

The Journey of the Accidental Dance Educator
By Fernadina Chan

Almost 40 years ago, I made a drastic change from studying physics to studying dance. I wanted to dance and make dance, not teach dance. I had no dance pedagogy or education training in my studies. Instead, I followed my advisor's recommendation to broaden my exposure to related arts and ventured into television production, filmmaking, lighting design and theater history to fill my electives. After graduation, I realized that being a dancer/choreographer was not a financially lucrative career. I took up teaching thinking that I would have time and money to support my *habit*. So I embarked on this career in dance education totally by default, unprepared as a teacher. I had no written curriculum to follow, just my problem-solving instinct as a choreographer. I never imagined that 30 years later, I would still be teaching in a public school and loving it.

Dance is perhaps the most misunderstood and undervalued discipline in academia. In ancient culture, dance was one's means of communication to God. In China, dance was a vital part of the scholar training during Confucius time. Unfortunately in modern society, people have lost touch with their own physical being and dance is no longer an integral part of their lives. In the artistic world, dance is often ranked far below music and fine arts (visual arts). This makes the job of a dance educator particularly challenging. We have to fight to be recognized as an art form not just another physical education activity, and we have to correct misconceptions that dance is a subject for girls only.

In my first 20 years of building the longest-standing dance program in a public school in Boston at English High School, one assistant headmaster closed the curtain on my

students in the middle of their performance because the bell rang. A guidance counselor once told my student that dance was a waste of time at school when she could just go out Saturday night and learn to dance. Despite the lack of support and the danger of being the first to be cut in time of budget crunches, I was able to help many students enrich their lives with dance. Some found the studio as a sanctuary from their chaotic lives. Some excelled through their kinesthetic intelligence beyond their special education instructors' wildest imagination. Some found their passion and calling as a dancer. Some just open up new ideas through dance. Witnessing these discoveries of my students and making my own discoveries and connections along the way sustained me on a rocky road and kept me in the field.

When I joined Boston Arts Academy (BAA) as a founding member in 1998, I thought I had reached paradise. I had students who auditioned to become a dance major, and I would have the next four years to train them. I had a blank slate to develop a curriculum according to the student outcomes we envision. Not being an important subject like math or language art in the eyes of the State Education Department is a blessing in disguise. Unlike my academic colleagues who have to give up some of their most innovative units because they do not fit the MCAS curriculum, the dance educators go on to invent and refine according to their vision. Nevertheless, as a school, we work hard together to cultivate the artist/scholar/citizen in our students, and impart upon them the BAA habits of the graduate: RICO (Refine, Invent, Connect and Own). As an artist/teacher, practicing these same habits, I have made some of my greatest discoveries and connections with my

art and created some of my most imaginative works on my students in my ten years at Boston Arts Academy.

Since I am neither a theorist nor a researcher, in this paper I share with you some of my personal discoveries and lessons learned in my 30 years of teaching and some of my pedagogical ideas developed at Boston Arts Academy. Although my work is very specific to dance, it is informed by some of the same principles found and practiced in other arts disciplines at BAA.

My Guiding Principles

Whether I was teaching a broad range of students in a comprehensive high school or the aspiring young dancers in a specialized arts high school, I have always been informed by my own standard as an artist and my own experience. The depth of the learning experience for the two groups might be different but the principles are the same.

- Provide students with a total experience in the art form to physically experience dance, learn specific movement vocabulary and articulate their body. Also provide the context of the movement they study to equip them with the ability to create and express through movement, as well as responding to works they see.
- Provide the students with the opportunity to see and experience much high quality art work in its natural form and in different disciplines. This means in the theater and concert hall performed live or in the gallery, not from a video or a book. The students need a visceral response to the actual work. At BAA, experiencing high quality art expands to include direct contact with master artists. They engage in

dialogue exchange or their art making process in our guest choreographer residencies.

Allow me to share my favorite story about the inspiration that master artists can bring to young people. Age has privileged me with the opportunity to meet early pioneers like Martha Graham and Hanya Holm. When Harvard University invited Katherine Dunham to speak in an open forum about five years ago, I jumped at the opportunity. I asked the organizer to let me bring a group of junior dancers from high school to the lecture. Dunham was in her nineties at the time. This lecture was in the late afternoon, after their normal school hours. Many of these juniors tried to get out of this mandatory assignment and asked to make up the work by watching video. I said absolutely NO. “How often do you get to meet someone so great and famous? At her age, how many more opportunities do you think you will have?” Reluctantly and unhappily they went, fearing that they would get a bad grade. You can guess the end of the story. They left the lecture fully inspired and actually thanked me for making them go. The following year, when they wrote their artist statement in their senior grant proposal, Dunham’s philosophy about art penetrated much of their writing.

- Believe that all students can achieve at a high level with guidance. Learn to trust the process, understanding that we need to allow time to develop the standard and culture. Uphold the standard but allow students with different learning styles to achieve the standard in different ways.

