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Collaborative Dance Making
workshop, Estrella Mountain
Community College.
Photo by Linda Keyes.

Collaborative Dance Making: **Philosophy and Practice**

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I share my approach to collaborative dance making. I use this in both workshop settings with learners of all ages and abilities, and as a more complex process for developing full productions with community college students. I describe the basic practice as well as the philosophy that informs my work, which is designed to foster connection and communication through dance. This is followed by a description of a more in-depth application of this cooperative choreographic process within which students can express their personal stories as part of a larger theme in a fully produced performance. The role of educator as facilitator in this process is key, and so I share strategies for faculty and peer mentoring as well as specific feedback techniques.

Dance can be a powerful tool for bringing people together. Distinctions of culture, aesthetics, and athleticism in dance, however, can alienate some individuals who might not see themselves as fitting into a given dance environment. In an educational context, these distinctions can be bridged through creative approaches that honor what each student brings to the studio. This includes lived experience in addition to learned or personal movement styles.

To this end, I developed a process of collaborative dance making. Participants work collectively to make choices and mutually create dance material that expresses an agreed-on intention or theme. With a primary focus on cultivating a culture of empathy and respect, my collaborative process integrates movement styles, cultural contexts, and personal experiences into a student-driven, faculty-mentored experience.

The power of a truly collaborative process is that students share and discover connections and commonalities. Through the blending of their personal contributions, a unique movement language for each dance emerges. Additionally, by initially focusing on movement development to express ideas, dance becomes informed by creativity, aesthetics, and cultural and social associations, rather than primarily as an expression of music or lyrics.

This collaborative process can enhance learning in other areas because the development of creative thinking skills is integral to this approach. When students work together to problem solve, their overall experience of learning, evaluating, and assessing becomes rooted in positive reinforcement and shared accomplishment, rather than criticism and competition. A supportive atmosphere encourages creative risk taking and underscores the importance of effort in achieving goals, whether in dance or in other subject areas. Confidence deepens their ability to receive and give constructive feedback.

I see my role in collaborative dance making as a facilitator, guiding participants throughout the creative process, assisting with movement generation and compositional

techniques, but the resulting study or dance is the students' work. This is distinct from the approach some choreographers use that directs dancers to generate movement, and then the choreographer forms that movement into a dance.

Although this process evolved over my years of working with college students, it can easily be adapted for use by dance educators working with various ages and abilities and explored in a single workshop or throughout a semester in a choreography or performance class.

WORKSHOP MODEL FOR COLLABORATIVE DANCE MAKING

Participants begin by forming a circle, and I explain that we are going to be working on a theme of introductions, as in introducing ourselves to each other, to create dances with the working title of "Getting to Know You." We start with simple "hello" movement motifs. I demonstrate my "hello" motif and then ask the students to turn away from the circle and create their own. The practice of facing in and away from the circle creates a distinction between creating and sharing work. It also helps me to identify who might need assistance. I encourage students to be creative with their motif so it reflects their personality, or the rhythm of their name. The rule is to keep it simple with a clear beginning and ending that can be easily repeated three times.

When the students are ready, they turn back into the circle. Participants then introduce themselves by sharing their motif (they can also say their name). One common error or misinterpretation is that students hit a pose, and I show them how I am asking for a motif that is a moving thought, not a static picture. Another result is that they try to do too much with turns or jumps. This is already complex, so a simple motif involving the torso, a specific use of focus, and a gesture is best for this first experience. I often help identify an ending as students might begin a beautiful and clear motion but let it dissolve or just drop. I explain that their motif will serve as the reference point for further development, and that it must be able to be repeated, varied, or connected to new movements.

Introducing Compositional Tools and Variations

Once everyone has a clearly defined motif, we discuss the movement dynamics of sustained (or continuous) and sharp (or percussive). I present my motif again and clarify which it is. Students then determine which dynamic is present in their motif. If there is more than one or it is not clearly defined, I ask them to pick either sustained or sharp and be consistent. All the sustained motifs are shown at the same time, as the others watch, and then they switch groups.

With an original motif and a defined dynamic, we move to Variation 1. This is when the students perform their original motif with the opposite dynamic. After demonstrating, I ask them to turn away and practice their Variation 1. Now the students have two movements, an original motif and a variation on their motif using dynamics.

