Sharing the Unknown: Developing Autonomy in Artistic Creation[1]

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A visual artist we know described his struggle teaching elementary school children to draw. After modeling the use of materials he watched as students recreated, with slight variation, the lines, shapes, and subject matter he had meant to offer as mere examples. "Do you know what I really want?" he asked. "I want them to make their own line." Though the art form we teach is dance, the metaphor -- having children "make their own line" -- touched a nerve. Our friend had identified a dilemma we, too, had faced: if we want our students to do things in their own way -- not "our" way -- how do we step aside to let that happen?

The moment an artist-teacher chooses to grapple with this question, a new part of the teaching journey, filled with unknowns for both teacher and student, begins. These unknowns bring us face-to-face with deep and often troubling questions about structure, planning, pedagogy, tradition, and independence. Recognizing the tensions within these questions can be both painful and liberating for the teacher who steps down this road.

Learner autonomy in the arts—qualities of which include confidence in navigating the unknown; the ability to look at one's work more deeply; and the capacity to independently sustain one's artistic creation—has become an overarching goal for us. This paper examines these issues of art and education as we face them in our work with student artists. Our title—*Sharing the Unknown*—reflects our belief that where our teaching meets our students' unique artistry, we must share and embrace the unknown. Both teacher and student enter a process that changes how we see and how we work.

Teaching for Autonomy

Autonomous learning, defined in different ways across different educational disciplines (notably second language learning and technology), is often referred to as self-directed learning or "taking control of one's learning" (Holec, 1981). Autonomy involves psychological states in which the individual can access the subconscious while remaining receptive to new information, instruction, and corrections from others. While focused on the individual, we develop and practice learner autonomy in social settings (Bruner, 1962, Vygostky, 1986) and often

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experience it through the related concepts of self-regulatory behavior (Zimmerman, 1986), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Autonomous learning suggests choice and intrinsic motivation, and yet it also requires support from external sources, sources whose power and influence by nature, threaten independence. An overemphasis on extrinsic rewards and punishments also threatens autonomy (Amabile, 1996).

In all of the settings in which we work—in public elementary schools, dance studios, and higher education programs -- many issues confront the goal of learner autonomy. Intense pressure for compliance through standards and tests in schools, product-oriented dance schools dominated by competition, competitive models of dance in popular culture, rule- and criteria-based models for choreography emphasized at the University level, and our own habitual practices, all test our ability to stay in the moment, foster autonomy, and develop self-motivated artists. As we face these obstacles we are buoyed and continually challenged by the thinking of psychologists, artists, and educators, most importantly Seymour Sarason, John Dewey, and Henry Schaefer-Simmern. In concert with our own practice, our readings have led us to question unexplored assumptions about the nature of autonomy and independent learning, creativity, and artistic development.

In dance, the choreographer—like a playwright or a composer in other performing arts—is usually considered the "creator." But the development of artistic and creative process in the field of dance includes the dancer as well as the choreographer, and runs through all types of dance classes from skills-based technique classes to improvisation and composition. The kind of student we hope to develop in these many aspects, is active, curious, risk-taking, and reflective, whether learning new skills and set material, improvising, or composing and creating original choreography. Though the main focus of our recent research has been on choreography, we will discuss issues that apply to teaching for autonomy in any dance setting.

Into the Unknown: Who Finds the Problems?

Teachers are trained to design lessons that scaffold students' learning, to move from the "known" to the "unknown." In the arts, as in other disciplines, teachers anticipate what structures, methods, and forms will establish a foundation from which students may gradually explore their own ideas. In simple terms, the scaffolding is often described as "I do, we do, you do:" a teacher models or introduces materials and procedures; teachers and students work

alongside each other to explore those materials and procedures; and, finally, a student is permitted to select and explore materials of his or her own choosing.

The progression is deeply ingrained and not without logic. This makes it hard to see the risk it poses to developing independent artists – artists who "make their own line." Writing about the development of visual artists, Alane Starko (1995), cautions against an over-reliance on lessons based on "the teacher's idea, the teacher's selection of materials, the teacher's clear set of instructions. Students merely provide the labor." In such lessons, Starko says, "students do not experience art. When teachers present preplanned problems and designated solutions, they short-cut one of the keys to creativity: finding important and interesting problems to solve" (p.129).

Starko's focus on problem-finding rather than problem-solving offers many challenges to those of us who teach dance. Unlike visual artists, dancers create a product that is not separate from self. The body is both an instrument and the material, and it 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. Commonly the choreographer creates the movement (or at least the basic shape of the movement) on her own body and teaches it to the dancers. She may also be a performer in the dance, further complicating her ability to see the dance as it takes shape. To step back and both feel and see what is actually happening—finding the problems—is extraordinarily difficult for dancers and choreographers.

Choreographers (like all artists) often begin without a conscious articulation of a problem to explore. 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). The dance itself, in this situation, shapes the idea. In order to recognize what the dance is becoming, the artist must stay with it, watch and feel it, experiment with it, until it feels whole and complete in concert with the artist's developing vision. The problem may be impossible to articulate in words and trying to do so may interrupt or block the process. "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).

