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Building Cultural Bridges through Dance

What role does dance have in developing global understandings?

by Sena Hernandez

As I majored in Dance and International Studies at university, I always wondered if there was a way to combine my two majors to create something that could bring the global community together. I remember when I was a freshman, there were students visiting from China who took classes with us. Although we had a language barrier, we had the common passion of dance and were able to become friends really quickly. When they were doing improv work, we would learn from each other's differences and adapt different movement qualities to our bodies. While we were dancing together, there was definitely a sense of connection and energy that we shared in the same space. It brought us closer knowing that people across the world share a common passion, and naturally made it easier to become friends.

On a larger scale, a great example of this in history were the cultural exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. From 1958-1988, more than 50,000 Soviet scholars, engineers, scientists, journalists, athletes, musicians, and dancers came to the U.S. to mutually benefit from learning about each other (Richmond). Although science and technology might have been considered the most important fields of exchange for each country, dance also had power in terms of bringing people together and developing a deeper sense of connection. Although sometimes overlooked, cultural exchange has just as much potential and influence when it comes to building a global network. Economic and political exchange may be beneficial to the market economy, but without the basic cultural and societal understanding, it is very hard to approach global problems.

Understanding the society and culture of countries can lead to smoother economic and political exchanges, because each side can get a better understanding of each perspective to help navigate conflicts. "Dance can reach beyond preconceived notions and into hearts and minds of an audience" (Needham). Dance can be influenced by political, economic, cultural, and societal circumstances of each country, and it can help bring new perspectives through provoking different emotions. In the U.S., dancers explored modernism, rhythm, and subject matter that emphasized artistic freedom, while the Soviet Union focused on technique and strict training methods that aligned with their country's identity and communist agenda (Needham). By being exposed to different dance styles and performances, it was an eye-opening experience for both the dancers and the audiences. Through these cultural exchanges, the two countries were able to have a better understanding of each other, easing the tension and preparing each country for the end of the Cold War. It was a very peaceful way to break the many stereotypes they had about each other. Through more cultural exchanges in the dance field, we could be able to break down many stereotypes and build a better future with a stronger sense of a global community.

Why is having a global mindset important today?

Globalization continues to develop, and we are all becoming more and more interconnected and dependent on each other. This comes with many global problems, such as climate change,

poverty, pandemic, and social problems that we need to solve together. In 2018, the United Nations developed the Sustainable Development Goals, which address 17 aspects of urgent global problems that different countries could work on to promote better environment, health, and well-being of people. This is where having a global mindset becomes key in building a better sense of community worldwide in order to solve these problems. “Global mindset” is defined as having an open mind to different perspectives and cultures in order to connect intellectually as well as emotionally (Unruh). “Leaders who possess a global mindset are able to view situations from a variety of perspectives, develop trusting relationships with individual contexts, and identify promising routes to successful collaboration” (Unruh). The earlier in their lives that people can have opportunities for cultural exchanges, the easier it can be for them to adapt to a global mindset and create future generations that can solve global problems together.

Growing up, I had the opportunity to experience both American and Japanese culture as I moved back and forth between the two countries every two years. I permanently moved back to San Francisco in my high school years, but in the summer I still got to attend a private school in Okinawa, where I joined their international class for a few weeks. I got to meet students from Mexico, Taiwan, Canada, and other parts of the U.S. and different international students every year. One year at an international class in Okinawa, I met a student from China who was clearly unhappy to be there. “My mom made me enroll in this program,” she said, “but I hate Japanese people. I don’t want to be friends with you guys.” She was so set on her views that we were all shocked, but the Japanese students still continued to be friendly and asked her to join them for lunch and hang out. Although hesitant, she slowly started to open up and became friendly with everyone. By the end of a few weeks, she apologized for making such a blunt statement in the beginning, without trying to get to know the Japanese students better. She mentioned that she had grown up with a negative stereotype about Japan, but spending time with the students for just a few weeks had already changed her mind. If more people could have the opportunity to study abroad or participate in some sort of cultural exchange, it can break many stereotypes that people grow up with in their cultures. I’ve had similar experiences and it made me take a step back and realize I can’t categorize everyone so quickly without getting to know them first. This experience made me have more of an open mind and to keep reminding myself to not judge people based on where they come from. Being pushed out of your comfort zone can definitely make you realize things that you weren’t aware of before.

In the past, there was a program called DanceMotion USA that facilitated cultural exchange across different countries through artistic collaborations. A project of the US Department of Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, along with some private partners, they chose certain contemporary companies to travel abroad and host workshops, master classes, and collaborate with local artists (DanceMotion USA). One program featured dancers from America, Turkey, and Armenia creating a piece called “unsettled,” performed in the U.S. “The dancers’ ability to overcome the inherent challenges of merging distinct dance styles and choreographic expertises is a testament to the significant cultural exchange produced through the collaborative process” (DanceMotion USA). Each country has different dance styles and techniques, so it must have been a challenging process to create something together. Since every country has different goals and ways of solving problems, the ability to navigate conflict with other cultures is a key component of developing a global mindset. Through this program, company members were able to show the audiences how we can come together to create something innovative and beautiful.

The power of art bringing communities together is something that is often overlooked in our current society. Cultural exchanges through dance could be beneficial in cultivating a global mindset in order to build a greater sense of community. Small interactions with other cultures can lead to bigger lifelong connections, and a better understanding of different perspectives. With a global mindset developed through cultural exchanges in dance, we can hopefully build bridges that could help solve greater problems in the world.

Sena Hernandez graduated in June 2022 with a B.A. in Dance and B.A. in International Studies. She is moving to Japan to hopefully work for Peace Boat Japan.



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