

Arizona State Music Teachers Association 2015 Conference Presentation
Collaborating Across Disciplines - An Integrative Approach to Performing Arts Education

Understanding and Facilitating Collaborative Interdisciplinary Productions
by Janaea Lyn McAlee, Residential Dance Faculty at Estrella Mountain Community College

Introduction

A creative process which equally involves participants in all three disciplines is the premise underlying the idea of collaborating across disciplines. This article is intended to provide performing arts educators with an overview of general concepts and collaborative skills necessary for the creation of performance work which integrates dance, music and theatre. The core concepts presented here are intended to be of use to all educators (and professionals as well) as the specific content can be adapted for the ages and levels of the participants. For everyone involved, a supportive, inclusive and safe environment to experiment, create and communicate provides the foundation within which collaborative work can develop.

A Way of Thinking and Communicating About Collaboration

While both training and production preparation in the performing arts inherently involves collaborating in groups, this is often only a discipline specific experience. People work closely within each area - dancers with dancers, actors with actors and musicians with musicians, but this same level of time intensive group interaction is rarely engaged in across disciplines, either by students or faculty.

In an educational context, performing arts instructors with the desire to work together using a collaborative and cross-disciplinary approach is essential. This requires a shared commitment to process, experimentation and choice-making in developing a production over time. In addition to technique and compositional expertise in their respective fields, faculty must also share basic knowledge of the other fields, have knowledge of and experience with creating collaborative work, and develop their own way of communicating as collaborators across disciplines. To effectively facilitate and mentor their students through their own collaborative process, faculty must model this process in real time. When students must see firsthand the sharing of ideas, disagreements and resolutions that occur among educators in shaping the production as a whole, it illustrates how to successfully engage in this complicated process.

Many metaphors have been used to describe the nature of collaboration, but when discussing the performing arts I believe the most useful metaphor is that of language. Language allows us to communicate and connect with others, but it also distances us when we do not understand what is being communicated, or we are not understood by others. Our shared human experience can transcend this to some degree. Anyone who has traveled somewhere they did not speak the language and has attempted express themselves through gesture, sound and movement to be understood has experienced this firsthand. But even when we can successfully translate basic ideas across gaps in language and culture, this form of communicating is limited at best and a richer discourse cannot emerge. Dance, music and theatre each have their own respective languages and shorthand. Styles within each discipline can be likened to dialects. For effective collaboration,

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the goal is not to speak or comprehend to the same degree as someone who is fluent, but to learn and understand basic vocabulary and common usage, not unlike a respectful traveler to foreign culture.

Collaborative Skills and Technique Training

Therefore, the foundation for approaching collaborative work by faculty and students is the development of a working knowledge of dance, music and theatre vocabulary and concepts. Performing arts educators must initially provide this information so successful interactions among the students can occur. Then they will function as translators throughout the process when misunderstandings and miscommunication inevitably occurs.

A distinct and secondary set of collaborative skills is necessary for applying this working knowledge of respective disciplines to an integrative process. It is often useful to begin with identifying commonalities – the ways in which performing artists are actually saying the same thing but calling it by different names. Sometimes it is a simple but critical difference in how something is commonly stated and understood. A classic example of this is the common counting pattern of “5, 6, 7, 8” you often hear dancers say before beginning to move. This is a limiting way of counting, which does establish tempo, but is not effective when a dancer needs to communicate with a musician, a composer, follow a score or deconstruct a piece of music on CD. There is no “5, 6, 7, 8” in music, it would instead be the second bar of a two bar phrase in a 4-4 time signature. This becomes a critical distinction and frequently is a common and time consuming reason for a breakdown in communication which can be easily rectified.

Similarly, musicians often begin playing without understanding that dancers need to be in place and cued with the tempo stated in advance (i.e. counting out the first bar at tempo). This is something even conductors do not always take into account. Often the musicians start playing when they are ready but not thinking to cue the dancers that they are about to begin. Or perhaps cueing the dancers but then speeding up or slowing down the tempo as they interpret the music, and not watching to see how those choices affect the dancer’s ability to execute their choreography.