Have we let our students actually have the experience choreographers like Wong and Sokolow describe? If I always initiate -- giving students the exercise, the improvisational idea or compositional problem to solve – when do my students practice the critical artistic step of finding and exploring material based on their own interests, visions, and developing sense of form? Improvisation and composition teachers often begin with externally imposed concepts and emphasize using analytic tools and templates for dance design (Hutchinson-Guest, 1993; Lavender, 2006) as a prerequisite for having students find and develop their own ideas. Assigned a common task and given the parameters by which to fulfill the assignment (referred to as a "study"), students are then assessed by how well they've accomplished the stated task: e.g., did they use three levels, a range of dynamics, the rhythmic pattern that was assigned, etc. Teachers may dismiss a student's lack of interest in a particular assignment as unimportant. Rather than consider the students' lack of interest as an indication of disengagement from his or her own artistic voice or process, teachers often assume that after being schooled in the use of tools, the student will be equipped to pursue his or her own visions -- later.

Even those who openly question the value of external criteria (see Larry Lavender, Dancers Talking Dance, 1996) and encourage students' self-direction and inner dialogue may rely on a "first-they-need-these-tools" approach to art-making. Lavender, for example, writes in the *Journal of Dance Education*,

> Creative process mentoring as I conceive it is not a priority with beginning students. Those students need to accumulate experiences in exploring and inventing movement and learn to recognize and apply basic concepts of and templates for dance design (ABA, round and canon . . . and so forth). They need to undertake small and self-contained choreographic problem-solving assignments and to practice observing, describing, and analyzing dances and other works of art. . . . Creative process mentoring is for students advanced enough to formulate and address artistic problems on their own" (Lavender, 2006, pp. 7-8).

Lavender's final sentence above presents a conundrum: if, as Starko argues, problem-finding is essential to the artistic experience, and if one believes, as Lavender says, that only advanced students can "formulate and address artistic problems on their own," then it follows that beginners are not yet ready to make "real art." Lavender's statement reflects pedagogical practice found in all art forms and across domains. The implication that beginning students are

not capable of formulating and addressing artistic problems on their own demands deeper examination. Such a perspective on the "beginning" student can help us look at unstated assumptions about artistic development generally and the role of the teacher in that development.

The common conception of artistic development across all art forms—"first you must learn X and then you will have the tools to express yourself as an artist"—is something we hear from even our most creatively-focused colleagues. "Yes, of course everyone has something unique to express but first they must…." Our questions prompted us not only to contemplate variations in the progression, but to wonder if the process of learning X first might actually inhibit or stifle a student's artistry. Perhaps the standard, scaffolded progression was serving as an unintended tyrant, keeping our students from developing their internal processes—the dialogue with self, the capacity to reside in the uncomfortable or unknown space of artistic creation, the confidence to make something different, risky, or even "ugly" -- actions that could sustain them in the long run.

<div align="center">The Teacher's Stance</div>

We believe in an innate human consciousness of artistic form. The ramifications of that belief as teachers of the arts are enormous. Even as we offer skills, techniques, history, and vocabulary of the art form, our priority is to help students uncover and develop their own artistic vision rather than adopt ours. In his groundbreaking work, The Unfolding of Artistic Activity (1948), Henry Schaefer-Simmern, a visual artist and teacher, maintained that a teacher's role is to facilitate the complex developmental process of artistic activity, not by teaching a set of predetermined skills, but by guiding students to look at, revise, and develop their art according to their own "visual conceiving." Through this process, students' skills and techniques would develop in service to their vision as part of a psycho-physical whole. Lev Vygotsky (1971) 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).

Schaefer-Simmern's "method" was less a method than a stance; he established with each student a relationship that respected the artistic vision of the artist, whether he or she was a child, an "untrained" adult, or a developmentally disabled or mentally ill patient in a psychiatric facility. Underlying his stance was an awareness of the unequal power relationship between teacher and student and a constant attentiveness to the impact of the teacher's words and actions on the student. 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. Considering one's impact as an arts teacher 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).

In his foreword to <u>The Unfolding of Artistic Activity</u>, John Dewey made a critical distinction between a "gush of self-expression" (Schaefer-Simmern, 1948, p. x), unguided by either teacher or self, and the kind of focused and rigorous work that Schaefer-Simmern encouraged. The teacher's role, as Schaefer-Simmern saw it, was to be sensitive to the student's developmental stages of visual conceiving and help students move their own work forward. Seymour Sarason, who observed Schaefer-Simmern's work with developmentally disabled and mentally ill patients, described his approach,

> He knew his subject matter well enough to know when, where, or why the individual may encounter difficulties. He did not provide answers to these difficulties, and he never showed a person the "correct" answer. He trusted and encouraged the person to think about, study, and judge what he or she had done. For Schaefer, the person was able to do and critique the end product....It was Schaefer's obligation to respect, stimulate, and support a person's capacity for judgment as a basis for change; he was a prodder, a stimulator, not a shower. (Sarason, 1999, p.93)

Studying Schaefer-Simmern prompted us to question whether we had struck the right balance in our work with young dance artists. We asked ourselves why we taught certain things in a certain sequence and wondered what would happen if we did less. What if we didn't give all of the assignments, for example, and encouraged students to design their own? What subtle cues might cause students to rely on *our* aesthetic judgment and suggestions rather than trust their own? How much struggle would frustrate students and when (and how) should we step in to help them through a difficulty?

