

## **Embodied Liberation: Envisioning and Manifesting a Better World through Dance**

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Why use dance for liberation? How do we embody liberation, envision radically, and manifest a better world? Dancer, anthropologist, and educator Pearl Primus responds, “Why do I dance? Dance is my medicine. It's the scream which eases for a while the terrible frustration common to all human beings who because of race, creed, or color, are 'invisible'. Dance is the fist with which I fight the sickening ignorance of prejudice” (Boyd, 2018). This paper describes a dance-in-education curriculum designed to encourage students to respond to these inquiries using Primus’ words as a catalyst. Calling upon historical examples of dance being used as an instrument for social change and the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy, the curriculum aims to build a foundation from which dance students can further build agency and engage in advocating for a more just world.

Key words: embodiment, liberation, dance, education

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The described curriculum, “Embodied Liberation: Envisioning and Manifesting a Better World through Dance,” is designed specifically for secondary and collegiate students. It uses the body as an instrument of liberation within dance education. Dance is specifically used in the pursuit of liberation as it is bodies that are marginalized through oppressive, systemic structures, as well as bodies that are liberated through community building and protest. The dance studio is considered a place where the seeds of liberation and empowerment can be planted and students’ agency is realized.

Methods used to develop this curriculum drew upon both narrative and ethnographic investigative practices. As in narrative research methodology, the curriculum encouraged teachers and students alike to collect and tell stories about their personal histories, as well as journal about their experiences in the course. Their oral history was valued by centering students’ cultural identities, histories, and knowledge. Through the ethnographic research principle of the observer as participant, the foundation was laid for students to mine their personal histories with agency, while teachers observed, reflected upon, and altered the curriculum based on their learnings about themselves and the class community.

### **Embodiment in Education**

bell hooks urges us to “return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others” (hooks, 2017, p. 139). Dance, which uses the body as its primary instrument, can be taught in ways that enhance bias, or it can be taught in a way that encourages a state of *embodiment*. Through the activities and exercises described below, this curriculum allows students to “return to a state of embodiment” in a shared quest for liberation.

In recounting the possibilities for empowerment and liberation in education, Zaretta Hammond finds that “empowerment also can be described as student academic competence, self-efficacy (belief in one’s ability), and initiative” (Hammond, 2015). Through this dance curriculum, teachers are viewed as co-conspirators for societal change. Part of working with students for societal change is creating an environment in which students can honor and develop their own self-efficacy and the initiative to advocate and work toward the changes that need to come about to build a more equitable society. Creating a space for students to share their own embodied knowledge creates the beginning stages of liberation. Allowing students to feel *visible* serves as a first step to amplifying their voices and embodied-being in advocating for a more just world. Beginning with students’ innate, embodied knowledge affirms the power of their presence not only in the dance studio, but also in the larger community and, ultimately, the world.

## **Embodied Liberation through Movement and Art**

The arts, and specifically movement arts, have been used historically for both individual and societal change. The concept of embodied liberation presented in this curriculum goes beyond an individual's own self-actualization. It encourages students to understand themselves and connect this understanding to the wider world. Embodied liberation considers the communal healing and growth that can occur when a class as a collective moves, sings, and holds space together. This communal healing creates space for the community to envision and manifest a better reality. Movement and rhythm play an essential role in this work. Historical events demonstrate this truth and they can be applied to transforming practices in education.

A specific example is described by Bessel van der Kolk who was a witness to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1996. In his book, "The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma," he describes that the TRC was "based on the central guiding principle of *Ubuntu*, a Xhosa word that denotes sharing what you have, as in 'My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.' Ubuntu recognizes that true healing is impossible without recognition of our common humanity and our common destiny" (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 351). *Ubuntu* is the foundation of this dance curriculum, built through encouraging the realization of one another's "common humanity." Once *Ubuntu* is learned and realized, students are supported in confronting difficult realities. van der Kolk describes that during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission "events were framed by collective singing and dancing. Witnesses recounted the unspeakable atrocities that had been inflicted on them and their families. When they became overwhelmed, [Desmond] Tutu would interrupt their testimony and lead the entire audience in prayer, song, and dance..." (van der Kolk, 2014, p.335). Embodied liberation as described in this testimonial is a necessary component of deep societal change. Movements, both figuratively and literally, allow us to transform as individuals and as a community.

