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9. *Dance Dialogues: Creating and Teaching in the Zone of Proximal Development*

Barry Oreck and Jessica Nicoll

The first step, the Crone who scried the crystal said, *shall be to lose the way.*

Galway Kinnell from *The Book of Nightmares*

The choreographer Bill T. Jones has described the way a dance can "arise" from an improvisation. "There are propositions," he said, "coming from both my mind and my muscles.…I follow them and something comes out that makes me think, 'Whoa! Where did that come from?'" (as cited in Morgenroth, 2004, p. 144). Meredith Monk takes a different route. "I don't go into rehearsal where we're just going to do an improvisation. I never know how to use material generated like that" (p. 97). And yet she, too, surprises herself. "Part of the process is hanging out in the unknown.…I'm excited that I don't know what the form is going to be when I start" (p. 91). Jawole Willa Jo Zollar urges her company members to collaborate in the choreographic process, sometimes asking them to problem solve with a phrase she has created. "It's really a question of listening and being open to where the creative process takes you" (as cited in Vellucci, 2009, p. 30). These choreographers, like many others we have studied, find—through different processes—ways to enter a dialogue with self. Their methods serve not as a formula but as an attitude: they step knowingly into unknown territory to make their art and discover its meanings.

We often inadvertently keep student choreographers from taking that important step. As teachers, we try to demystify the artistic process, breaking it down into manageable parts, while designing intriguing problems for students to solve. In so doing, we may have overlooked an essential feature of creative play: the finding of those interesting problems.

By looking into the choreography class and reflecting on the words of professional choreographers, we will study the complex relationships involved in the development of dances and dance artists. We will also examine the role of play and physical activity in dance composition, the social nature of the experience, and the ways in which the language of dance is shaped through the interaction of the body and mind, cultural and historical contexts, word and image, and conscious and subconscious processes.

Artists and Teachers in the Zone of Proximal Development

Lev Vygotsky said, "The act of artistic creation cannot be taught" (1971, p. 256) and described the teacher's role as a cooperative one that would help students "organize the conscious processes in such a way that they generate subconscious processes" (p. 257). The visual artist and teacher Henry Schaefer-Simmern, in his groundbreaking work *The Unfolding of Artistic Activity* (1948), demonstrated how the teacher can help the artist open and maintain a dialogue between conscious and subconscious processes that he saw as key to the artist's progress through subsequent stages of artistic development. He maintained that a student arrives with inborn understandings about artistic form and that the teacher's job is to facilitate the individual's "awakening" to his or her inherent abilities.

As we examine the relationship of teacher or mentor to the developing artist, it is useful to consider Vygotsky's theories concerning the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky defined this zone as the distance between the problems a student can solve independently and his capabilities under the guidance of more competent teachers or peers. In the arts, where both the student's capabilities and the particular problems are indeterminable in advance, the zone itself, we suggest, cannot be determined. Vygotsky called it a "dynamic developmental state" (p. 87) that in the arts requires the artist to constantly move beyond the known, to push past his or her prior capabilities but that also, in most cases, requires support and collaboration with others to achieve. Even mature artists often look to mentors and collaborators for help in navigating this unknown place. Phyllis Lamhut, a choreographer and mentor to many contemporary choreographers, describes her role as "stabilizing the discomfort. I try to encourage artists to revisit their work—to not run away from their work quickly." Even masters, she says, need to "keep that edge of freshness and challenge their risk-taking abilities" (personal communication, March 3, 2009).