We began to adjust our stance with a renewed commitment to the premise that students' inborn consciousness of artistic form develops most deeply when we help them connect to what *they* imagine, see, feel, intend, and question in their own artwork. At the moments we feel the urge to jump in and fix a student's artwork or remove their confusion, our stance tells us to consider a pause—a breath—in which the student can study her work and uncover her own problems and possible solutions. As the educator Eleanor Duckworth says, her task is "not a

matter of mediating between the subject matter and the learners, it is not a matter of telling them how to think about it, but keeping learners directly in touch with the subject matter itself, and the subject matter becomes the authority" (Duckworth, 2012).

<div align="center">Seeing and Reflecting: An Artist's Dialogue with Self</div>

The dialogue must begin with something. Our mistake is in assuming students arrive with nothing. When we make that assumption we begin to supply a "something" that we already know and understand. Instead of following this well-worn path, we have shifted our focus, as Schaefer-Simmern and Dewey suggested, toward action, observation, and reflection. The most important tools we provide become those that help our students access their senses and engage in their own dialogue. It is neither easy nor predictable.

Students thrown into the challenging work of art-making often look to others for answers, particularly when facing the inevitable times of frustration. A teacher or mentor who can anticipate a student's struggles offers a new way of looking. Phyllis Lamhut, a mentor to many professional choreographers says, "I stabilize the discomfort…I try to make artists revisit their work and not to run away from their work quickly" (personal communication, March 9, 2009). Rather than offering her opinion or suggesting a solution for something that is not working, she encourages choreographers to dialogue with their own work. We believe that students at all stages of development, not only professional choreographers, are served by the kind of support Lamhut describes.

Reflection in dance is often thought of as a verbal process undertaken after motion finishes and, in classes, reflection is frequently left to the end, or skipped altogether because of time. We see reflection -- in both verbal and non-verbal modes -- as the "essence of thinking" as John Dewey put it (1916), not a post-activity follow-up. Dewey explains that reflection links activity with its consequences -- connecting actions, perceptions and judgments in a unified, vital experience. Without reflection, Dewey says, we do not truly think and cannot find meaning or learn from our experiences. Reflection in this sense requires free choice to experiment and time to connect internal resources with external stimuli. Reflecting on artistic process helps an artist maintain a sense of autonomy while finding problems, questions, and answers that will drive her or his artistic creation.

Applying Schaefer-Simmern to the Dance Classroom

Having worked together extensively for over 30 years in schools, arts institutions, and colleges, we have, in the last 10 years, been co-researching how Nicoll's growing emphasis on learner autonomy has affected dance students in different settings, from large elementary school classes, to small, studio-based improvisation and composition classes, to undergraduate choreography courses. The most comprehensive and controlled study of her approach was conducted with teenage choreographers in a program called "Young Masters" at the 92nd St. Y Harkness Dance Center which is described in detail in our paper entitled *Dance Dialogues: Creating and Teaching in the Zone of Proximal Development* (Oreck & Nicoll, 2010). Our current study with improvisation and choreography students at Hunter College, New York, is still in progress and the results are far from complete. The process and our perspectives on it described here are still evolving but point the way to further inquiry and retrospective examination.

Though Nicoll has always been a responsive, student-centered teacher, her focus on students' independent artistic development has led her to use specific pedagogical techniques more deliberately and to develop a more flexible planning process. As previously discussed, these "approaches" or "techniques" are better described as a stance that is constantly being challenged and redefined -- a complex process that resists recipes or prescriptions of "always" and "never." "Autonomy can't be the same thing for everyone," writes Tim Murphey (2003), as "deciding for others how they should manage or teach autonomy is anti-autonomous" (p.7). With that in mind, we offer instead some reflections on actions and incidents to illuminate the challenge of teaching for autonomy.

We acknowledge differences between our work and that of artists and teachers in other disciplines. Henry Schaefer-Simmern worked in visual arts with small groups of students. He was able to respond individually to students' needs, providing materials and teaching skills as the students demonstrated new stages of artistic development. In dance classes of 25 elementary school students or 29 college choreographers it is not possible to offer the same kind of individual attention. The art-making materials are entirely different, as is the process of observation. We maintain, however, that the basic approaches and underlying values of Schaefer-Simmern and others outside our discipline can support and reinvigorate our own work. We see not a Schaefer-Simmern "method," rather a consciousness of teacher-student

relationships and capabilities. A pedagogy focused on active experience and observation, questions posed by students as well as teachers, and reflection embedded in all phases of teaching and creating, can cross all domains. The teacher helps shape time and creates openings in which students learn to navigate their own creative process and developing artistry.

Creating an environment for autonomy. A series of small, important actions communicate to students that we want them to speak up, ask questions, make suggestions, and develop their own "what if?" problems. These behaviors, while building an environment for autonomy, may directly contradict the conventional training of schooling; the goal of encouraging "self-motivation" quickly collides with the objective of "rule-following." The tension between these goals opens new territory for exploratory teaching and learning.

Not every student's desire can be accommodated in every moment of a class. Yet a teacher's awareness of—and openness to—a single, freely-stated question or desire can shift the motivation for every student in a group. "Could we do it backwards?" Carlos asked during the third class in a 25-week school residency in modern dance. 20 fourth graders had asked to repeat a simple but rhythmically challenging foot spring exercise. Nicoll, though aware the class had started almost 10 minutes late responded, "Sure, how would we do that?" thinking Carlos might suggest the class turn to face upstage. Instead, Carlos said, "I guess we'd start with the last part" and he began to mark through the sequence in reverse. His classmates collectively said, "Oh!" with a mixture of fear and eagerness. "OK, let's give it a try," Nicoll announced. "Now?" Carlos said, eyes wide. "Yes," she said. "Right now." The class launched into the foot springs again, inspired by their classmate's idea. Carlos had created an opening and Nicoll and the other students followed. Soon Carlos's classmates bubbled over with "What if we…?" Nicoll wrote their ideas in her notebook, crediting each child, and reminded herself to make space for their ideas throughout the residency. These small encouragements and the underlying statement of respect for students' artistic vision have a powerful effect. Though at times it seems Pandora's box has opened as student ideas spill out, the problem of managing and responding to too many ideas is a far better one than struggling to get a group of passive students to speak up.