An anecdote here: I once had to choreograph a dance based on Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” for our first freshman class and I asked my dancers to help

me with images for movement. An experienced dancer who had danced for many years at a local studio before coming to BAA protested and asked why didn't I just tell them what to do. A decade later, involving dancers as collaborators in the creative process is a standard both in my choreography class as well as my own art making at BAA.

- Challenge dancers to broaden their horizon, to go beyond their comfort zone physically and mentally. While I validate where they came from and what they know, to stay within their familiar ground would be a disservice.
- In a specialized arts high school, allow the duality of artist and teacher to serve as a role model for students. As a life-long learner, I am constantly evolving as an artist, I share with students my own breakthrough in technique from my GYROKINESIS® training as well as my creative process in choreography which helps inform their own art making. As the artistic dean, last year I helped implement the first mini-sabbatical for a vocal teacher and a visual arts teacher to make art during the school year. Both reported that sharing their process and progress of their art projects with their students was the single most powerful experience and made a huge and significant impact on their relationship to their students as artists.

Pedagogical Ideas

My inspirations for my creative work and new ideas for lessons often intertwine. I explore the following three pedagogical ideas over and over again at BAA. They have become signature elements of my work.

1. Interdisciplinary Study

"Individuals demonstrate interdisciplinary understanding when they integrate knowledge and models of thinking from two or more disciplines in order to create products, raise questions, solve problems and offer explanations of the world around them that would not have been possible in a single discipline."

(Boix, Mansilla, & Gardner, 1996)

As a result of my own eclectic background and love of collaboration, an interdisciplinary approach deepens my understanding of the subject. Such an approach helps my divergent thinking and helps to make the connections that happen in the real world. Early on, through a teaching partnership with the math teacher, I engaged the dance students in his class to create a dance based on the quadratic equation. I never looked at the quadratic equation in so many different ways in my high school days. Figuring how to transform it into choreographic ideas in an abstract and non-representational way was an interesting challenge. Although this lesson was designed to produce an actual artistic product for our dance concert, its afterlife included adapting the idea into a choreographic study for my seniors and in presenting this interdisciplinary study in a workshop for the BAA faculty. The lesson inspired the new math faculty to eventually create a dance project in their angle study in geometry.

I also created interdisciplinary studies in a more traditional way: I taught Chinese dances and developed a short lecture-demonstration that chronicled the evolution of Chinese dance to accompany the China unit of their humanities course.

Aside from interdisciplinary study between arts and academics, my use of my brief study in filmmaking and television and my love of video helped my dance students create

dance sequences with the kinesthetic sense of the dancer and the design eyes of the videographer.

2. Integration of technology

Modern technology is a very *in* thing to include in our curriculum, and an excellent way to get students engaged. This generation of students grew up with it and are much savvier than many of the teachers. To avoid integrating technology in the curriculum just for the sake of using technology, I return to the question posed during my intensive exploration of sophisticated dance technology at Arizona State University: “Can you achieve the same result without using this particular technology?” With that always at the back of my mind, I have integrated technology most successfully in these three areas:



- Artistic expression

As a choreographer, I work with pre-recorded video, live video with multiple-cameras and multiple-projectors, as well as the software “Isadora” transforming movement into abstract images. While dancers on these projects can experience more sophisticated technological operations, students in my choreography class experiment with more simplistic technology, creating dance video with iMovie. Some students

with higher aptitude on technology venture into incorporating technology into their senior dance project.

- An assessment tool

Since the VHS camcorder days, watching a recording of their performance is the only way dancers can assess their own work. Our dance majors carefully study the video of their jury performance and reflect on their progress in technique and devise goals for the next year. They look at their senior dance project and talk about their artistic vision, images, choreographic structure and creative process. However, even with prompts guiding them, dancers often have a hard time verbalizing about dance and articulate their ideas without a visual reference. A free download program Video Paper Builder, in spite of its limitations and issues, has been a near perfect match for our assessment purpose. With this program, students can illustrate their ideas by referencing an exact moment in their video. They demonstrate their creative process by showing how a movement motif evolves from conception to the embellished stage. Seniors can create a portfolio that shows both their writing and artistic work. We also found that students are better engaged, with this tool, in deeper and more detailed reflection.

- A Teaching Tool

We have also begun to incorporate blog in our Dance History class. In our first attempt last year, we managed to post only our readings, homework and projects. We see lots of possibilities as we refine our design and find more innovative and effective way to use this technology. You can see our first attempt on <http://baadancehistory.blogspot.com/>.

This year, I use blog for my choreography class for juniors, uploading videos of their choreographic studies. I am hoping to experiment with comments from students on the videos. This is designed to help increase their verbal skills in articulating their ideas and giving critical responses to artistic work. You can visit this new blog on <http://baal1thgradechoreography.blogspot.com/>

Technology is here to stay. As with all other disciplines, we use it for research and presentation extensively. However, I am particularly interested in its application specifically for dance.

