Teaching as a Transformational Experience

Debra Wright Knapp

It is vital to the growth of the New Mexico State University dance program that the dance faculty and students work toward personal and organizational transformation by having a persuasive and durable sense of purpose and direction, rooted deeply in human values and the human spirit. As a dance educator, I explored methods that go beyond educating students in memorization and replication. Applying transformational learning theory helps my students to make meaning of their experiences in ways that change not only their views but how they live their life.

Transformational learning refers to the process of reflecting on what we learn and on our belief systems, which shifts our perspectives and assumptions. Kegan (1994) wrote that transformative learning happens when someone changes “not just the way he behaves, not just the way he feels, but the way he knows—not just what he knows but the way he knows” (p. 17). An educator who teaches from a transformative approach wants to guide students past informational learning, which as Kegan (2000) explained, is the type of learning that expands existing cognitive capacities into new terrain, affecting and changing what we know. Transformational learning changes the way people see themselves and the world in which they live (Clark, 1993; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

I have studied a theoretical framework of transformational learning as developed by Dirksen (1998) as a guide to inform my leadership, teaching, scholarship, and creative activity practice. Dirksen felt that transformational learning was a composite of four trains of thought and that each needs to be utilized by educators for the whole person to experience a transformation. His four-lens framework includes transformation as consciousness-raising, transformation as critical reflection, transformation as development, and transformation as individuation. Over the past 10 years, I focused on transformation through critical reflection, which resulted in transformative change within the other three perspectives.

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Transformation as Critical Reflection in Teaching

This perspective is supported by the work of Mezirow (1998), who described that the outcome of transformative learning is individuals who are more inclusive in their perceptions of the world, able to increasingly differentiate its various aspects, open to other points of view, and able to integrate differing dimensions of their experiences into meaningful and holistic relationships. Dirkx (1998) implied that this type of transformational learning happens through personal experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse that help us to identify, assess, and reformulate key assumptions on which our perspectives are constructed.

Reflective practice offers a way for a person to expand existing points of view, establish new points of view, transform a point of view, or become aware of the effect that one’s bias can have on viewing groups unlike oneself. Critical reflection leads a person away from the concepts, values, feelings, and beliefs of others. Critical reflection helps people learn to think for themselves. Mezirow’s (1998) theory describes a process of transforming frames of reference to make a person more open to or capable of change (Dirkx, 1998).

This reflective process is very gratifying, as I witness transformation in my students, as well as in myself. It is an enlightening journey of self-discovery.

Student Growth Through Reflection

As a dance educator, I have many responsibilities to my students. One is to teach them how to become competent in a specific dance style. I help the student progress from imitation to skill accomplishment, with the goal of ultimately achieving artistic expression. However, in my years of teaching at the university level, I have found that many of my students come with the notion that being able to perform “difficult” dance skills (e.g., how many turns they can do, how high they can kick their leg, or if they can do the split) is what makes them a dancer. These students know very little about the world of dance, dance as an art form, dance as a means for personal expression, dance as a philosophy, or dance as a lens for making sense of the world we live in.

These same students want extrinsic rewards and cannot honestly reflect on their own growth, accomplishments, and areas that need concentrated focus. Feedback sounds like criticism to these students, and they become discouraged and frustrated when they are in a learning environment that is about process, reflection, and transformation.

Many of my students experienced transactional teaching from our educational system. Transactional teaching motivates students by providing or withholding extrinsic rewards. It implies that if the students perform competently and behave responsibly, their learning is successful. Reinforcement and rewards are based on the student’s ability to perform correctly (working from a model of perfection). Thus, the transactional teacher leads students according to the situation or circumstances, and rewards or reprimands according to the goals and objectives achieved.

However, there are students who arrive to my class expecting more. They are looking for meaning and purpose, not just in the classroom but also in their daily life. Here is where the dance educator needs to be a transformational teacher. This type of teacher focuses on instructing by encouraging students to try new things, suggesting new ways of looking at challenges, and stimulating new perspectives. These teachers encourage creative and innovative thinking, and they value individuality.
Dance educators who are transformational teachers are dedicated to educating the whole person, not just the dancer. Many of my students will not choose dance as a profession. However, if the goal of my classes is to transform students into productive and contributing members of society, then I need to go beyond the steps and into the world of concepts. One way I did this is by including more reflection in my classes.

My greatest accomplishment in teaching comes from how I changed my classroom to be a place of reflection. It took me over 10 years to develop ways to engage my students in meaningful reflection. In the beginning, they used reflection as a way to whine, complain, or blame others for their struggles and challenges. They rarely affirmed what they were accomplishing and most could not self-assess their growth. To engage my students in meaningful reflective practice, I improved the reflective prompts, changed to online writing, provided more in-class verbal reflection, allowed my students to reflect through self- and collaborative assessments, and fostered the development of personal belief statements.