Traditional views of the teacher-learner relationship that assume an individual of greater competence (teacher) and lesser competence (learner) focus on the student's zone of proximal development alone. In the arts, however, the teacher or mentor may possess greater experience but is not the expert in what the student has to express. If the student creates a product that is beyond the teacher's understanding or pushes the edge of socially accepted meaning, the frequent response from a teacher is to correct such thinking and behavior. It is an interesting dilemma: many art teachers bemoan the lack of original thought displayed by their students, and yet, by its nature, originality may flout the very structures or rules a teacher has imposed, perhaps even confounding the teacher's ability to recognize its value. A friend, for example, who teaches visual art stood before a painting at an outsider art exhibit, marveling at an unconventional, dynamic creation that featured a figure in one small corner of a large canvas. "If one of my students had turned that in," she said, "I'd have said he should use the whole page." She was shocked at the limits of her own perspective. The conventions of teaching through demonstration, modeling, and scaffolded instruction—often by breaking the whole into parts—offer structures to guide learning but may also reinforce a student's tendency to follow rather than initiate or innovate. Further, if the teacher has taken on the role of evaluator as well as instructor, both creative and evaluative processes remain only within the realm of the teacher's competence and zone of proximal development.

When a teacher/mentor recognizes and truly respects the seriousness and validity of a young artist's own vision, the relationship can more closely resemble a creative collaboration in which partners "create zones of proximal development for each other" (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 189). Their collaboration focuses not on the product, which is truly determined by the student artist, but on ways to support the student's own investigations and inner dialogue.

This stance, we recognize, is highly challenging for any teacher, whether situated in the culture of a school or of a professional studio. After all, the teacher is frequently judged by the quality of his or her students' work. Further, in academic settings, curriculum standards and assessments specify the elements considered necessary to demonstrate proficiency and artistic quality. Such a stance, however, is a logical expression of the underlying beliefs, proposed by Vygotsky, Schaefer-Simmern, and many others, that artistic activity (a) is a universal process of people and, (b) stimulates consciousness of artistic form and is thus a process of internalization or dialogue between the self and the work of art.

Beginning the Dialogue

> Artistic activity cannot begin where educators impose on students externally formulated images and methods, concepts and cognition. A transaction between the individual and his or her physical, psychological, and social environments is necessary for true artistic activity.…He or she needs, in short, *to become conscious of consciousness* within and emanating from the being. In doing so, the physical, affective, and cognitive domains of his or her being function in coordination with and in service to the artistic process. (Schaefer-Simmern, 2003, p. xx)

While there is no evidence that Schaefer-Simmern, who died in 1978, had read or was directly influenced by Vygotsky, his methods demonstrate how the teacher/mentor can support the developing artist in his or her own zone of proximal development, through a process of internalization that Wertsch (2007) calls "implicit mediation" (p. 180). Schaefer-Simmern's role, as he saw it, was to be sensitive to the student's developmental stages of visual conceiving (Schaefer-Simmern, 1948) and help students move their own work forward. Rather than begin by instructing students in skills and form, he invited them to create work based on their own personal imagery. He asked the students to study what they had done and to identify what did or did not satisfy their internal imagery. He then encouraged them, using a new page or fresh materials, to revise their work. His guidance came not through an external critique but through questions that promoted a student's self-evaluation of the art product.

After students had arrived at a new stage of visual conceiving through this process, new tools, materials, or processes and historical artworks (related to the forms students had discovered) might be introduced to reinforce students' learning. Schaefer-Simmern believed that telling or showing students what to draw and how to change their work actually served to inhibit their own creative development. The respect he paid to the students' internal vision as artists altered their sense of themselves and of their own capabilities. The artistic products they created, meticulously documented in Schaefer-Simmern's books (1948, 2003), and through the work of his colleagues (Abrahamson, 1980; Arnheim, 1972; Sarason, 1990, among others), attest to the often astonishing abilities of children and adults previously considered "nonartists." Through his analysis, Schaefer-Simmern identified key developmental stages and specific methods for both external and internal mediation to help students transform perceptual images into unique and complete works of art.

