

# **TEACHING EAST AFRICAN DANCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE U.S.: RECONCILING CONTENT AND PEDAGOGY**

**Alfdaniels Mabingo**

Fulbright Exchange Graduate Student and Adjunct Faculty of East African Dance  
Program in Dance Education, New York University  
MA Dance Education, New York University

## **Background**

Higher education institutions in the United States have integrated Africa dance courses into academic programs and curriculum. Previously, "the usual course concentration in dance departments have been on concert dance forms derived from European classical ballet such as modern dance" (Vissicaro, 2004, p. ix). With ever evolving diversification of student population, higher education institutions have witnessed augmentation of academic courses in dance theory, history, and philosophy, as teachers began to honor many world dance traditions (Vissicaro, 2004). As such, different African dance forms are part of higher education curriculum. In Africa, dances exist and are taught and learned in their traditional contexts in communities that create and perform them. Nesbit (2012) has cautioned that in teaching African dances in higher education, "separation of the "content" of dance as a list of formal elements from the "context" of dance, where culture resides, not only has the possibility of firmly establishing one while allowing the other to slip past unnoticed, but also does not reflect the way all teachers teach." (p. 6). Therefore, adapting these dances to a higher education paradigm and aligning their material against western formal education

standards, which is characterized by use of mirrors, recorded music, assessment rubric, quantified grades, classroom management strategies, and feedback provision criteria has implications on pedagogy, assessment, class management, lesson plan development, as well as dance material that is selected for teaching.

The purpose of this article is to explore how I reconciled content (dance material) and pedagogy (teaching methods) to facilitate effective teaching and learning processes of traditional dances from East Africa. I started teaching East African dances as an adjunct faculty in the Dance Education Program at New York University in Fall 2011. Since then, I have taught an average of 4 dances each semester, combining dances from Tanzania, Rwanda and Uganda. The average number of students that I have taught each semester is 20, including; dance majors, non-dance majors, undergraduate and graduate students. The student population was diverse in national origin, age, race, and gender. For effective teaching, I adhered to Kassing's (2010) caution that dance has a discipline-based pedagogy, which can be implemented in different dance education settings. Hence, I synchronized content of these dances and pedagogy to achieve effective application of the course syllabus.

### **Research methodology**

Data for this article are based on anecdotal information that I started collecting during fall 2011 semester. For every semester, I used a teaching log/journal to record notes from participatory and non-participatory observations that I made while teaching, comments and questions of students during class discussions, and the discussions that I had with the accompanist of the classes. At first, my objective was to use these anecdotes to advance my pedagogy and lesson plans. Later, I realized that I could

compile this information into an academic article. Consequently, I revisited the teaching log/journal for each semester and identified recurring patterns within these data. I coded and catalogued these data into categories. Later I condensed these categories into themes that constituted the proceeding sections of this paper.

### **Selecting material for the course.**

When I was appointed as an African dance instructor, I started putting together materials for the course. The preparations involved getting instruments to provide accompaniment for classes, recording dances and songs, getting sample costume and props of the dances, identifying online resources for the course, and gathering literary material related to the course to use as teaching aids. During this period, I researched and reflected on how to align and present the material so that I can successfully facilitate smooth teaching and learning processes (Fletcher & Patrick, 1999).

I acknowledged that teaching African dances involves much more than knowledge of the dance material. I made decisions about what to teach and how to teach it to the students, and at the same time address obstacles to teaching dance skills that include: inappropriate dance material, ineffective dance material, and isolation between teacher and students (Kimmerle & Cote, 2003, p. 3). I developed lesson plans that started from the perspective of a novice and then built towards complexity, and that were sensitive to the level of the course and the extent to which students might have familiarity with the content under consideration (Fletcher & Patrick, 1999, p. 19).

Moreover, I considered the intrinsic value of the dances; use, relevance and reality of the dance material; needs of students; interest of students; intellectual values that the dances convey; and cultural representation (Barrow, 1984, pp. 73 – 92).

East Africa has diverse ethnic populations. Within these communities, “dance styles vary enormously and so do definitions of dance” (Hanna, 1973). I selected dances from different ethnic cultures to give students diverse cultural and artistic experiences since “each dance form provides a slightly different context for the learner” (Kimmerle & Cote, 2003, p. 24). The dances that I selected had distinct movement vocabulary, technique, and history. This gave me an opportunity to navigate with the students through different teaching strategies that were responsive to the uniqueness of these different dance forms. The dances were imbued with set gender roles, complex cultural histories, spiritual convolutions, and composite social, political and economic dynamics. I developed a syllabus that acknowledged students’ diverse strengths rather than their deficits and provided flexibility in terms of content, processes, and products to cater for students’ individual learning needs (Noble, 2004, p. 193). For each dance, I started with simple rhythms and basic movements, and I described the cultural and historical background of the dance to allow students understand the context of the dance.

In this syllabus, I aligned the material beginning with less complex dances to complex dances. Less complex dances included: *Kimandwa*<sup>1</sup> dance by the Banyankole people of South Western Uganda, *Naleyo*<sup>2</sup> dance by Karamojong people of North Eastern Uganda, and *Agwara*<sup>3</sup> dance by the Alur people of West Nile. These dances demand less energy and have less polyrhythmic movements. Complex dances included *Maggunju*<sup>4</sup> dance by the Baganda people of Central Uganda, *Mwaga*<sup>5</sup> dance by the Bagisu people of Eastern Uganda, *Kizino*<sup>6</sup> dance by Bakiga people of South Western

Uganda, and *Malivata*<sup>7</sup> dance by the Wakamua people South Western Tanzania, etc. The movements of these dances are multifarious, and the accompaniment intricate.