Drawing upon the transformative power of theatre arts, Augusto Boal's work with *Theatre of the Oppressed* presents another example of embodied liberation in practice. "In Theatre of the Oppressed, reality is shown not only as it is, but also, more importantly, as it could be. Which is what we live for -- to become what we have the potential to be" (Boal, 2007, p.6). Theatre of the Oppressed has a long history of transforming communities suffering under oppression and inequality. It aims to work towards broad liberation, whether in prisons, land negotiations, or in theatre companies. Augusto Boal, its founder, created theatrical games that work toward social change. Embodiment is central to this work. Boal remarks, "The most important element of theatre is the human body... Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, instead of just waiting for it" (Boal, 2007, p. 6). He notes the importance of the human body in experiencing embodied knowledge that can then be used to help us "build our future" and to "become what we have the potential to be."

## **Embodied Liberation Curriculum**

The “Embodied Liberation” curriculum begins in response to students’ concepts of peace. The beginning peace-gesture exercise, as described below, encourages listening and observation as a means of creating community. As the majority of communication is nonverbal, echoing a dancer’s movement allows us to become aware of, and have greater embodied empathy for, realities of the individuals that compose the community. Through this beginning exercise, dancers also learn the choreographic tool of “echoing” that heightens awareness and encourages deep listening. English teacher and culturally responsive educator, Zaretta Hammond notes that “Listening communicates a sense of respect for and an interest in the student’s contributions. Research says that 70% of communication is nonverbal. So listening doesn’t just mean hearing the words but listening to the emotional quality of the conversation” (Hammond, 2015, pp.77-78). At the completion of this exercise of echoing the peace gestures, there is an immediate recognition of one another’s contributions to the class community.

### **Peace-Gestures**

The peace-gesture activity begins with students preparing to share their feelings and thoughts around the concept of *peace* through a written brainstorming exercise. Displayed throughout the space are large posters with prompts asking students to brainstorm what peace means to them. They consider their definition of *peace*, write the word *peace* in their respective languages, and contemplate the look, feel, and sound of *peace*. Next, gathering in a circle, students work independently to create a movement gesture representing peace. A circular spatial formation is used for this activity as it is an ancestral form of building community through dance. Secondly, it disrupts the hierarchical practice of using lines in dance classes to differentiate between the purported levels of students. Frequently in this structure, the students in the front rows are those who demonstrate the “model dance student.” Performing the peace gesture exercise in a circle leads to students’ demonstrating their agency and sense of democracy. This serves to work against a hegemonic power structure within the learning environment. As a result of a “Western-informed filter of what valued dance is, a Eurocentric hegemonic ideology is being applied. As a result, some students conclude that the embodied knowledge, the cultural capital that they possess, is not sufficient to move forward” (McCarthy-Brown, 2017, p. 31). Sharing peace gestures in a circle serves as a way of building connections: we listen, acknowledge, and embrace one another’s truths. This exercise aims to honor students’ cultural capital as they use their innate movement to create their gestures. Going around the circle, one student shares their peace gesture and a word or phrase from their brainstorm. Next, the entire group echoes the participants’ movements and words. The next activity in this curriculum further honors students’ innate movements, cultural capital, and listening, expanding upon their peace gesture.

### **Peace Improvisation**

Following and scaffolding upon the exercise of the peace-gesture, students next develop their gestures into an improvisation and choreography. After improvising together, each student enters the circle one by one and offers their peace-gesture-inspired improvisation to the community. Prior to the next person entering the circle, everyone in the circle responds with an improvisation that expresses what resonated with them about the expression they witnessed. While improvising, dancers have the option of moving through space. At the end of the improvisational moment, they return to the circle space and the next person enters. Improvisation in this curriculum is an essential component of embodied liberation as it is the body moving freely without the constraints of the mind and prescribed movements. Students next connect their gestures through the use of improvisation and choreographic tools in small collectives created by the dance educator.