Jessica Nicoll's study of Schaefer-Simmern's methods raised questions about the ways she had been introducing choreography throughout her more than 20 years of teaching. Though she felt a philosophical kinship with

Schaefer-Simmern, having consistently focused on improvisational play as a starting place and included significant self-reflection in the creative process, she began to question whether she had gone far enough. Did she really let students determine the focus of their work and were they setting their own next steps through self-evaluation and revision rather than responding to external criteria or critique by either teacher or classmates? What was the effect on their creative process of introducing new forms that, though commonly used in choreographic craft, had not emerged for the students through their own internally mediated experience?

For modern dancers beginning to choreograph, looking at the work and therefore bringing form to consciousness is complex, for the product is not separate from self. Dancers often say the body is an instrument. The body is also the material; most choreographers begin by making up movement and performing it themselves or teaching it to others. This medium is shaped through physical training that depends in large part not on the student's vision as an artist but on tradition and on a teacher's perception of appropriate instruction for body and mind. Sound technical training has great value in developing a dancer's physical vocabulary, range of motion, and artistry as a dancer, but it also establishes habitual movement patterns that can be difficult to break.

In compositional training, the learning of analytic tools and traditional forms is often assumed necessary before students may begin to create out of their own imagery, concepts, or self-directed physical explorations. Often overlooked are the essential processes by which individuals make meaning and link conscious and subconscious thought through a dialogue with the work and themselves. Such a dialogue, central to both Vygotsky's and Schaefer-Simmern's work, occurs through action rather than calculation and is a vital source for a student's discovery of artistic form. "I never plan a dance," Anna Sokolow, an important modern dance pioneer, said. "I do it, look at it, and then say: 'Yes, I see what I am trying to do'" (cited in Cohen, 1965, p. 35).

Making Dances

Dance is a quintessentially communal activity and demonstrates an extraordinary depth of mostly nonverbal social discourse. Cultures in which dance is an integral part of daily life, and a vital element of community ritual, converse in a dance language that children learn as naturally as they would a spoken language. That dance exists in all cultures and demonstrates common structures related to time, space, and energy, is evidence that embodied artistic form is a

human birthright (Hanna, 1987). While traditional dances follow established structures, they continue to evolve as the people sharing them shape and extend the human vocabulary of communal action.

The founders of modern dance broke from tradition to express their own individual visions. Ironically, many of the training methods these pioneers developed have themselves become tradition-bound and offer students few opportunities to develop their own vision and style of movement (Lakes, 2005). Many of the most original choreographers in contemporary dance speak of breaking the rules of *these* traditions. In touch with their own curiosity about the world, they can find source material in anything. It can be as simple as an image. Kei Takei describes one such inspiration: "I saw a rain-pool....It was the start of *Light, Part 3*. It was a shock, but somehow these things come out" (cited in Kreemer, 1987, p. 20).

Artists know that the questions formed and insights gained at such moments of discovery are key to their ability to create. They recognize that the interplay of word and thought, logic and feeling, mental and sensory processes must be "shaken up" or kept in a state of animation in order to make something truly novel and meaningful. To develop ideas beyond the initial inspiration, they must discover a form integral to the problem they are trying to solve. By integrating the elements of form, including spatial arrangements of dancers, relationship of the movement to rhythm and music, use of light and darkness, integration of props and costumes, an artist strives to create a unity of vision, an indivisible merging of form and content: a gestalt.

Developing Choreographers

At the 92nd Street Y in New York City where pioneers of modern dance, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and José Limón created and taught, Jessica Nicoll works with teenagers making their own dances. Nicoll's teaching approach has developed over 25 years, at the Y and other studios, and in artist residencies in the New York City public schools. In 2004 she began an experiment, attempting to apply Schaefer-Simmern's methods to dance-making. She wanted to see if the personal investment and artistic growth that Schaefer-Simmern engendered in children and adults would be more evident in her students if she did less "instructing" and used questioning and self-reflection in an even more intentional and disciplined way. She wanted students to find artistic problems as well as solve them and to develop their own ongoing processes of dialogue around their work, the work of their peers, and that of professional choreographers.