If I am working with younger learners, or I have less time, I might introduce the transitional material described next sooner. Otherwise, I continue by adding the tool of levels and introduce them as follows:

- ◆ Ground
- ◆ Low
- ◆ Neutral
- ◆ High
- ◆ Aerial

For Variation 2, students are asked to combine their original motif and dynamic with a level change. Variation 3 combines their Variation 1 (original motif and opposite dynamic) with a different level change. At this point, each student has a motif and three variations, which are to be considered the building blocks for what will become their “A” phrase. This can be written on the board as follows:

- ◆ Motif & Original Dynamic (Sustained or Sharp)
- ◆ Variation 1 (Motif & Opposite Dynamic)
- ◆ Variation 2 (Motif & Original Dynamic+Level Change)
- ◆ Variation 3 (Motif & Opposite Dynamic+New Level Change)

At each step, I continue to model what I am asking of them and invite questions to provide clarification. Participants continue to turn away to create and then face into the group to share.

Transitional Material: Connecting Ideas with Movement Grammar

Dance is the hidden language of the soul.

—Martha Graham (1985)

Now I reference written and spoken language. Using the example of sentence construction, I explain that each sentence is made up of primary and secondary words that are equally necessary to create a complete thought. The same is true in dance, just like Graham’s quote expresses. I define transitional material as movements not as important as the main movement ideas but essential for connecting those motifs and variations into a cohesive and expressive movement phrase. Using a clear shift of direction, a range of locomotor movements (walk, glide hop, etc.), or lowering weight to the floor can all serve as transitions to connect variations.

The dancers are instructed to pick an interesting opening position that lends itself to moving into their original motif. They are asked to add transitional movements wherever they decide makes the most sense to connect their motif and variations into a movement phrase. For clarity, they must connect their motif and variations in the same order that is on the board but do not necessarily have to have a transition between each. Their choice and placement of transitions should feel organic and logical from a movement development standpoint. I encourage them

to connect variations and transitions using breath and noticing where their weight takes them to provide the phrasing rather than using counts. Once completed, students have an “A” phrase with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Everyone presents for the group while still in a circle.



Collaborative Dance Making workshop, Estrella Mountain Community College. Photo by Linda Keyes.

Collaborative Composition

The next step in this process is breaking the circle into two lines so that students face one another to express the idea of introduction as a conversation in duets. Each pair “introduces themselves” simultaneously so they see what emerges when their phrases happen concurrently. Now that each dancer has his or her own “A” phrase, a shared intention, and vocabulary for basic dance composition, each duet (or trio if there is an odd number) can begin to create cooperatively. The first assignment is to study each other’s “A” phrase and decide together how to best combine them. There are several ways to begin, and I suggest approaches they might already have familiarity with, such as repetition, canon, call and response, and facing changes. I remind them the goal is making choices together to create a dance study combining their motifs and “A” phrases on the theme of introduction.

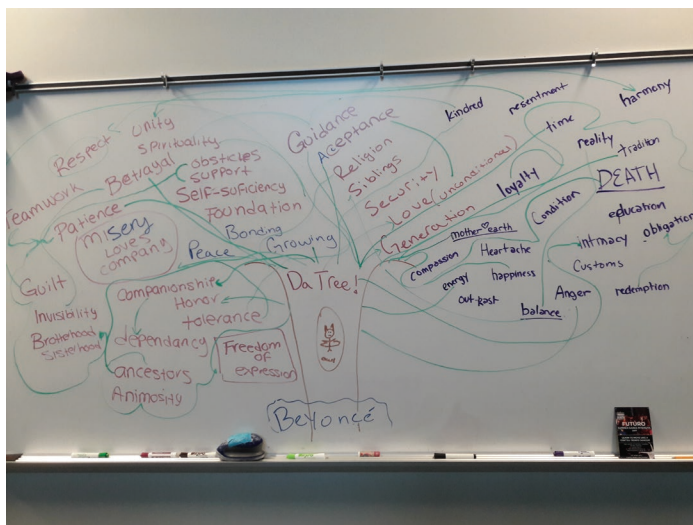
I check in with each group as they are working, helping with simple suggestions and clarification as needed. Once the duet studies are completed they are shown to the rest of the class, and then dancers combine pairs to create larger groups of four to six. Once again, dancers begin by performing their duet studies concurrently in their group so they can all see what naturally occurs. Now, they begin making decisions about creating a group dance through combining their movement material and using basic choreographic forms, patterns, and groupings in more complex ways.

Observation and Feedback

Words can inspire. And words can destroy. Choose yours well.

—Robin Sharma (n.d.)

Each group presents their dance study to the rest of the class for feedback and the one rule I establish is always to offer a compliment before a suggestion. One of the most interesting and consistent observations is how complete the studies look to the student observer. The power of shared intention is that it creates a cohesiveness that unison dancing rarely achieves.