In her college choreography class Nicoll does not begin by taking roll. "Who is missing?" she asks, and the students look around to identify absent classmates. "Who will fill those people in on what they've missed today?" Though students report that in many classes they do not know their classmates' names, after a few sessions of this opening ritual they enter the studio with this

question in mind, focusing on who is in the space. In elementary school settings, Nicoll forms small group cohorts who are responsible to each other for practicing choreography, posing questions and clarifying their work, or bringing absent teammates up to speed at the beginning of each class. Organizing these groups, having them create group names, and giving them opportunities to work together takes time and planning. Rather than focus on an instructional sequence based on a curricular calendar, this planning makes space for student contributions that can build self-direction and a sense of responsibility among students. Particularly in settings where compliance, behavior management, and having the "right" answer are valued so highly, it takes practice for students and patience for teachers to establish a different kind of creative and artistic partnership. Individual autonomy requires group support, a safe environment for taking risks and offering new (even apparently bizarre) ideas, and opportunities for students to succeed or fail through their own efforts.

Offering students opportunities to practice self-regulation. When we ask ourselves how much we, as teachers, need to lead and direct experiences and activities, our answer is usually "less." Clear instructions are essential but if we aim to make sure everyone understands everything and can anticipate exactly what is about to happen, we may deny students the chance to make their own discoveries and shape their own artistic experience. We may also eliminate one of our most effective teaching tools: the element of surprise. Attempting to insure everyone's comfort and success -- according to our own criteria of success -- can undermine students' stake in the experience. If we do not entertain failure and give the students real responsibility, they will not take it and will experience neither the full thrill of their success nor essential learning from their failures.

Early on in any set of classes, simple structures can put students in shared leadership roles. In a large group class Nicoll asks students to count off around the circle. Dividing that number in half, the students count off again, from 1 to the halfway point, twice. Each student is now partnered with a person sharing that number across the circle.[2] Nicoll asks the students to silently, in order from 1 to the highest number, change places on the circle—1's, then 2's, 3's, 4's, etc. There is no cueing; each pair must feel the moment to change. (With very young students, she may count them in for the first round.) They then repeat the process. Nicoll pays close attention for any overt response from the group—laughter, expressions of surprise or

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[2] Only if there are odd numbers does the teacher participate.

exclamations of discovery. At the conclusion of a round, she asks, "What happened when we all gasped?" "They almost crashed!" may be one response.

"Almost—but did they crash?" she asks.

"No."

"How did they do it?" Nicoll continues.

"They froze, really close."

"So that was interesting. Let's try that: you must not crash, but there is a moment when you freeze—very close." Quickly, students begin to notice—and propose—new ideas and complications: overlapping pairs, different movement qualities, stillnesses. Depending on the group, Nicoll may ask for suggestions or propose a few. Usually, however, students themselves initiate the changes, sometimes independently and privately, sometimes in a challenge to the whole group -- "all odd numbers go together," "slow motion to the middle, then quick the rest of the way," "underwater." Nicoll aims to offer the least direction necessary; she wants to turn students on to their innate understanding of form and to notice what intrigues them in action. She must trust the dancers to tell themselves when to begin, how long to move, and to notice what already exists in their imaginations and bodies to manipulate space, time, dynamics and other choreographic structures. Her message to her students: "You have it within you."

Attempts to develop self-direction and control through this kind of experimentation and student-generated problem-finding run counter to many standard teaching strategies in schools. Several years ago, working with a class of fourth grade students and their teacher in a Brooklyn elementary school, Nicoll noticed that each time students faced a new challenge the teacher, Ms. B. said, "We should model that." She had been taught that modeling was a necessary first step, to provide structure and safety for students who might struggle with a new idea or skill. One day as Nicoll asked an 8-year old girl to clap a Call and Response rhythmic pattern with her, Ms. B. said the two adults must first model it for the child. Risking contradicting Ms. B., Nicoll gently said, "I think not; sometimes we need to trust that they can do it." Turning to the child, she said, "You might not get this the first time, or the second, or the third, but I believe you'll get it. Do you want to try?" The girl nodded. On her fifth attempt to find the rhythm, she succeeded. In that moment she nearly went through the roof with joy and her 27 classmates burst into spontaneous applause. Later Ms. B. and Nicoll talked about one message students receive when faced with a steady diet of modeled action: we have already figured this out. Now you can do it like we do.

Sharing leadership and artistic choices. Inviting students to share leadership responsibility is always a scary business and carries real risk for teachers and students alike. Even after seeing previous groups rise to an occasion, teachers can feel deep inner panic, whether facing kindergarteners or college students: "this time it will all fall to pieces", "there is no way this group is ready to do this." The panic may be mirrored in students, especially if they are not used to being given responsibility or sharing cooperative leadership. Yet if we insulate ourselves from the shared risk of such unknowns, we will also insulate our students from finding their way as artists.