Thirteen teenage girls, ages 13–17, participated in the "Young Masters" choreography class during this period, with no more than six in any semester. They came to the Y with a range of dance backgrounds and three had studied dance technique and improvisation intensively with Nicoll previously. They attended a variety of public and private schools and all took at least one dance technique class per week, though some had neither improvised nor choreographed before. The program had been in existence for 10 years and Nicoll had directed or co-directed it for all but three of those years. The once-a-week class consisted of a warm-up, improvisation, individual or small group revision and rehearsal of previously developed material, showing and responding to choreography in progress, and, toward the end of each semester, preparing students' original work for public performance.

From 2004 until the final semester of the experiment, in the fall of 2007, Nicoll charted her own evolving process alongside the young choreographers.[1] She observed an increasing willingness on her part to let go of teaching habits, such as presenting problems or assignments, that she had previously assumed necessary. Early on, both she and the students sometimes struggled with this new way of working. Space does not permit a full description of the process, but we will focus on some aspects that demonstrate how the artistic dialogue was cultivated in the choreography class and how it mirrored the processes of mature artists.

Finding a Personal Dance Language

"If I'm always the one to lead improvisations and present the assignments," Nicoll wondered, "how do the students take the step that artists must learn to take: giving themselves their *own* assignments?" As Alane Starko notes, "Rather than shielding students from the frustration of seeking ideas, teacher-structured problems rob students of the art making process: looking for ideas, choosing materials, tools, and forms, visualizing a variety of possibilities" (1995, p. 129). Where Nicoll previously designed thematic classes to guide exploratory improvisations out of which students would shape short studies, she now facilitated only a brief warm-up and asked students to initiate and determine the focus for improvisations and compositions. In composing, the students were encouraged to build dances using sources that interested them (e.g., an image, a rhythm, a piece of music, written text or story, or simply moving), but they were under no obligation to name or describe their ideas verbally to anyone.

Regardless of the original source, the choreographer chose the movements, shaped them into phrases and sequences in space, defined the relationship of

movement to music, silence, words or other accompaniment, and set these elements on herself or another dancer or group of dancers. The choreographic mentor Phyllis Lamhut calls this process of finding and shaping movement to make a dance "creating a language for the idea" (personal communication, March 3, 2009). A central challenge for the choreographer is to keep creating new vocabulary, recognizing and resisting habitual patterns of movement. As Anna Sokolow recalled, "For me, *Lyric Suite* was a turning point. It was then that I began to find a language of movement for myself.…The important thing is to stretch the personal vocabulary so that it does not remain static" (cited in Cohen, 1965, p. 35).

Nicoll asked students to explore and be aware of their natural movement patterns: what felt good to their bodies, what they recognized as their "signature" movements, and how they related to the space and fellow dancers (see Figure 9.1). She neither identified students' tendencies for them nor suggested alterations; her intention was to raise self-awareness. Luisa, a former gymnast with little prior choreographic experience, explained:

Figure 9.1. Finding a Personal Dance (Courtesy of Markus Dennig)

> I am really intrigued by how all dancers tend to revert to a particular type of movement or specific gesture when they "get stuck." I had such "default movements" that I would frequently incorporate into improvisations, phrases, and full

> pieces. However, I found that I was most satisfied with my choreography when I was able to transcend the boundaries of my usual vocabulary and experiment with movement that was truly new for me.

Luisa's "default movements," which clearly reflected her gymnastic training, were evident to Nicoll. She took notes and tried to be alert to new stages of development that she could reinforce through guided reflection and by introducing relevant resources. She wondered, though, if she was failing Luisa by not directly pointing out her habits or offering solutions to the problems Nicoll perceived.

Several months into the process, the group discussed the humor and originality of a new solo by Luisa, a piece in which she'd layered elements of space and time with a witty and confident hand. It was clear that Luisa had uncovered a unique voice. Whether that voice would have emerged (or been silenced) with the specific intervention of a teacher can't be known. What stands out in Luisa's later reflection, however, is her own discovery: an awareness that pushing beyond her own boundaries was the most satisfying aspect of her artistic growth.

