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Dance Major Journal

Title

Bringing Dance Back to Education

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4r44p7dd>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 9(1)

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/D59154699

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Bringing Dance Back to Education

How public schools could make dance more respected

by Claire Kucera

When I introduce myself to other students in college I find myself explaining that I am double majoring, as if being a dance major is not enough and they will only appreciate me if I have another major. I, like many other dance majors, feel the need to justify my choice of major to those who don't understand. Every dance major I have talked to has a story about another student belittling the dance major, assuming it is easy or not worthwhile. It is as if dance is less of a major as biology or education, therefore it requires no respect.

I have also found that I receive more questions about my major than students in other arts majors. It is as if everyone understands the significance of playing an instrument or singing but cannot understand why I would come to college to dance. These questions do not seem to come out of personal preference for certain arts. Instead, they seem to come from a lack of knowledge about dance.

One can see this lack of knowledge or appreciation for dance outside of the university setting as well. As most art forms thrive throughout the country, dance battles to stay afloat. According to the artsjournal website:

Almost every major city in America has a symphony orchestra, a museum or two, and a few theaters. Few have successful dance companies. Move down to second- and third-tier cities, and dance almost doesn't exist.

Why is there such a difference between the arts? Why do some arts thrive in this country while dance is treated as a second-rate art form?

All of this evidence seems to point to a lack of education about dance. Using my second major of Education, I decided to look at this issue of disrespect for dance. I focused on public elementary and secondary schools in California, where dance is almost nonexistent. According to *California Arts Education Data Project*, a program that collects data on arts enrollment in schools across the state, dance has the lowest enrollment rate across all of the arts. It found that, "17 percent of students enrolled in art, 14 percent in music, 5 percent in arts, media and entertainment, 4 percent in theatre and 2 percent in dance." The shockingly low percentage shows how few students get the opportunity to learn dance at their elementary or secondary schools. This results in only those students who actively pursue dance and who can afford outside classes getting dance lessons. How are students expected to value dance if they never get introduced to it? Young people are not able to see the work and artistry that goes into dance, and therefore do not form an appreciation for it. This would then also explain why dance majors are treated badly in college.

A key reason why dance and theater enrollment is far lower than music and art is because there is no teaching credential for those subjects. Prior to 1970 you could get a teaching credential in all four art forms. When it came time to renew the credentials in 1970, the Ryan Act was passed, in which it stated all of the subjects one could get credentialed in under within the state of California. “Due to the Ryan Act only the music and visual art teaching credentials were renewed” (Ng). The Ryan Act favored music and art while making it much harder to become a dance or theater teacher. This led to music and art being the most supported by schools, and thus getting higher enrollments. Through the Ryan Act, public education has sent a clear message to students about which arts deserve respect and which ones can be tossed aside.

To further diminish dance, public school teachers who wished to teach dance had to receive a credential in physical education. Although dance is a physical activity, this requirement asserts that dance does not count as an artistic pursuit in schools. This makes the students see it as less of an art and more as a recreational activity. Recreational activities by definition are considered more of a hobby and not a something to be studied seriously. If students are taught that dance is recreational, then it is understandable why college students would find it weird to major in. Additionally, the PE credential barely focuses on dance at all, including it as just one subject along with the mechanics of body movement, aquatics, gymnastics, tumbling, individual sports, dual sports, and team sports (California Department of Education).

With this disregard for dance occurring at the state level, it’s no wonder that the personal views of individuals can reflect the same attitude, leaving dance majors feeling misunderstood and diminished. It may be too late to change the minds of those who have made us feel this way, but it’s not too late to help future dance majors. The fight for dance education and appreciation is not over; there is new hope for dance in California public schools.



Dance students being taught by Kucera

On September 26, 2016, California passed Senate Bill No. 916, which addressed credentialing for dance and theater teachers (Allen, SB 916). “This bill would add dance and theatre to the list of authorized subjects (for credentials)” as well as grant dance educators working under a PE credential with a new dance credential (Allen, SB 916). As this program, named TADA, starts in the coming years, educators will be able to teach dance as a fine art once again. They will also receive specific training on how to instruct dance, instead of the general physical education training.

Educators can also foster an appreciation for dance. In a study by Malarsih, done with the Department of Dance Education, at Semarang State University in Indonesia, they looked at how appreciation can be increased in dance education. They noted that showing high school students dance videos affected their appreciation and creativity. “Teaching media in a form of the video had activated the students’ interest in appreciating and creating dance” (Malarsih). This study highlights one of many ways in which new TADA teachers will be able to increase their students’ respect for dance. Additionally, these techniques could result in a community that views dance in a new, positive light.

As dance majors we are privileged in that we received dance training and education, when so many students in public schools are not so lucky. Unfortunately, this privilege means that we have had to explain and defend our choice of major over and over. However, I believe that, through TADA, dance education will increase, fostering an understanding and appreciation for the art form. And, at long last, future dance majors won’t have to justify themselves, dance will get the respect it deserves.

Claire Kucera is currently a junior at UCI, pursuing a BFA in Dance Performance and a BA in Education Sciences. She plans on graduating in the spring of 2022 and later pursue her teaching credential to teach dance.

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