Process board for DancEstrella.

Using language and dance vocabulary that is appropriate for each class and length of time, I ask the students to consider these questions: What did you see? What is the story that seems to be unfolding? I then identify compositional structures evident in a group study and give simple suggestions to revise the ordering of movements, transitions, or facings. The dancers repeat their study with these changes, which are compared and discussed. This helps the students to see the choreographic and expressive impact of different choices and how they can heighten or diminish the intention behind a dance.

Now the student and audience members are included in the decision-making process. I ask them to think about what choices might strengthen what they see happening between the dancers in the group and assign individuals with specific tasks such as choosing different facings, which dancer starts first, or reorganizing the starting formation. This introduces the idea of peers as collaborators both within the creative process and as observers, reflecting back what they see and offering constructive feedback.

FROM PROCESS TO PRODUCT

I regularly use collaborative dance making with DancEstrella, the student performance company at the community college where I teach. As artistic director, I do not hold auditions. Although not a requirement for using this approach, I have found that my nonrestrictive policy provides an enhanced experience for everyone, as participants bring very diverse life experiences and movement languages to the group process. Before directly cocreating dances, students participate in the introductory experience so everyone can become familiar with the process. In this way there is no initial pressure of an end goal, and an atmosphere of play and exploration is established.

Regardless of the performance class or context in which collaborative dance making is used, it is important that ground rules are outlined in a student-engaged contract. This should define a class culture based on respect, empa-

thy, and cooperation with behavioral expectations and accountability clearly stated.

Establishing a Theme

If there were only one truth you couldn't paint a hundred canvases on the same theme.

—Pablo Picasso (n.d.)

To begin, I propose a broad theme with an accompanying inspirational quote. Once this or another topic resonates with the class, I facilitate a brainstorming session to identify words, ideas, and feelings it evokes. This process helps the students feel more comfortable sharing and learning about each other. As Picasso's quote indicates, there are many ways to approach any given theme.

The photograph of our process board illustrates an initial discussion on the theme of family tree, inspired by Kabir's (2002) quote, "The world of man dances in laughter and tears" (80). This raw material provided students with a range of approaches to interpret the idea of family, personally, choreographically, and theatrically. The final production was titled *Our Family Tree*, and the promotional design was also a collaborative endeavor inspired by the tree drawn on the board (Figure 1).

After the group decides on a theme, students are assigned to bring in a movement motif based on an aspect of the theme they wish to explore as well as (1) a quote, lyric, or line of text;



Figure 1. *Our Family Tree* program cover. Photo by Bill Nkumzumwami.

(2) a visual image; and (3) their backstory. While in a circle, each dancer presents his or her kinesthetic, visual, literary, and personal inspiration. Sharing individual histories can be evocative, and students who find it difficult to talk about emotional, abusive, or traumatic experiences are often drawn to dance as a nonverbal form of expression. This environment is intended to give them the safety to express themselves with the support of, and engagement with, other students. Through bearing witness and sharing vulnerabilities, bonding naturally occurs.

Setting the Groups

After the class looks at all the different motifs and listens to the backstories, we combine dancers. Beginning with similar ideas

or complementary movement motifs, after trial, error, and discussion, several groups ranging from two to five students are set as cocollaborators. When working with dancers who have more experience with choreography or collaborative dance making, I often include them in groupings with those students who do not. I am also mindful of any other issues between specific individuals that might adversely affect interpersonal communication and interaction when casting is finalized.

Students spend time learning and experimenting with compositional tools and forms for movement development, and I provide a handout for reference (Figure 2). Each dancer is then assigned to work independently to create his or her own “A” phrase and to share it with his or her partners. Now each group discusses their original

Choreography: Basic Definitions and Compositional Tools – Professor McAlee

KEY CONCEPTS:

- *Choreography*: Movements which are developed into a dance using Tools to express an Intention.
- *Composition*: The structure and form of the dance.
- *Collaboration*: Working cooperatively to compose and choreograph a dance on a shared theme.
- *Critique*: Feedback to choreographer which is helpful and objective not subjective (personal).

FOUNDATIONS:

- *Intention*: The idea or theme the choreographer wishes to express in movement. All choreographic, compositional and theatrical decisions will be made to support and communicate this idea.
- *Working Title*: a word or phrase that captures the Intention. Can be changed into a final title later.
- *Backstory*: the inspiration and/or experiences that the Intention is based on.
- *Motif*: a kernel of movement which captures the essence of the intention and lends itself to further development and variations using tools.