3. Experiential Learning

A colleague once observed of the dance teachers during faculty meeting that none of us ever sit still. As dancers we learned by moving. Asking a group of juniors to sit still after lunch and listen to dance history lectures or watch the much less dynamic dance video is not particularly effective to help them understand the context of what they practice in the studio every day. In our attempts to experience the evolution of western dance, we offered master classes in historical dances like Renaissance dances or dances by Isadora Duncan. For a deeper understanding, we brought in master teachers to reconstruct masterpieces like Doris Humphrey's "Water Study" and Jose Limon's "There is a Time." One year, our ballet master cleverly used the tale of "Canterville Ghost" and created the ballet "Haunted Castle" for the students that chronicled the development of ballet. His concert piece became a lesson in dance history. Availability of resources varies from year to year for projects mentioned above. Yet, we help the students connect by referencing what we do in our technique

classes. The choreographic ideas in the pieces presented in our dance concerts help illustrate the concepts presented in lectures. We always conclude with a major presentation where the students both talk and dance a part of the history. This project piloted with just the family tree of modern dance gradually expands to a more complex lecture-demonstration on the abbreviated history of western dance.

Senior Dance Project

Senior Dance Project is the exit requirement of all dance majors at Boston Arts Academy. All aspects of their four years of learning in dance must be synthesized into a fully-produced piece of choreography. This is perhaps the most representative example of my work, and gives you grounding for all of the disparate principles and pedagogical ideas presented earlier.

Before Boston Arts Academy, when I served on the committee to write the dance standards for the Boston Public Schools I wrote this sample dance product for grade 9-12 advanced level:

Create a dance (solo or group piece) based on any of these criteria: A literary work such as a poem or a visual arts piece as the source of inspiration, a social issue, or your research on a particular culture or historical event. The dance should contain a clear beginning, middle and end. The piece should show exploration of various formal elements and choreographic structures to arrive at the most effective expression of your chosen theme. The dance may be performed in silence or with accompaniment of music or spoken words. The creative process and the development of the dance should be documented by written journals, or notations (established or invented), or recorded on video. The final version should include a costume concept or design, and an idea for lighting. The dance

will be performed for the class and videotaped. A discussion will follow of the choices made and the strength and weakness of the piece based on criteria of evaluating dance discussed and established in class.

In many ways, Senior Dance Project expands on the idea of mirroring the process of real life choreographers. Unlike visual artists who make art all the time, dancers spend most of their four years training their instrument – their body. In choreography classes, they make shorter studies within a framework given by the teacher. If they have the opportunity to work with a choreographer like me who always engages the dancers as collaborators, they might have a more active role in the creative process of a major work. This is the very first time they develop their own idea or a theme into a dance, audition their own dancers, set up their rehearsal schedule, find music and costume and communicate with the lighting designer about the mood and lighting effect they envision for their dance. This is a major project for them.

The summer before their senior year, I send them off with Twyla Tharp's The Creative Habit for summer reading and a journal for ideas that come to mind about a theme to explore. When they return in fall, my teaching partner and I help them sort out these ideas. We push them to go beyond their usual teenage angst for theme and guide them with ways to explore these ideas in movement. We review choreographic devices they learned and show them samples of work by professional choreographers that can inform their process. An example is Bill T Jones' workshops with terminally ill community in his process of creating *Still/Here*.

While the two teachers each take half of the class to mentor through the process, we have three formal showings of work-in-progress where both teachers, and sometimes other dance faculty and students, will provide feedback on each piece. In the first showing, students show movement motifs based on their theme. For the second showing, the choreographers show sections of their piece with dancers they have chosen from the audition. By the third showing, which is about three weeks prior to their concert, they will finish a rough draft of their piece and complete their artist statement. This is a very critical showing where a panel of invited professional choreographers will view their work. The invited panel provides feedback and suggestions rather than evaluation. In between the showings, teacher advisors will work with individual choreographers. After the third showing, they will also help the choreographers incorporate the panel's feedback into their final revision, and grant the final approval of their eligibility for the concert.

Through this project, the students demonstrate achievement of a certain level of technical and performance skills. They know how to express ideas through choreographic devices, and understand their own aesthetic influences. The citizen aspect of our triad – artist/scholar/citizen – is not prominent, and is more reflected in the school-wide Senior Project requirement. Still, the Senior Dance Project demands the strong duality of artist/scholar. To carry out this project successfully, students must employ every habit of the graduate: Refine, Invent, Connect and Own. In the end, even if they never create another dance after they leave BAA, they will be ready to take on other major projects in other important disciplines.

The project is not over when the final curtain comes down on the concert. As I mentioned earlier, they must do their final reflection using the video of their process from the beginning to the final product (the three showings and their performance) and compile all the writings with Video Paper Builder. Their digital portfolio is published as a webpage.

Conclusion:

As I reflect on my 30 years of work, I see that this journey of a dance educator is long, windy and never ending. The beauty of it is around every bend, which opens into a whole new horizon. After these decades of practice, I am still constantly in trial-and-error mode, adapting to the changes in time, population and advancement of technology, and figuring out how to draw the best out of our students. I have no simple formula for success. My advancements rise through my passion, curiosity, a sense of humbleness and an absolute conviction in the power of arts education.