Legitimate questions remain: how will students devise their own problems if they are not familiar with the kinds of problems or investigations that might interest them? Further, in a class of 20 or more students, can each student work on a unique, different exploration? Finding a balance between teacher- and student-initiated problems requires individual judgment based on many factors including the age and previous experience of the students and the instructional goals. We are not suggesting that teachers should never give ideas, directions, or evaluation. We do propose, however, that when directing a class, teachers invite more student choice, not only in physical response but also in structure and design of experiences, and use individual and group reflective processes with an eye and ear for unexpected offers that may stimulate greater engagement from individuals and the group.

In the second half of a semester, second and third year college dance students developed and directed improvisations for half the class of 20, while the other half observed. Many of the students' improvisations struck Nicoll as flawed in design or direction—described by participants later as too structured or too free, too burdened with instruction, too literal or too abstract, for example—but in reflective discussions about what "worked" or didn't, students became deeply curious about their own inclinations and choices. Nicoll observed that the last few student-led improvs clicked in a new way for participants, observers, and leaders. They were discovering language, images, and structures that could fulfill or go beyond the initial idea. A number of times during the semester Nicoll considered abandoning her plan to have every student lead at least one improv. She thought a focused progression of improvisational experiences led by her might benefit the students as much as their participation in less proficiently directed student efforts. When considering her overarching goal of learner autonomy, however, she decided to persist with the student-conceived improv assignments. She

sensed that asking them to imagine and lead artistic explorations, risk failure in front of their peers, and learn from the difficulties they faced, could shift their relationship to their own development as artists. Schaefer-Simmern believed that students move through developmental levels at their own speed. By trusting them to observe and direct their own dance propositions, Nicoll gained insight into their current development stage as artists, while the students developed confidence, motivation, and an artistic eye.

The moment Keiko began to lead her improvisation, the students became alert, partly because they knew they needed to listen carefully to understand their classmate's thick Japanese accent. "You're on a big plate," Keiko said. "If anyone moves to another part of the plate," here she held her hands out as if they were on a huge platter, "everything…"—her hands suddenly jerked to the side—"shifts!" One dancer jumped to a new location and in an instant, the other eight dancers became energized, creating a new improvisational dance of hyper-aware co-dependence, playing with weight and location and levels in space. The observers watched with rapt attention. In her notes, Nicoll wrote, "I never would have come up with this."

Finding time for reflection in the classroom. Dancers enter the studio to dance. Classes, particularly in schools, are often too short to properly warm-up and complete the planned experiences. So where can we find time to reflect? And how can we offer students time to raise questions or make suggestions without stopping the movement and flow of the class? This is the essence of the art of teaching – gauging when the class needs to keep moving or when to slow down, whether its time to check in with students, ask for questions, reconnect to breath. We can plan reflection time, but exactly where it fits or for how long is most often a matter of improvisation.

Beginnings and endings of classes present valuable opportunities for reflection. When students enter a studio, and before the official class has begun, we often ask them to reflect independently on the previous session's work: how did it begin? What was difficult or challenging? What was pleasurable? After they have called up the earlier experience, we may ask, "What questions occur to you as you reflect on the events of the last class?" After all students have entered and had a period of reflection, we may ask them to either write what questions came up for them, share the questions with one other person, or share questions in a whole group exchange. We take notes during these times and often use the questions to propel

our ideas either for that day's class or for the next session. These introductory questions stimulate our thinking; students and we explore answers through the action of the class itself.

Reflection and student questions at the beginning of class serve two important purposes: (1) We can accomplish logistics of classroom management (taking roll, collecting or re-distributing assignments, organizing and setting up materials, etc.) while students engage in their own reflective practice. (2) We create space in which students can privately capture their underlying interests and queries and prepare to share them with others without the pressure of a public response. Though we cannot eliminate self-doubt when a student embarks on a new unknown ("What questions do I have? Do I even have any questions?"), we have found that this process makes students more likely to explore and share their ideas with others.

The end of class can also be an ideal moment for reflection, bringing "closure" to the experience with summary thoughts as well as student questions. Action, Dewey (1916) noted**,** precedes thinking; the concluding minutes of a class filled with action often overflow with questions—many of which will not be answered in the remaining time. Inviting students to pose their questions even privately can create a springboard for thinking outside beyond the class. When shared, such questions also inform the teacher about how students are thinking about their work.

Using and eliciting questions. Questions -- both from students and from teachers -- are central to developing autonomous learning within artistic processes. Though many in education emphasize the importance of well-constructed questions (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, among many others), we have observed that (1) less focus is given to developing student-generated questions, (2) students are often tongue-tied when asked what questions they have, and (3) teachers' questions are frequently poorly disguised statements or opinions.

Students' reveal through their questions their level of engagement and offer clues to their current level of artistic development. Their clarifying questions present opportunities for the teacher not only to clarify but also to invite new artistic choices. For example, when a student asks "Do you mean we should send the energy around the circle or are we supposed to go across the circle?" a teacher could clarify by saying, "I meant around the circle." Alternately, she could recognize an idea inside the question, saying, "There's an idea; which shall we do?" We want our instructions to be clear, and yet we see that more open-ended or "ill-defined" problems can

provoke student curiosity and initiative (Gallagher, 2000). Our positive response stimulates more questions and the courage to ask them.

