

Welcoming Diverse Populations

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Who are your dancers? Who is missing from your dance floor, and why? We'll examine ways to reach out to more diverse populations and how to make a more welcoming dance community for everyone. Bring an anecdote to share about a magic moment, or something you'd do differently. Participants will leave with a list of ways to reach new dancers, and make an inclusive dance "commons" that brings them back a second time!

Introduction

The workshop is not constructed as an expert model, but more as a "group think" about this set of issues.

We tend to a very white community, and while that is important to examine, when we say "diversity," we are not simply talking about race and ethnicity, but about what might make any person feel comfortable (or uncomfortable) about participating in our dance events.

Who is currently well represented? Who will I see there when I walk in the door?

Of course this varies in different communities, and may change over time. At this workshop, this is what small groups said:

Well represented

- Anglo (the tradition comes from Anglo roots)
- Pretty good age range overall
- People of any sexual orientation (in some communities)
- Various income levels

Less often present

- Different races, ethnicities; new immigrants
- Parents and young children
- People of any sexual orientation (in some communities)
- People who don't drive

Some other differences we discussed:

- Differing body types
- Varying dietary concerns
- Sensitivity to scents
- Religious diversity
- Various political perspectives
- Diverse language background
- People with a range of abilities and disabilities (physical and cognitive)
- People with different degrees of tolerance for energetic dancing

In general, we agreed that not every dance can please everyone. For example, welcoming people with a wider range of physical ability is likely to change the character or pace of the dancing that is possible, and dancers may or may not welcome such a change. However, there are certainly examples of groups that have opted to support greater diversity of a certain kind in a conscious way. Examples include gender-free dance communities, and BIDA (Boston Intergenerational Dance Advocates), which came into being to address what was seen as a lack of intergenerational interaction in Boston area dances.

One concern expressed at the workshop was that our communities might not always be as accepting as they claim to be. For example, participants expressed the feeling that they are often not asked to dance if others perceive them as unattractive, because of age or weight or some other physical characteristic, or simply because others do not know them. People seem to dance within a cohort (of friends, or neighbours, or people who look like them) more easily than outside of it.

Sociologists study the idea that “groupish-ness” may be hard-wired. Nevertheless, there is also an impulse that is frequently articulated in our dance communities that we be welcoming, and this notion is a big part of what we think of as dance culture. The dance floor is seen as a “commons” – a democratic space where everyone can be included, and enjoy interacting with and supporting one another.

In order to welcome and reach out to more diverse dancers (new audiences), an important first step is to identify the benefits of your dance. What is your “pitch” to the new dancer?

Articulating benefits of your dance – what’s good about it?

- Healthy touch and connection
- No partner skill needed
- Designed to be accepting
- Connecting with history
- Creates a social scene, community (social capital)
- Meet a lot of people
- Designed to be healthy
- Intergenerational

How to reach different people: Ideas around new methods and new places to grow audiences

Where else do you put those posters? What other organizations can we connect with? How do we expand “word of mouth” to different ears?

- Senior centers – demos in these centers
- Ensuring images on publicity reflect all the people you are trying to reach
- Car pool/bus stop as a meeting place for facilitating car-pooling and getting to a dance
- Sliding scale for dance admission
- Reach out to / advertise to other dance communities: ballroom, salsa dancing, etc.; encourage cross-over
- “Connect the dots” dancing with a mix of styles

Behaviors that might make us more welcoming of diversity:

The last part of the workshop focused on solutions to make people more comfortable. We divided into four groups to look at solutions to such complaints as: “Nobody here looks like me,” or “I can’t come to the dance with my young child,” or “The folks ‘in the know’ always dance together,” or “People at the dance creep me out,” or “Everyone assumes I think just like them,” or “The caller goes too fast and I don’t understand,” etc.

We divided into four groups to brainstorm (1) solutions about age, (2) solutions about money or people having trouble getting to the dance (accessibility), (3) solutions about personal space/confusing interactions, and (4) solutions about exclusivity (“No one asks me to dance”). Afterwards we generated a list of a few ideas we might bring back to our dance communities:

- More bilingual / French
- Calling in French
- Outreach for youth leadership – play, dance, call etc.
- Reach out to other dance groups and ask to share an evening
- Images/graphics – diversify
- Prepare your existing dancers ahead
- Discounts for bringing in new folks, green discounts for car poolers
- Encourage more dancing with newcomers

Sophia and Julia concluded the workshop by asking us to continue the conversation!