### **Living Peace Altar**

Throughout the course of the curriculum, a peace altar is created by the students. A spot in the space is chosen where objects significant to the community are presented. Students are prompted to bring in objects that bring them peace, calm, and serenity. For example, students can bring in objects that are important to them, whether culturally significant, from family members who have passed away, or from mentors who are influential in their lives. This altar continually grows as a living piece of art. Students repeatedly contribute items that show the joy, calm, resistance, and ancestral traditions that accompany embodied liberation. Sitting in a circle, each student explains the gift that they are contributing to the altar and then offers a gesture to the group. The peace altar affirms students' presence in the space and allows them to envision their ability to enact change. The next exercise further explores students' agency.

### **Warrior Voices**

As a part of acknowledging the ability of students to enact change, this curriculum encourages students to consider themselves as warriors against injustice. An exercise that reinforces this concept is '*Warrior Voices*.' Students create a tagline that begins with the sentence starter "I am a warrior when..." They then create a shape that embodies this sentiment. Once creating and embodying this shape, students capture it in a photo, and use a computer or phone application, such as Instagram, to write text over the photo sharing their warrior quotation. This is then shared with peers. Next, a small group is created by the educator. Each student shares their photographed shape and warrior statement with the small group. These shapes are then combined to create a short movement study. Students use their knowledge of choreographic tools, such as echoing which was taught previously,

to develop this study. The aim of this exercise is to encourage students to understand their innate strengths, embracing their peers' and their own, embodied knowledge.

### **Choreography Inspired by Gregory Porter's *Revival***

This section of the curriculum uses the work of a celebrated musician and dancer to inspire students to consider injustice and envision a better world. Gregory Porter's music video '*Revival*' is used as a springboard to discuss how art can be used to empower and affect change. Porter created the video reflecting on his own experiences as a teenager in California after police brutality against Rodney King and the subsequent verdict that prompted uprisings. In the beginning of the video, dancer Jemoni Powe is shrunken by the immensity of injustice, however by the end of the piece he towers above the city while his movements, "informed by Jook dance, are fluid and assured" (Chinen, 2020). Students watch the video noticing the changes in scale and the changes in the dancer's movements. Next, students create an original dance study inspired by the actions shrink, expand, and liberate.

### **Envisioning and Embodying**

The final stage of the curriculum involves envisioning, embodying, and working to manifest a better world. The prior exercises prepare students to engage in this work through building a foundation of community, improvisation, and dance-making. Students work independently on a visual art project to create a collage that represents how they want to enact change in their own lives, their community, and the world. These collages are gathered on the floor around the living peace altar. Students move in a circle around the collages. As they move through space, each student shares a word inspired by their collage. The community then echoes this word as they dance throughout the space. The process of this communal and improvisational exercise is next formalized into a dance that can be recorded or performed to spread the students' advocacy work.

## **Conclusion**

Embodiment-in-education allows students to engage their radical imaginations and work toward freedom. In Maxine Greene's work, "The Artistic-Aesthetic Curriculum: Leaving Imprints on the Changing Face of the World" she expresses the power of art in creating the conditions for liberation. She writes, "We need to hold in mind somehow that many works of art (wherever they come from) address themselves to human freedom-- meaning the capacity to choose and (we would hope) the power to act in a changing world." (Greene, 2018, p.185). Similarly, Bettina Love writes that "Art first lets us see what is possible. It is our blueprint for the world we deserve and the world we are

working toward. Abolitionist teaching is built on the radical imagination of collective memories of resistance, trauma, survival, love, joy, and cultural modes of expression and practices that push and expand the fundamental ideas of democracy” (Love, 2020, p.100). Through community, movement, deep listening, empathy, and embodiment, this curriculum works to encourage students’ use of radical imagination in envisioning and manifesting a better world.

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Received: August 31, 2020

Reviewed: October 12, 2020

Accepted: October 16, 2020