As teachers, we are always interpreting students' questions: do they pose them to avoid or stall? Are they confused or curious? When students are tongue-tied we often rush to fill the silence, but this is another opportunity to consider and evaluate. We may have asked an unispiring question ourselves, in which case we must revise. We may, however have not left enough space for the students to play with an idea in their own minds. If, for example, we ask, "what did you notice?" and become uncomfortable in the ensuing silence, we might be tempted to step in, giving examples of what *we* notice. That impulse can rush students away from their own observations, and reinforce the message that *we* know the appropriate details in which *they* should be interested.

When asking questions of students we need to ask ourselves, "am I trying to get them to see it my way? What opinions, attitudes, or aesthetic preferences might be implied by my question and is that what I intend?" If we want to inspire further investigation by the student we must take care with the impulse, the wording, and the tone of voice and what these things imply.

In the Young Masters program, after a student-directed warm-up and improvisation, the teenage choreographers worked independently and in groups while Nicoll observed the process and made notes from across the studio -- engaged from the periphery and available. After about ten minutes of work on a new solo, Rachel stopped. Her shoulders slumped. She came across the studio to Nicoll.

"I don't know what to do," she said dejectedly. "I'm stuck."

"Can you show me what's happening before you get stuck?" Nicoll asked.

Rachel talked her way through her new phrase as she demonstrated. "I'm like this and then I turn and then I drop down here, and then . . ." In frustration, hunched low to the ground, she vibrated her arms with a furious gesture of impatience. "I don't know what to do!"

"What is that?" Nicoll asked.

"What?" she responded, perplexed.

"Right before you said you didn't know what to do—what was that move?" She repeated the vibration, now centered in her torso and moved tensely through her shoulders and hands. Then she shrugged.

"Does that feel like something? Does an image come to mind?" Nicoll asked.

"No," Rachel said, still dejected.

"Can you do it again?" Nicoll prodded.

She repeated the motion. "Why," she then asked, "Does it look like something to you?"

"I don't know," Nicoll said trying the action herself. "It's so fast and small and tense. Kind of exhausting. It feels sort of like a passing subway rumble."

Nicoll instantly worried she'd said too much; Rachel might think she was supposed to make a dance about a subway. Rachel rose from the floor. "Oh," she said with surprise, "I got it!" She rushed back to her corner and grabbed her notebook. She worked steadily for the rest of the hour, dancing and scribbling notes. Nothing more was said but Rachel left class that night buoyantly. The vibration that rumbled through Rachel that night did not appear in the fully developed solo and her later descriptions of the piece and the process gave no indication of what had happened. Nevertheless, it seemed that Nicoll's question ("Can you show me what's happening before you get stuck?") and the follow up ("Can you do that again?") had helped keep Rachel in the process, dealing with her frustration and moving forward.

College programs, where student choreographers prepare their work for large audiences in a semi-professional setting -- and where the outcome may be taken as a reflection of a faculty's abilities – can trigger an even greater urge to intervene with specific suggestions or opinions. Sitting in on a rehearsal directed by Jennifer, one of her undergraduate choreographers, Nicoll puzzled over the dancers' odd arm position as they prepared to begin. To her eye, it didn't fit with what followed. Wanting to ask, "Why are their arms up there?" she instead wrote in her journal while Jennifer and her dancers continued to rehearse. Nicoll thought about how to focus on this moment without suggesting a change based on her own impulse. Not sure what to say to Jennifer, she addressed the dancers. "Before you start, is there anything you're confused about?" The dancers thought a moment and identified a problem with counts, nothing about the arms. Jennifer began to clarify the counts and Nicoll noted in her book her disappointment that nobody was confused by the arms. Jennifer soon returned to her spot beside Nicoll, cued the dancers, and then stopped. "Wait a second. Now *I'm* confused. What's that arm doing up there?" She returned to the stage, posing a series of "what-if" questions to her dancers. Back in her seat, Jennifer watched the revised opening, then clapped her hands, delighted. "That's so much better!" she cried. "I fixed it!"

It appeared that by turning to the dancers when unsure how to question the choreographer, Nicoll had given Jennifer a chance to look at the work from a different point of view, inside the dance. She then took more time with the material, digging into it, rather than thinking about it. At the same time, the question may have introduced "confusion" as a productive entry point. Perhaps when Jennifer returned to her observer role, she was newly open to the question of whether anything confused *her*.

What seems crucial in this exchange was not the outcome in terms of the dance itself but Jennifer's discovery of her power to make her piece "better" according to her own criteria. In the mentoring process, Nicoll, too, had learned; by slowing herself down with her writing, bringing an open question to the dancers (whose answers differed from her own), and not interfering with the exploration of solutions, she had learned something new about the potential for an artist's development. It was, as Schaefer-Simmern might say, evidence of artistic unfolding. When we listen to students' questions we engage with their unknown. We do not have to have an answer. Better that we elicit their questions and help them look for their own answers.

Questions from the artist. Many college composition and choreography classes hold regular showings of works in progress for peers and faculty. How students manage feedback from both of these powerful audiences can determine the usefulness of the responses and their ability to find their own solutions. One way to structure audience responses was developed by the choreographer Liz Lerman, whose Critical Response Protocol (1993) begins with a question from the choreographer to help guide the discussion. Of her own experience, Lerman writes, "I discovered that the more I made public my own questions about the work, my work, the more eager I was to engage in a dialog about how to 'fix' the problem. . . I found that often, just talking about the messes that are an inevitable part of creating new work, talking about it out loud from my perspective, pointed a way out of the dilemma" (p. 1).