Improvisation and Play

Improvisation, alone and in groups, was allotted considerable time in class. Whether used to develop an existing idea, or pursued for its own ends, improvisation provides a means of listening directly to the physical impulse, re-stimulating a playful attitude of discovery, and reconnecting with the subconscious. The choreographer Mel Wong said, "I don't necessarily set up a problem and try to resolve it, but I focus on an idea which is a mystery to me and start from there.…I try to put myself in a state of awareness on a subconscious level, where the subconscious level becomes conscious through my movements" (cited in Kreemer, 1987, p. 75). While common for dance makers, improvisation is not the only way to play. As Paul Taylor puts it:

> The aim is to do the most magical work you can—to permit the chain reaction of movement ideas, which spring from the original concept. The mind tends to think in a logical way, but magic is not logical. If dance is too logical, it becomes expected and predictable; then it can lose its life. (cited in Cohen, 1965, p. 101)

Directed physical play helps artists resist the tendency and pressure to intellectualize the process. The teacher's role in this can be critical. As Nicoll's student Julia put it, "[Jessica] always told us to not think so much, just act. Not to worry about what looked pretty or what was the best technical method. She wanted you to dance through your heart, not your feet."

The students began to identify the processes they found intriguing and to design their own “what if” structures for play during both improvisational and compositional exploration (see Figure 9.2). These included experiments with spatial and rhythmic elements, dynamics, and sound, including vocalization, and often played with the relationship of content to form. During one episode the dancers took turns observing and improvising in the midst of a shifting arrangement of chairs set up by one student choreographer who wanted to explore the theme of claustrophobia. Alex, a 15 year-old who’d not choreographed before, shared a “what if” list in her second class, “What if someone else danced my phrase at the same time but reversed? Huge? Small? Slow? While making sounds? Wearing a rainbow?,” and then looked at the group with surprise. “What does that mean?” she asked, laughing.

Tools for Self-Reflection

Journals were important tools for self-reflection and evaluation. Nicoll had urged the use of journals throughout her years of teaching but struggled to get teenagers to follow through. During this process, however, students fully embraced the use of journals. One student, Stella, later wrote, “I often found myself using my journal to jot down instantaneous bursts of inspiration when I was in class, on the train, or about to go to bed.” The choreographers used their journals to communicate with their dancers, record others’ responses to their work as well as their responses to others, and document the development of the class and artwork throughout the semester.

Figure 9.2. Improvisation and Play (Courtesy of Markus Dennig)

Work in progress was often videotaped, giving students the ability to study and evaluate their work at home. Julia observed, "I could step back from the choreography process and just watch my progress, and see what else I needed to work on." Not all students found video equally useful but it was particularly helpful when the choreographer was dancing in her own piece. Nicoll also shared videotapes of other dances and performers and arranged for students to attend dance concerts. She selected these experiences based on the students' work and particular problems with which they were grappling.

Teacher as Guide

Shifting away from teacher-generated assignments did not mean Nicoll abandoned her role as a guide. In some ways it intensified the challenge and caused her to revisit her own practice as an artistic mentor. While students worked independently, she used her own journal to slow herself down and avoid inserting herself in their process prematurely. It was important that the students know she was available but that she not set herself up as judge or the solver of their problems.

Roy Abrahamson, a student of Schaefer-Simmern, points out that even if a teacher says nothing, his or her value systems will be evident (Abrahamson, 1980). This is a critical point in understanding this approach to arts teaching. It is not, Abrahamson writes, "a matter of influencing or not influencing students. Rather, what should concern us is the kind of influence—where it leads" (p. 43). Nor is this process a hands-off method focused on "self-expression" in which students would erupt in what John Dewey called a "gush" (Schaefer-Simmern, 1948, p. x), unguided by either teacher or self. The work is focused and rigorous, and yet the goal is not to make students achieve a desired result. The questions a teacher poses and the self-evaluation a student practices are part of a delicate balancing act intended to support the student's own process of becoming an artist. At the same time, the teacher is shaping his or her own teaching, a practice we would also identify as artistic. The goal of students' full independence in perception, thought, and concept, as well as self-motivation, self-confidence, and trust in intuition within a social context, requires all participants to work as collaborators.

