatrical pedagogical approaches and unstated expectations in higher education. McCarthy-Brown (2017) explains the criticality of culturally relevant pedagogical approaches in dance. She outlines how failure to embrace and cultivate culturally relevant pedagogical approaches in tertiary dance education dismisses the needs and cultural values of students of colour, thereby hindering equity among the students. Alfdaniels Mabingo (2015) examines how the expectation of a Western pedagogical approach and class format negate the values inherent in African dance forms. In her work considering how African Diasporic dance could be reimaged in tertiary education, Takiyah Nur Amin (2016) illustrates how the unquestioned privileging of performance within tertiary dance programs negates the humanities aspect of dance, which is needed if dance forms that exist outside of the proscenium, such as social dance and hip hop, are to be respectfully and holistically included in tertiary programs. Amin calls for a practice-based approach to studying dance requiring students to understand dance as a comprehensive academic discipline. Crystal U. Davis (2018) interrogates how White perspectives unknowingly factor into assessment, most notably when Western-centric movement assessment and observation frameworks, such as Laban Movement Analysis, are assumed to be culturally neutral. By situating Western assessment frameworks as universal or neutral, the values within the frameworks become devoid of their cultural context and contribute to privileging Western dance aesthetics.

The dominance of White aesthetics, primarily from modern dance and ballet, is directly related to outdated expectations of professional practice—perhaps stemming from the symbiotic development of modern dance and university programs in the mid-twentieth

century. During this era, prominent White modern dance choreographers such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham taught and created work at the historically renowned Bennington School of Dance, held primarily on the campus of Bennington College. Many of the students were college and high school dance teachers, thereby increasing the visibility of modern dance and its associated professions across the US (McPherson 2013). This expansion in visibility extended to college campuses as teachers brought movements, ideas and expectations from their experiences at the Bennington School of Dance to their own students. Today, professional opportunities in dance are much broader than the limited scope of dancing for a company, choreographing for a company or teaching. Careers in dance now embrace both concert and commercial spaces, and professionals are frequently expected to simultaneously operate both within the dance world and to bring dance to other spheres of practice. Many who sustain careers into middle age have a diverse portfolio of experiences. The expansion and need for a wider variety of dance careers is intimately tied to undoing the stronghold that modern dance and ballet have on university dance curriculums. Embedded in modern dance and ballet is a clear hierarchy of ideas about roles within dance, where dance occurs and who has access to it; this hierarchical structure does not apply to all dance forms, nor does it benefit or connect with communities' economic, social and cultural wellbeing. Applying dance knowledge post-graduation also needs to be carefully considered when approaching curricular equity.

Approaching curricular equity

I share my own journey toward curricular equity to demonstrate one possible approach to curricular equity and to ground the reflective questions included later in the article. I teach at Arizona State University, and our current curricula, which includes undergraduate and graduate degrees in dance and dance education,

were collectively designed by the faculty in 2008 to de-centre ballet and modern dance with the intent of approaching equity. Our curricula focus on creative practice, reflection, humanity and inquiry as critical to dance study and allow students to take coursework in Afro-Latin movement practices, contemporary ballet, hip hop, postmodern contemporary dance and somatic practices. The curriculum also requires coursework in creative practices, movement practices, dance pedagogy, socially engaged practices and a variety of contextual courses.

This model has proven successful in broadening the offered dance forms, and thereby the dance interests and backgrounds, present in the program. In terms of dance forms, this model is more inclusive than many programs in the US. While expanding the dance forms we offered was a critical first step in recalibrating dance curricula toward curricular equity, ten years later, we still face several questions that need to be addressed if we truly want an equitable and inclusive framework that extends beyond the purely physical practice of dance. We are now considering how values and practices from each dance form we offer can be explicitly included in creative practice and contextual courses, not just in technique classes. Our revised curricula will include a menu of historical and theoretical courses that reflect the range of dance techniques we offer; further, creative practice sequences will include approaches and perspectives from all the dance forms in the curricula. We will also require coursework that introduces each dance form's technique, contexts, history and aesthetics to all students in year one, seeding the importance of curricular equity early on in their university experiences.