**The Art of Prompting**

Prompting can be an effective way to elicit reflection. Giving students a question or a prompt helps guide their reflection on specific experiences they are having in class and to make meaning of what they are learning (Davis & Linn, 2000; Ge & Land, 2004; Lai, 2010). Amulya (2004) suggested that by responding to the questions or prompts, students can increase their understanding by observing the meaning they have taken from the experience and excavating the underlying qualities that made the experience significant.

Most of my prompts are instructor generated, since I want to know whether my students are comprehending and applying what they are learning in class. However, some prompts come from questions that students ask in class. The following are several prompts that I use to stimulate reflections from my students and some of the responses I have received.

**Prompt: What barriers or inhibitions are preventing you from being fully engaged in class?**

As I have gotten older, I am now more afraid of doing something wrong because now I am supposed to be a role model and know better. But I need to let that go and enjoy the mistakes and learn from them.

I have found that my greatest inhibition is my own mind. I overthink movement, which makes my dancing stiff and awkward. When I start thinking about other people watching me, my dancing becomes less about what I feel, and more about what I want other people to see.

My parents always focused and almost idolized homework or practice time, and if I did not get a good grade it was because I did not focus hard enough and I thought I had to prove my 'intelligence' over and over again. This caused me to try to please everyone. When I first came to college I tried to be better than everyone else because that proved I was working harder. It is hard not to feel guilty for not being perfect. But I still have that inner voice wanting to please and get praise from authority, so when I know a teacher is watching I change a little on the inside and sometimes this inhibits me.

**Prompt: How do you use breath for fulfilling a movement, a phrase, or a dance?**

Perhaps we should think of our movements as an extension of our breath. Breath gives our movements life. I think I would become better at using breath to fulfill my movement if I thought about it more in daily activities—while walking to class, while working, while doing dishes.

When talking about breath before, for some reason I would immediately think that it was all about Modern Dance. For some odd reason, I didn’t think of how it could apply to different dance styles. Knowing how this feels in my body now, I wouldn’t be surprised that I will automatically be aware of breath from the get-go in any style I’ll be dancing!

Breath creates voluminous movement and allows the body to really feel and fill space.
Prompt: Let’s talk about how you incorporate the ability to use imagery to create pictures, words, or stories when you dance to make the movements more alive. Are you able to do this for yourself? Do you do this in ballet or jazz or tap? or flamenco? or ballroom?

I find that the imagery of my insides moving with each movement brings more emotion and individuality to my dance.

I try to use imagery to find the real way my body wants to express a movement.

If the instructor doesn’t give me an image, I never think to do it myself. Maybe if I did this more, classes would be more fulfilling.

Prompt: Discuss the principle of “total body integration.” What areas are you not integrating?

Integration is an amazing feeling. I’m being taught to break out of my ordinary way of moving and explode into a new and improved self-sense of being. I wonder who I will be tomorrow?

When I can reach all the way inside to the center of my core, then I am all connected and my whole body can dance. Then I can dance between the movements. When my body is integrated, its alive and nothing is left out. Now this sounds weird to me and it might be off base, but if it’s close to right I still have a really hard time doing it.

Where is my pelvis? Where is my core? I seem to dance from my arms and legs and leave everything else behind. I hear the words “kinetic change of energy,” and I think I am on another planet. How can I integrate when I don’t even know how my body moves?

Prompt: How can we improve our movement phrasing by creating grammar within the movement combination? How do we build movement sentences, paragraphs, chapters, complete books, stories, poems?

To be quite honest, I have no clue about phrasing. There have been several times that I feel my dancing is one giant run-on sentence.

My movement phrasing has a tendency to be rather monotone. When I watch dancers like S. and J., I wish I had their grammar. They know where to change efforts, where to add commas, question marks, exclamation points, etc. Sometimes I get so concerned with doing things “right” that I forget about how to express the movement.

Online Shared Reflections

In addition to improving my prompts, I also changed the format in which students wrote by having them share their reflections through online forums. All entries were public, giving everyone an opportunity to read and respond to the thoughts of others. Knowing that what they are writing will be read by their peers often results in students writing comments that are more insightful and deeper than if they just journaled for themselves. By having the students comment on their peers’ writing, they begin to become mentors for one another by encouraging and offering suggestions through difficult times. I also see changes in the classroom because they became more vested in each other’s learning. Here are two students’ comments on another’s entry.

Sarah could not have said it any better! Open-body wall isn’t even about the body at all! I was there with her in that moment. Yes! My heart knew what it meant and was encouraged that the “struggle” I was feeling was not even a struggle but just something we all feel, and that being open to the present without wanting the future or living in the past is where I should be.

Many of us (including me) have written that we feel we are not good enough and that we are afraid that others may think we look ridiculous doing some exercises, but reading what the others say, we can see that many of us share the same fears. That makes me feel better.