Many college students with whom we work express confusion when asked to form a question about their own choreography. The early state of work on their dances and the pressure of a grade can easily create an external focus. Additionally after 15 or 20 years in school, posing one's own questions may be a dormant skill. Often, they simply say "I don't have a question." Examining one's artwork and identifying one's own questions seems like foreign territory. Frequently the only questions offered are, "Do you like it?" "What do you think?" or "What should I do?"

Group discussion through the use of a protocol, combined with process-based talk guided by choreographers' questions, can make audience responses far easier to understand and consider. In Nicoll's choreography lab, Isabel posed a question to her cohort of choreographers before showing her work. "I'm going between having a line and completely breaking a line. I'm wondering if there's a big enough difference between those two ideas. Have I made the contrast clear?"

After watching the piece—an unfinished work-in-progress—other choreographers took up Isabel's question, some thinking the contrast was clear and others not. The new directions in which the question moved, however, became at least as interesting as the answers Isabel's classmates offered. Karen was intrigued by the idea of making and breaking a line, but also wanted to respond with a question: "I wonder what else this means to you—to break a line?" Amanda noted that other audience members focused on breaking group formations of "line." "I might not have understood what you meant," she said, "but I noticed the breaking of the line of the body. It was interesting, how just a change of the head or arm could break the line of the body so dramatically." After hearing Amanda's comment, Isabel said, "I was going less for breaking the line of the body than the line formed by a group, but now I'm really interested in what Amanda said, especially as I want to develop the partner work more. That seems like it will have potential." The discussion included language of imagery, specific physical details, and different interpretations of the idea, rather than confining itself to likes, dislikes or suggestions.

Nicoll also asked her college improvisation students to write down their questions at the end of a class and to consider the questions in their own way (e.g., physically, in oral conversation, in written form, with drawings, etc.) before the next class. Some of the questions follow.

Joan: Should I be moving from my mind or moving from my body?

Maria: What's the relationship between motion and emotion; while I'm dancing, should I let my face move or should I control that?

Denise: I noticed Alex's dance was done all with the face; can that be a dance?

Kevin: Is it ok if I follow somebody else's pulse?

Maggie: How can I structure an improvisation but not get 'locked in' to my idea?

Steven: Is there a difference between a pose and a shape?

Jessica: Should I come up with something new every time I improvise or can I revisit the old?

These questions reveal that some students were still wondering what they "should" or "shouldn't" do during improvisation; some were identifying practical issues in the design of their own improvisational problems; some were meditating on definitions and how words influence actions; and some were facing philosophical questions about mind and body. In response, Nicoll might bring readings or ideas for observation to individual students. At other times, she would use the questions as a stimulus for a class exploration. Steven's question about pose and shape, for example, triggered the beginning of the next session with an improvisation that led in surprising new directions. Regardless of prior experience with improvisation (for most this was their first improvisation class) many of the questions offered starting points for artistic explorations.

Looking at your own work. As we discussed previously, looking at your own work in dance is challenging. We can suggest strategies for choreographers -- video taping rehearsals, sharing processes in class for observing and responding, and using a journal to capture responses -- but whether and how they use them depends a great extent on their level of engagement and trust in their own intuition.

Nicoll asked her college choreographers, many of whom were creating a group piece for the first time, to video a rehearsal and watch it several times, writing down what they saw. Denise reported on the assignment:

"I think I had a revelation. I started to watch, and I got distracted. So I stopped the video, went back to the beginning and started again. I was trying to just see what I could see, objectively. It was hard. I kept getting distracted. When I noticed I was distracted, I went back to the beginning again. It happened a few times. I began to see that I was getting caught on the same thing every time, and that the distraction was the moment where the dancers looked unsure. So I asked myself why they looked unsure. And then I realized it was always the point where I was unsure about it, myself: moments where I wasn't sure of counts or intent or the direction I was moving in. And then it struck me that I had always moved on at those moments and didn't clarify – for them or for myself. I either pushed it aside or I threw it away, thinking 'that stinks,' and that I should lose it. Now I

started to think maybe it's not that I should lose it. Now I'm thinking maybe I should dig into it instead." (personal communication, October 22, 2012)

Though Denise might have addressed the same issue had a faculty member pointed it out, the way she discovered the problem, describing her new awareness as a revelation, seemed to engage her more deeply with the work. Nicoll heard in Denise's observation a new stage in the choreographer's development – a stage Nicoll might have interfered with by critiquing or identifying the problems.

Sarah, another undergraduate choreographer, asked Nicoll to talk with her after the first informal showing of her new piece. She described what it was like to watch her own piece – no longer alone in rehearsal with just her dancers. "It was a strange experience, watching what I'd created on others while an audience was watching. It was a kind of out-of-body experience. I said to myself, 'Just see the piece; see if you feel something.' But I didn't feel what I thought I would, based on what I'd been seeing in rehearsals."

Throughout this description, Nicoll took notes, her habit during conversations with students about their work. At this point she asked, "What *did* you see that was different?"

"It was the quality I noticed. I wanted a grittier feeling. It was round, not jagged. I wanted jagged. I can't tell you why -- it's just telling me to be. Maybe because it's round, I want to see it jagged. I asked Julianna to throw a word at me afterward and she said, 'Round.' I said, 'I thought "round" too.' I hadn't noticed that before."