Nicoll used questions to help students explore and evaluate their own work and also urged students to develop their own questions. While drawing attention to specific aspects of the work or opening possibilities for play, she herself offered no critique of the students' process or product. Constructing questions also helped Nicoll negotiate her own relationship to the material students wanted to explore. She watched from the studio's perimeter, video

camera and journal in hand, with the goal of informing herself. The students alerted her when they wanted to show or videotape work in progress. They also came to talk with her when they wanted help. As one student, Lydia, put it:

> [We] would show Jessica our work and anticipate comments and suggestions. But we almost never received these and instead were presented with questions such as, "What do you want to develop about this phrase?" and, "What would you like to fix?" Sometimes we would answer out loud to Jessica, but more often she would quickly add, "You don't need to tell me; just think about these things and keep working."…We were encouraged to reflect on what we had created, what we had not yet created, what we wanted to achieve, and what we could ultimately achieve.

Phyllis Lamhut has described a similar process with established choreographers, "Everything I do is dialogue, just to get them to focus on that section, not to do what I say.…I have to call attention to something, which is different, in a way, than making a suggestion" (personal communication, March 3, 2009).

Challenges and New Perspectives

Regardless of the choreographer's stage of development, the underlying principle is the same: to help artists look at their work from a new perspective and generate their own questions to move the process forward. One of the young choreographers, Anna, reflected on her own sense of that challenge:

> I think it was just challenging to step outside the easy. I remember Jessica once asking me, "What are you doing with this piece? What is new, what is your own?" That was not a question I wanted to hear. But I do think about it each time I start conceptualizing a new piece.

Developing work beyond the initial inspiration is one of the most difficult tasks for any artist. Stella, who worked with Nicoll over several years, spoke of this as a continuing struggle.

> Every year, the most challenging aspect of the choreography process…remained the same: completing a piece. I often get bursts of inspiration in which I can create a one to two minute phrase that I am satisfied with on its own, but once I set about developing these ideas, I frequently run into roadblocks.

Stella went on to describe the way questions helped her move beyond those roadblocks. She also applied her discoveries to later work in a painting course and describes the satisfaction of finding completion while remaining open to the unexpected: "I now view the development of a piece, culminating

in its completion, as a process that is anything but stagnant: everything can always be pushed around, added to, removed or manipulated."

Helping to shape group discussions was also a significant part of Nicoll's role as a mentor. She urged the students to ask each other for the kind of feedback they needed and to pose specific questions to direct the group's attention. She encouraged the students to find the aspects of each other's work that excited, surprised, intrigued, or puzzled them, and this established a positive yet honest framework. Nicoll avoided speaking first or serving as a gatekeeper during group discussions. She wanted to take herself out of the role of expert and to foster a collaborative spirit among the dancer/choreographers themselves. Stella recalls:

> These discussions were some of the most revealing aspects in my own process of development, since they brought my attention to various themes I could play with that had not occurred to me. Even listening to observations of other works, I was able to relate them to my own and thereby get new ideas.