I encourage layering in an understanding of other art forms and the language skills needed to communicate with other artists more effectively into traditional technique training. For example, to help dancers collaborate more effectively with musicians, it is preferable to teach them to count the bars musically in 4-4 time, and to count them as **1**234, **2**234, etc. This enables all students to understand that two bars of 4-4 time constitute that same 8 count movement phrase. This also allows for mathematical coordination of music bars with dance phrases, which can be charted out. Performers can know where they are simultaneously so

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they can begin rehearsing together at any point. This approach can also make a big difference in preparing dancers to work with more complex and/or varying time signatures, composers and musicians.

Musicians can learn to become sensitive to the fact that even small adjustments in tempo have a big impact on a dancer's ability to successfully execute a given movement. Even when a tempo has been established, eye contact needs to be maintained to allow for ongoing communication. This is often a new skill for classical musicians who are used to staying focused on reading their score. Their experience with dance, musical and/or theatrical productions is generally in the role of accompanist, and they are often invisible to the audience (and performers) in the orchestra pit. To be able to be more fully integrated into a production onstage musicians must learn how and when to be able to look up from their score. Even more important, is the ability to memorize composed music in the same way actors learn to memorize text. Once this is achieved they can become an active part of the stage experience, whether exclusively as a musician or in other types of roles. The experience of performing independent of reading a score can also help musicians develop a kinesthetic sense of what dancers and actors are experiencing and communicating, which they in turn can support and enhance through their musical phrasing.

In theatre, discovery and the development of a character with a full and rich life is an essential aspect of the craft. In collaborative work this is an important but often overlooked step for dancers and musicians. By using acting techniques to develop a "back story" about their character, with an identity and relationship to the content of the production, the movements or melodies they are performing take on a heightened relevance. Many actors take movement and voice classes to learn to develop the physical and vocal life of their characters, but they do not always understand that their physical decisions can also provide material for dancers which they can develop more fully into their choreography. Similarly, vocal inflection and phrasing can be inspiration for music and underscoring, while gestures and musical motifs can inform the choices actors make. All of these interactions can provide reciprocal motivation and emphasize or de-emphasize moments of character development and plot.

Once dancers, musicians and actors become more fluent in all three languages they come to understand that a musician's "fermata" is same as the dancers "suspension" and the actors "dramatic pause." Once a shared definition of terms exists, the real work of conversing skillfully and effectively communicating across disciplines can occur.

Structural Differences

Sometimes the problems that occur in collaboration require understanding the learning process that is inherent to each discipline. For example, dance creation and rehearsal is generally more time intensive

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because there is no script or score to follow or refer to. Often musicians prefer to rehearse separately from other performers until the music is polished and then put things together at the end. But this does not lead to a true collaboration because the artistic decisions are being made independently of one another. This is not unlike two actors rehearsing their part of a scripted conversation separately, and then putting the conversation together once or twice and then performing it onstage. The final product may have the semblance of a conversation, but none of the immediacy that comes from actually having a conversation in the context of a relationship, or taking the time to explore all the possible nuances that conversation may contain. When performers work together throughout the process these organic relationships can develop and artistic choices which support and further the stated intention can be made jointly.

It is especially important that students understand this does not mean to come to rehearsal unprepared. Rather that it means coming very prepared and then being open to what working with the other collaborators in rehearsal will generate for everyone. This means being able and willing to change, redo and prepare over and over again. To understand and be patient with the process each performer requires to integrate these changes, and to actively participate in the very messy, playful, frustrating and exhilarating experience of a process, trusting an authentic product will result.

Stages of Collaboration

It is useful to begin with brainstorming sessions in order to find an overarching intention which provides a Theme which will lend itself to participation by all disciplines. This can be established by the faculty collaborators or can be student initiated or influenced. Either way, it should be one that interests and intrigues the participants so they will be motivated to bring ideas and energy to the project throughout the creative process. Next is deciding on a Working Title to reflect the chosen theme and focus creative contributions.

For large ensembles, a useful approach is to group students into smaller units combining performers of different disciplines. This can be done by assignment, by choice or by chance. Each group's assignment is to select an idea and an intention for a scene section or "playlet" which relates to the larger theme and a working title which reflects the content they will develop. Ideally, titles should give the audience a clue as to the subject matter contained within. For example, one student production my colleagues and I facilitated was based on stories inspired by tattoos. This was the larger theme and the chosen title was **Beneath the Ink**. Each individual story had its own title to reflect that part of the production, such as *Right of Passage*, *Signs of Redemption* and *Me*. Once the intention was clear, collaborators within each group determined a basic approach to their use of dance, music and theatre to support their concept and specific content.