Verbal Reflection

Verbal reflection is also a part of my classes. During our peer-tutoring segments in each class, the students assume the role of teacher/trainer. This enables them to share their artistic journey, offer corrective and prescriptive feedback, and
witness change. Feedback becomes a positive experience. It is impossible for me to give each student feedback in every class, so having the students assume some of this responsibility moves the focus of class to more intrinsic rewards instead of just looking to me for approval. One of my advanced dance students commented on her experience peer tutoring with a beginning student:

On Wednesday of last week I had a partner who is a new mover. He said that movement does not come naturally and is hard for his body to do. At first, sharing with each other was difficult. I did not want to give too much technical feedback and he was shy about giving me any. The mood soon changed as we both shared movement back and forth. I noticed where he was excited in the movement and owned it and he noticed where I came out of the work. We soon looked past the easy things and saw the artist in each other! Oh man! I just love that! I just love beginner dancers because they are driven by this artist inside who needs to be fed in order to grow! Like a dividing cell, the new cells have the same DNA yet grow larger to be something that can do more!

Other students have reflected on the benefits of working together on material learned in class. They speak to the support they get from their peers.

I really enjoy working with partners because I always learn from watching them. Not every dancer is the same. It seems to really help me when we each step back and watch one another and then reflect on what we both did. At first I just started dancing and wasn’t really finding my inner self and I didn’t go down to the floor at all. My partner helped me realize this. It seems easier now.

Working in groups or partners showed me that everyone experiences dance in their own way. I had the opportunity to expand my knowledge by watching others. It also showed me that sometimes I am so focused on my own movements that I am limited by what I know. When I see others dancing I realize that dancing is infinite. Working with partners is also a great help because they support me and correct me when I am having a hard time. Actually, I think they play an important role in my growth.

Reflective Assessment

Another form of written reflection is assessment. I give movement exams of the material covered in class. I have a rubric that assesses students’ artistic and technical (athletic) abilities, their ability to perform as an ensemble, and their composition skills. After each exam, they rate their performance and reflect on why they gave themselves that score.

I gave myself a 6 for “effort qualities” because during the test I was only thinking about doing the steps correctly and being on the right count. While I was learning the movement phrase, I loved feeling the effort of movement but I get scared on a test and lose all I have gained. Where is the artist?

These movement exams always include a group compositional assignment. They are given another rubric that assesses their group’s collaborative experience.

I have loved working with others in this group and I think as a whole the entire class likes it better too. Usually I really don’t like collaborating, but exploring together is really fun. The best interactions happened when we least expected it. When we moved from working as soloist to ensemble we suddenly connected and we all couldn’t help but smile. I am trying to find that connection between people more and more.

These movement-test reflections proved very successful not just in one class but over students’ four years in our program.
The students are able to assess their growth and work toward their potential while having a heightened awareness of dancing as an ensemble.

Personal Belief Statements

In my pedagogy class, we spend time reflecting on learning experiences from past instructors—on what makes teachers inspiring and what makes a good learning environment. They share their reflections in class and are awakened to the diverse teaching methods, both positive and negative, that are used by dance educators. It is through such reflection that students begin to gain an understanding of the rewards and challenges of teaching. Through their reflections, they give voice to the kind of teacher they want to become.

The students are asked to develop their own personal belief statements, and from their statements they are asked to develop their philosophy of dance education. When they discuss how to embed their beliefs in a class, they begin the process of reflecting on dance as a philosophy. Listening to each other’s views on life broadens the way in which students see one another. As one of my students read her statement of belief, she wept. I asked her why it was so emotional for her. She replied, “No one has ever asked me what I believe. I’ve always been told what to believe.” Other students expressed themselves this way:

We live in a society in which we think we do everything right and that we always need to be accomplished. We live in a society in which, instead of striking for excellence, we try to beat others. We should all know that there is always going to be someone better than you and the easiest way to accomplish something is not by beating others but by being better than ourselves.

Give yourself time. We often look for quick fixes and instant results. True growth takes time. Don’t look for big flashes of insight or epiphanies, allow the little ones. They will add up to big changes in your life. Expect change to take place, expect that you will go through a rediscovery period, a period of growth. You may need to say goodbye to the old you. You need to keep an open mind and an open heart, take chances, be kind to others, keep a journal, have some alone time, and leave preconceptions to the past.

Find the light in every situation and hold onto it while in the darkness. We all have scars from our past; they help make us who we are.

During the 2011 fall semester, I was on sabbatical. I spent part of this time in China presenting and teaching. I kept an online blog that my students could access. I reflected on my experiences working with elementary, high school, and university dance students.

Prompt: What will I take away from this experience?

That dance is a universal language and that when you move together, barriers dissolve. That having an open heart opens hearts. That everyone wants to do meaningful work. That touch and laughter heals. That kindness fills me up. That I love teaching. That there is beauty and hope and honesty in people. That dance has been one of my greatest teachers. And that at age 39, I still have something to give.

Effective teaching requires a person who is also seeking a life focused on transformation. This journey takes patience with oneself and patience with our students. It involves much more than the simple ability to disseminate information (Kramer & Pier, 1999); it requires teachers to be facilitators in the social dynamics of classroom communication (Catt, Miller, & Schallenkamp, 2007). To develop transformational classrooms, teachers must be able to teach contextually and contextually, and embed in each lesson opportunities for reflective inquiry.

References