Results of the "Experiment"

One of the clearest outcomes was the level of students' commitment to their artistic process. The parent of one 14-year-old who had been working with Nicoll at the Y since she was eight asked Nicoll at the end of the first experimental year, "What did you do differently? Something changed; they owned this in a whole new way." Anna said later, "It really felt like it was ours, that it had emerged from something we already had inside of us—not that it had been 'taught.'" Nicoll had noticed changes immediately; the choreographers were using the tools for reflecting and moving the work forward in a new way and began to function as a true artists' collaborative. They needed no reminders to keep up with their journals or develop choreography between classes. They communicated with each other during the week and found spaces outside of the Y, from family living rooms to apartment building playrooms, to rehearse independently. They watched their videotaped dances at home and arrived at the studio, notes in hand. Possibly most striking, given the difficulty many teenagers have revising and editing, they continued to revise even "finished" dances up to and after their public showings. This self-regulation and focus on the work were clearly on display at a student dance festival where a number of their pieces were performed. They were the only performers who, without prompting, requested time onstage before and between the two shows to rehearse themselves: making changes, working out spacing problems, and fixing what hadn't worked well in the first show, while Nicoll looked on from the side.

What of the quality of the artwork itself? Our interest, beyond the integrity of each student's artistic process, focused on the extent to which the works, at the developmental level of each choreographer, showed a completeness of vision and demonstrated growth over time. In terms of dance composition, Nicoll hoped to see that each choreographer pursued her own interests to make dances that went beyond simply stringing together favorite moves. She examined whether they had applied formal structures as integral elements of the work; discovered a language for their ideas; and developed movement vocabulary and craft that, while informed by training and personal inclination, did not remain the same for each new piece. Had they achieved a unity of vision that served the meanings they brought to the work and that allowed for discovery of new meanings? One would have to see their choreography over a period of time to judge whether the works overall demonstrated the sort of integrity a Gestalt formation suggests. The observations of audience members, the dance center director, and parents corroborated our perception that these students' choreography, as well as their discussion and analysis of composition, reflected a sophisticated application of these artistic principles and was both varied and distinctive.

The concert at the end of the first year of the experiment, in spring 2005, featured seven original works by four choreographers. Indira's quartet, "Preparing to Promenade," explored the link between ballet vocabulary, performed at a ballet barre onstage, and a teenager's sense of imperfection. In rehearsal Indira had asked her dancers to improvise off set phrases by imagining "All the audience sees is you casting a shadow that becomes a mirror image and then reveals the imperfections of a person near you." The dance featured spoken text, written by Indira and performed on tape by the dancers, directed and recorded by Indira.

On the same program, Anna and Lydia performed a co-choreographed duet, "Versation.con" that had grown out of a playful improvisation in which they "took time to move together and create a relationship,…testing limits, how hard can we pull…can I jump onto you from the ground…surprised at where we could land." Anna had also created a new piece in the final week before the performance, "Cross Sensitization," and recruited more than a dozen dancers from another performing group to learn a structured improvisation during dress rehearsal and performed that night in a bustling exploration of pedestrian motion and stillness accompanied by a percussion score. Each dance, and the four others on the program, made a unique artistic statement and used both the qualities of the individual dancers and elements of form to express a wholeness of vision. Nicoll was consistently surprised by

the fullness of the work. In her journal she wrote, "I'm delighted with their choreography, partly because I have no responsibility for it. I have a sense of not knowing where it came from."

Applications to Other Settings

This rare opportunity to explore the nature of art-making with a small, highly motivated group of young women may not immediately seem applicable to other circumstances. And yet, by examining the key features of the culture that grew up around the process, we recognize ways in which such artistic activity can apply to different settings. Nicoll's ongoing work with younger students (ages 7–12) in much larger groupings (classes of 25–30 students) in the New York City public schools has given her an opportunity to explore these principles of stepping back and trusting both the individual artistic impulse of every child and how social learning can extend the artistic possibilities of choreographic play.

Though Nicoll's public school classes are not focused specifically on choreography, they do include improvisation and collaborative composition. Informed by her experiment at the Y, she challenged herself to open up the more structured processes she has developed in public school residencies. We can summarize the key features of the approach as follows:

1. Encourage students to offer ideas to adapt exercises or structures.
2. Give students leadership roles as early and as often as possible.
3. Establish and practice methods for self-directed group work.
4. Provide open structures in which students can find their own problems and pose their own questions.
5. Integrate reflection and focused observation and discussion throughout each class.