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With a theme and working title in place, collaborators can individually and collectively develop ideas, motifs and phrases. Performer/creators may have to first spend some time developing material in their respective disciplines. This collection of possibilities can then be brought back to the group for artistic play and experimentation. A shape begins to develop as the artists respond to each other's work and once a good level of communication, creativity and trust is in place the next challenge is which choices to make.

Determining and revising artistic choices often proves to be the most difficult aspect of any creative project. Collaboration is time intensive and process driven, but most importantly *the primary commitment is to the work being created, not to either the faculty or students' personal vision or material*. While there can be a designated director(s), this role requires a more democratic than declarative approach. The theme and working title serve to keep the focus on furthering the content and the arc of the piece. Not all decisions will go smoothly or democratically and this is the stage where faculty facilitation and mentoring become essential. For faculty new to this process, this can be a good time to bring in colleagues or professional artists to give feedback and guidance, while substantive changes can still be integrated.

Another critical issue of concern is the power and personality dynamic of each group. As educators, each individual needs to be integrated and involved in the best way to further their own growth in all areas - technically, creatively and inter-personally. Ongoing facilitation in the form of "checking in" is necessary so that faculty members can facilitate or intervene as needed to keep all aspects of the educational experience on track. Ideally, this should be done by faculty in all three disciplines so communication and artistic issues can successfully be addressed and resolved. As the performing arts are intimate and self-revelatory by nature, an atmosphere of acknowledgement and encouragement is important for all involved at every stage of the collaboration. When educators provide guidelines and language that model a constructive feedback dialogue, students learn how to be supportive and non-judgmental of one another during this complex process.

Once some initial choices are made and a structure starts to take shape, a new momentum begins to emerge. Sometimes the collaborators require more intensive time together refining a particular passage. At other times individual rehearsal is needed to work through the technical challenges of mastering the material. After this process is substantially underway the individual sections can be brought together initially to see how they best fit together with basic compositional integrity. Faculty direction regarding theatrical devices and transitional material will help to connect them into a cohesive production.

Throughout this evolving process, the educator/directors help guide each collaborative project while concurrently maintaining a production timeline. This is a parallel job of allowing enough time for real discovery, and then assisting with choices which support the larger vision of how the scenes and/or sections will combine into a cohesive production. To facilitate this it is important that faculty maintain their own

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communication in regular meetings to review and assess both the progress of the individual groups and the production overall.

Techniques and Traps

Using basic acting tools for defining one's character by is very important for developing material in theatre, dance and music. Start with facts such Name, Gender, Age, Profession, Socio-economic status, Education, General Physical Characteristics, and General Personality Traits. Next comes some inner images associated with the physical and emotional life of this character. These inform the specific use of the body, including posture, movement, tempo, rhythm and individual habits, as well as voice pitch, timbre, speech patterns and manner of speaking (formal, slang, etc.). The given circumstances of the scene are the setting, situation, the character's desires and fears, and their relationship to the other characters. This information informs the ways in which a character changes and grows, and shapes how the performer's choices affect the given plot and the other participants involved.

From dance we can borrow some compositional tools such as Levels, Focus, Symmetry/Asymmetry, Weight, Facings, Locomotion, Dynamics, Improvisation, Unison and Patterning. From music we add Rhythm, Phrasing, Counterpoint, Cannon and Call and Response. Experimenting with different styles and uses of music and sound scores also can result in different experiences of the same material as humorous, dark or moving.

It is important to be mindful of traps and clichés, and when they are or are not useful in furthering the intention of the piece. Clothing, fabric and overall costuming can add either elements of reality or abstraction, while props can enhance symbolism, ritual, humor and tragedy. When interpreting music it is important to be aware of when it is or is not useful to be overly literal regarding style and structure. Always beginning and ending at the same time can become predictable. If performers are moving, speaking and playing all of the time, it can pull focus from the central action, unless cacophony is the intended result. It is especially important to thoughtfully use stillness and silence, as they can often be the most powerful choices to make.

Importance in Artistic Development

Cultivating the skills to work collaboratively across disciplines provides students and teachers with many rewards. As performers they learn to connect more intimately and authentically with others in the shared experience of live performance. As professionals they will become more employable in a range of productions. As creators they will gain a wealth of languages to speak in. As audience members they will attain a deeper understanding of what they are seeing. As human beings they will develop enhanced respect for the diversity of experience and forms of expression by other people and cultures.