Nicoll looked up from her notes and said, "What brought that out?"

"I think I didn't ask the dancers to emphasize certain movements enough – the elbows, hands, fingers: they didn't come across clearly enough." For the first time in her narrative, Sarah looked at her own notebook. "I'm going to write that down," she said, grabbing the book and her pen. After writing a note, she began to discuss another section of the piece.

"When the two dancers are on the floor and the other three walk through, looking at them, I think the audience sees through the eyes of the walking dancers. I wonder if that gives the audience a pitying feeling – looking down at the dancers like that?" She paused a moment. Nicoll continued writing. Suddenly Sarah said, "I think I made that too blatant." She hastily took up her pen again, and said to herself, "I'm going to write that down." She made some notes, then looked up from the page and said, "I think that for the opening, I want to get that feeling of pity

for the dancers on the floor, without forcing the audience to feel it through the walking dancers. That's what I'm going for" (personal communication, October 10, 2012).

Nicoll realized she was hearing Sarah in dialogue with herself. Sometimes, as when Sarah mentioned "a pitying feeling," Nicoll simply made notes, contemplating the mystery in Sarah's description. At other times, such as when Sarah said, "That first leg extension did not fit," Nicoll asked her to elaborate. "It needs to be changed," Sarah said with certainty. "A flexed foot, I think. The first step is too abrupt. It needs a better transition." This young artist, thinking through what she was creating on other dancers, conversed easily about metaphoric ponderings, aspects of the piece that were still mysterious to her, and physical evidence that spoke very clearly to her.

Though Nicoll often urged students to have notebooks ready, this was the first exchange with Sarah in which the choreographer announced her note-taking intentions during the conversation. As the two sat scribbling across from each other, Nicoll was intrigued by the shift this seemed to represent. Perhaps Sarah was simply attempting to satisfy her teacher, following the apparent rules of the game. Nonetheless, she claimed a certain power in the process, declaring what statements deserved a note, and confidently pausing the conversation to independently reflect and document her reflection.

The Continuing Challenge

This has been and continues to be a difficult and yet rewarding journey. Bringing unexamined parts of our practice to light, testing whether our actions truly support our beliefs has inevitably shaped us and our stance. As our focus on the centrality of student independence and autonomy has increased, so has our awareness of how challenging it is to strive for that that goal in every class. Wanting to teach what we care about, to lessen students' discomfort, to see our students succeed -- these are essential reasons we became teachers in the first place. When we answer a question with a question or restrain from offering a personal opinion, we often worry that we are not doing our jobs or are intentionally making the way harder for our students. We must frequently remind ourselves of the deeper goals. In focusing on those goals, we create not a rule book – "*never say this, never do that*" – but a bigger framework that can deepen both self-awareness and responsiveness to others. We try to remember:

- To encourage self-initiating behavior we must make space for self-initiation.

- To foster unique responses we must accept the danger that the response may appear conventional or alternatively, strange or unfathomable to us.

- To ask students to enter the unknown we must enter the unknown (check formulas at the door).

Shifting away from teacher-generated assignments in improvisation and choreography does not mean we abandon our role as a guide. In some ways it intensifies the challenge, demanding that we focus on observation, support, and timely offers of clarification while giving enough space to not step into students' process prematurely. For us as teachers, finding a way to manage our own discomfort and uncertainty – to stay in our own struggle – is the biggest challenge. Writing what we see as it occurs, posing questions to ourselves and to our students, and practicing the same processes of observation and reflection we recommend for students, helps us stay present but out of the way. We want to reassure students we are available for support, while dissuading them from the idea that we are there to judge or solve their problems.

Some key reminders in planning for autonomy include:

1. Encourage students to offer ideas to adapt exercises or structures.
2. Give students leadership roles early and often.
3. Provide open structures in which students can find their own problems and pose their own questions.
4. Integrate reflection and focused observation throughout.

Not only can these strategies be used productively in any dance class, they apply to all teaching. In our work with general education teachers, masters level education students, teaching artists, and parents, the focus on learner autonomy and the challenge of bringing our practices in line with our beliefs is basically the same. One might assume that the arts naturally lead to the kind of independence and originality we hope to inspire, but that is not necessarily so. If we do not explicitly put the goal of learner autonomy front and center, artistic voices can get swallowed up in the outcomes-based orientation of our current educational system.

John Dewey (1910) said that a teacher's status as an artist is "measured by his ability to foster the attitude of the artist in those who study with him…Some succeed in arousing enthusiasm, in communicating large ideas, in evoking energy. So far so well; but the final test is whether the stimulus given to wider aims succeeds in transforming itself into power" (p.220). Processes that help students generate their own ideas, sustain their engagement, and reflect

deeply on their work can shift the power so that students will to continue their own artistic journey after they leave our class or mentorship.

There is humility in this stance. I cannot know what my students can or want to create. My experience and expertise help me know when and how to offer guidance but also make me aware of the power of my words to disrupt students' process. As the choreographer Kei Takei reminds us, "I should not be safe in my creativity" (cited in Kreemer, 1987, p.18). The safest place in teaching is to repeat the known, to deliver instruction unquestioningly, and to see artistic development as a sequential, predictable process. If we truly believe in our students' unique artistry and that teaching itself is an unfolding artistic process, we enter the unknown together everyday.

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