To refine our curricula around the idea of approaching curricular equity, we had to ask ourselves the following questions, which are useful for anyone interested in engaging with this journey:

- What does curricular equity actually look like and require in reality?
- What tensions exist between the expectations of a dance program and the lived realities of our students?
- How can we give our students the skills to both take advantage of existing opportunities in dance and to create their own opportunities in dance after graduation?
- How can we direct students to view dance practices, both in terms of dance forms and dance careers, as an equitable spectrum while still encouraging individualised expertise?
- How can we partner with our local community to include their voices and perspectives?
- How can we 'let go' of long-standing, conventional coursework to make room for new courses that better approach curricular equity?
- How can we ensure that students' dance interests are reflected in our coursework beyond broadening technical practice?
- Do the curricula honour our students' cultural backgrounds, interests and aspirations?
- How can we de-centre Western theatrical expectations in creative practice courses, dance performances and events?
- How does theoretical course content need to change to embrace a range of dance forms and perspectives, theories and aesthetics?
- Do course titles accurately reflect their content?
- How can we bring more specificity to the naming of exercises and methods in our teaching to better situate their socio-cultural contexts?
- What assumptions are built into the language we use to teach, and how can we question these assumptions?
- What are our responsibilities in educating future faculty and dance educators to advance approaching curricular equity in tertiary education?

As dance educators reflect upon the above questions, it is helpful to remember that there are many ways to imagine a dance program in terms of relevance and inclusion. Prioritising the needs of students and the regional community is often a good starting point—as is imagining how graduates could contribute to dance and to their communities. If educators in a program truly believe that focusing on modern dance and ballet is the way to contribute to their community or advance professional practice, then they should build curricula around excellence in ballet and modern dance. However, as long as most programs continue on this path without reflecting upon why they are doing this and for whom, dance in academia will remain exclusive, access to dance will not increase and the potential for what dance could do in academia and society will never be fully realised.

Of course, there are challenges that will prevent programs from immediately actualising curricular equity, but future planning can create a blueprint. When asked to engage in this transformation, many well-intended dance educators may find themselves unintentionally hiding behind rationale that upholds the status quo, including limited resources to allocate toward diversifying curricula, the need to maintain accreditation or meet professional standards or the expertise of tenured faculty (Risner and Stinson 2010), each of which stems from the construction of Whiteness and White supremacy in dance education (Davis 2018). Currently, most tenured faculty hold expertise in Western theatrical dance practices. Graduate programs, which in the US are the gateway to faculty positions, still prioritise Western theatrical dance, meaning future faculty continue to achieve and maintain expertise in ballet and modern dance. Yet faculty do have the power to revise graduate curricula as a way to seed future advancements toward curricular equity. Studio spaces, a precious resource on college campuses, are pre-built to reflect and facilitate the development of Western theatrical dance aesthetics,

but many can be retrofitted to welcome different types of dance. There are expectations within university systems that performances occur on stage, but there are also public spaces that can be used for dance events that are more community or socially oriented. All of this requires a rethinking of conventional practices in academia in service of promoting equity—initially, they are roadblocks, but they can be overcome if the desire to begin a path toward equity is sincere.

Budget is also a concern, and it is often easy to shut down thinking about possible changes by saying there is no funding to add courses and faculty. Yet approaching curricular equity is not about expanding, nor is it about continually adding courses to a program—it entails carefully balancing course offerings and removing courses that no longer serve the field or contribute to curricular equity to make space for new courses. Budgetary priorities point to what dance programs value. If programs are truly dedicated to approaching curricular equity and becoming more inclusive, they must shift how they allocate resources. There will always be budgetary concerns for most dance programs, but assuming there is not a way forward is an easy way to skirt the issue of approaching curricular equity.

Much of the work in recalibrating curricula toward equity centres on considering what conventional assumptions and practices can be retired to make room for what is needed for relevance and equity. Tertiary dance programs need to regularly and critically examine the connections and disconnections between their stated values and practices in relation to curricular equity, diversity and inclusion. There is no simple path forward, and each step toward change will likely reveal numerous other steps that are needed—however, the only way to achieve curricular equity is to start approaching it one step at a time.

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BIOGRAPHY

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