While these processes are difficult to implement fully in a school gym, auditorium, or classroom, the results of Nicoll's shift toward a more collaborative model have been obvious, both to her and to the classroom teachers with whom she works. Students demonstrate greater motivation and commitment; they show improved collaborative skills and reveal enhanced awareness of their own processes and what interests them in the world. Encouraging students to use their imaginations, make works of art based on their own ideas, and collaborate with peers stands in stark contrast to the increasing standardization and rigidity now dominating many American schools and classrooms.

Off the Cliff

Changing internalized teaching models is extraordinarily difficult. Nicoll left almost every class during the experiment wondering whether she was shirking her responsibilities, withholding help and expertise from her students. In retrospect she recognized that not only was she working just as hard, though in different ways, but she was seeing a different result both in the students' level of commitment and in the quality of their art. After 25 years of teaching with what she felt was a student-directed, constructivist approach, she had asked herself, "How did I come to the conclusion that certain things had to be taught in a certain sequence? How do these results change my assumptions?" We hope the description of this process stimulates similar self-reflection in teachers and mentors about the correspondence between philosophies and practices, between *our* aesthetic values and the task of helping students recognize their own, and between the need to fulfill external expectations and the goal of developing internally directed artists.

Conclusion

We recognize that some dancers and dance educators may dispute some of our basic premises concerning the development of choreographers and the teacher/mentor's role in the process. Even for those who accept them, the ramifications of these ideas may be difficult to fully grasp. The underlying principles can be restated as:

1. Everyone has the capacity for artistic creation in dance.
2. Children and adults move through developmental stages of artistic activity through social interaction and internal dialogue.
3. Teachers and mentors must be open to the possibility that they cannot imagine what and how their students and mentees are about to create.

If we believe the artistic processes of all individuals, from children to beginner adults to professional artists, do not fundamentally differ and that the tools of choreography are in service of expression and meaning making, rather than prerequisites for it, we must respect and nurture the internal processes that allow meaning to emerge. Further if we believe that the most productive learning occurs through the discoveries we make for ourselves at the upper edges of our ability, then the teacher must be prepared to offer aid and instruction but cannot make assumptions about the individual's capacities or

predict the trajectory of the artistic creation. Artistic activity changes what the artist is capable of.

In *The Psychology of Art* (1971), Vygotsky wrote, "[Art] is a requirement that may never be fulfilled but that forces us to strive beyond our life toward all that lies beyond it" (p. 253). His description of artistic striving seems a profound recognition of the zone of proximal development, though he would not articulate the theory for several years. For artists to move into the unknown, to extend and reinvigorate their stay in the zone of proximal development, they must establish processes that keep open the dialogue between the conscious and subconscious. The powerful intellect prompts us to name, explain, and analyze, trying to return us to a safer and more known reality. But the choreographer Kei Takei reminds us, "I should not be safe in my creativity" (cited in Kreemer, 1987, p. 18). When working with young artists the temptation is strong to offer solutions and comfort by having them follow set procedures. The safety nets we provide, however, may keep our students from exploring the imaginative realms we most desire for them. Perhaps holding less tightly, joining them in the unknown space, will bring them closer to the heart of their artistry. In dance, the journey involves one's own body, along with the companionship of other dancers, teachers, and mentors. Beyond this, we are accompanied by the cultural and historical influences that shape our ideas and understandings. Original, meaningful creation in dance occurs through the integration and deepening of the dialogue among all these sources. As Julia, now 15, puts it:

> Dance, although you may practice it solely for yourself, is not a private practice at all. Dance is a community with your teacher, your classmates, your audience and especially yourself. If you string all of these people together, and include them into your thought process, your movement will be heard.

Note

1. Quotes from the choreography students were collected via email in March 2009 in response to a set of open-ended questions one to three years after the end of the experience. Other student comments were taken verbatim from Jessica Nicoll's notes at the time.

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