TOOLS:

- *Dynamics*: movement duration combined with energy: e.g. sustained or sharp, and these can be separate or combined
- *Levels*: floor, low (plie), flat (neutral), high (relevé), air (jump)
- *Locomotion*: to move through space e.g. walk, glide, skip, hop, jump, leap, roll, crawl etc.
- *Symmetry/ Asymmetry*: same on both sides of the body, /not the same on both sides.
- *Weight*: consciously crafted relationship to gravity - heavy, bound, resistance, weightless, etc.
- *Facings*: Up Stage, Down Stage, Center Stage, Stage Right, Stage Left, Diagonals, Profile
- *Focus*: low, out, high, in, direct, indirect, up

OTHER:

- *Improvisation*: using a task or idea to generate a flow of movement ideas without editing or judging.
- *Stillness & Silence*: never underestimate the power of pausing with intention and presence.
- *Phrasing*: accents, suspension, speed etc.
- *Audience*: what is performer(s) relationship to the viewer?
- *Environment*: where is dance taking place and how does this inform your relationship to the space?
- *Unison, canon, call & response*: use of parallel, subsequent and conversational movement.
- *Pattern*: use of bodies spatially, lines vs. curves, etc. onstage.
- *Groupings*: how are multiple bodies moving onstage at the same time? e.g. solo + duet in a trio.

CRITIQUE (FEEDBACK) GUIDELINES:

- Compliment before a Suggestion!
- Your goal is to reflect what you see and give the choreographer concrete suggestions using compositional tools to help them accomplish their intention.
- Avoid *Subjective* language, e.g. “I liked it; it was good; dope; exciting OR ugly; weird; don’t get it.”
- Instead use *Objective* language, e.g. “Perhaps if you tried changing the dancer’s focus from out to down after the pirouette, it may more effectively convey the idea of self-doubt that you are intending in this section of the dance.”

REMEMBER:

- All movement and staging choices should reflect and support your stated Intention.
- Don’t be afraid to experiment or improvise
- Don’t edit or judge yourself as you work.

Figure 2. Choreography: Basic definitions and compositional tools.



The Fire Within, collaborative choreography by DancEstrella.
Photo by Jim Heinrich.

ideas and decides how to combine them into a cohesive approach with a working title, image, and quote they all agree on. This new shared intention becomes the foundation for individual contribution and collective decision.

Shared Movements as Source Material

I can make up a thousand steps; my problem is deciding what to keep.

—Mark Morris (1990, 25541)

Dancers engage in a creative process period without music so movement remains the primary focus. Students learn each other's phrases and deconstruct or combine material to develop new variations and phrases. I mentor both individuals and groups as they invariably hit snags. Often, this involves improving communication, but I also assist with movement development and compositional structure by suggesting improvisational and choreographic forms or providing guidance with technique and partnering.

In addition, students become peer mentors. Those who have previously participated in this process are often assigned as the "point person" for each group. They assist others for whom this process is new and often very different from the common experience of learning predetermined steps set to music. Ongoing showings include nonsubjective feedback with a focus on craft by asking questions and offering specific choreographic suggestions to support and strengthen the intention of the collaborators. I invite the students to speak first, saving my own input until the end so it does not color the students' comments or the direction of a dance. As the Morris quote indicates, there is often more than enough movement material, but the student choreographers learn to sift through what they have generated to make a cohesive and communicative piece.

Adding Production Elements

As each piece takes shape, I assist with the process of selecting and approving music. The idea is that the dance contin-

ues to be shaped by the movement and not the music, so I do not allow music with lyrics to be used. As we transition into rehearsal and preproduction, I shift to a more traditional artistic director role but decisions about the program order, lighting, costuming, and other theatrical elements are also made with company input. After every concert, there is a talk back with the audience. This exchange gives students an opportunity to learn how to speak publicly about their process, and to receive audience comments and questions.

CONCLUSION

A collaboration is a piece of work that has been produced as the result of people or groups working together.

—Collins Dictionary (n.d.)

The process concludes with the company watching the video of the full production and having an in-depth discussion. Each student shares his or her experience, both lived and now observed, of the group's dance and process, the production, and the talk back. This important step takes the collaborative dance-making process from collective conception through creation and presentation to assessment and reflection.

Collaborative dance making encompasses a series of choreographic choices that serve the intention a group has decided on collectively. This philosophy is the guideline that establishes and supports cooperative engagement. The making of the dance becomes more important than any one individual's contribution, and yet would not exist without everyone's contribution, a dancing definition of collaboration!

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