### **Theorizing East African dance teaching in higher education**

After identifying the material for the syllabus, I embarked on identifying theories to support and guide the teaching and learning processes. These theories focused on how I would effectively deliver material to students, and stimulate them to actively participate in learning and nurturing of their own experiences.

Firstly, I applied Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD). I exposed students to individual and group movement tasks and activities with and without my guidance. I was able to establish the distance between their actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and their level of potential development as determined through problem solving collaboration with my assistance (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). For instance, the accompanist would play drum rhythms accompanying the dances and students would identify the underlying central beat by clapping without my assistance. The intention was to allow students to partake in the teaching and learning process to encourage student-oriented participation. I would then work with them to repetitively isolate the central beat and how it relates to other rhythms, dance songs, and movements.

To expand the students' learning abilities, I acknowledged that "learning involves knowledge construction in one form or another; it is therefore a constructivist process" (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan & Chin, 2007, p. 99). I employed the social constructivist learning theory to facilitate how students created realities out of their interaction with the

dances, learning environment and one another. Constructivism has a long and distinguished history (Piaget, 1966; Von Glaserfeld, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1995), portraying learners as independent constructors of their own knowledge with varying capacity or confidence to rely on their own constructions (Fenwick, 2000). Through activities such as warm ups, group choreography, peer tutorship, and playing drums and singing, students would construct knowledge by interacting with the classroom atmosphere and their world to seek meaning. Interaction with fellow students within the same environment encouraged exchange of different interpretations and promoted multiple ways for sense making to occur (Black & McClintock as cited in Vissicaro, 2004, p. 51). In some class activities, students presented movement routines in clusters where they would travel and interact with one another in the studio. I always encouraged each student to interact with more than four different students in the course of learning and performing dances. I applied the learning theory of constructivism because cognitive and kinesthetic skills and patterns of thinking and learning are not necessarily prescribed by innate facts, but are determined mostly by the sociocultural contexts and environments in which the individuals interact (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 51).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) theory of flow/optimal experience broadened social constructivism and the teaching and learning perspectives in which I anchored the course. The theory explains "how art and music aid an individual in reaching a fuller integration of the self" (Turino, 2008, p. 4) in the process of learning. While teaching this course, I followed Turino's (2008) observation about flow that:

... the most important condition for flow is that the activity must include the proper balance between inherent challenges and the skill level of the

actor. If the challenges are too low, the activity becomes boring and the mind wanders; if the challenges are too high, the activity leads to frustration and the actor cannot engage fully. When the balance is just right, it enhances concentration and that sense of being at one with the activity and perhaps the other people involved. (p. 5).

In order for students to experience flow in learning process, I applied Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. This theory describes "a holistic process of adaptation to the world" (Kolb, 1984, p. 31), not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person - thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). The pedagogy supported students to interface with "two dialectically related modes of grasping experience - concrete experience and abstract conceptualization and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience - reflective observation and active experimentation (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2001). In grasping experience, students perceived new information through experiencing the concrete, tangible, felt qualities of the world, relying on their senses and immersing themselves in concrete reality. Experiential learning enabled students to experiment with the prevalent learning styles: diverging, where dominant learning abilities are concrete experience and reflective observation, assimilating, where dominant learning abilities are abstract conceptualization and reflective observation, converging, where dominant learning abilities are abstract conceptualization and active experimentation, and accommodating, where dominant learning abilities are concrete experience and active experimentation (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2001). For practical group assignments, for example, students relied on stories and histories

underpinning traditional dances to re-arrange their choreography. The cultural backgrounds of the dances informed and formed not only the dances that students re-arranged but also storylines that guided the choreographic process.

To complement experiential learning, I used the theory of situated learning as a pedagogic frame. Situated learning was centered on the whole person, resulting from the interaction of three areas of influence: agent, activity, and world. It embodied a comprehensive set of skills - including valuing, thinking, deciding, and acting-necessary for a variety of activities related to cross-cultural learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Because African dances survive on collaboration between the individual and the community to which different members contribute, I wanted individual learning to be thought of as emergent, involving opportunities to participate in the practices of the community as well as the development of an identity which provides a sense of belonging and commitment, and that knowledge is...socially-constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blackler, 1995).

To create a safe learning environment, I designed class tasks and activities in a participatory and interactive format. I always had students participate in drumming (accompanists), singing (choristers), leading songs (soloists), and dancing to support them in all these aspects of performances of African dances. With the participatory approach the full range of the learning curve was audibly and visually present and provided reachable goals for students at all skill levels. The inclusion of students with a wide range of abilities within the same learning process was important for inspiring participation (Turino, 2008, p. 31).



I designed teaching strategies such as using music as a teaching aid, building from basic to complex material, teaching through choreography, observe and join in, contextual teaching, and Mosston's (1972) practice, peer teaching and guided discovery to foster multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). Like other forms of dance, African dances happen in time, space and the body. The corporeality, spatiality, musicality, and communality of these dances stimulate linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligences in a learner (Gardner, 1993). Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligence theory was a useful framework to illuminate my observations that different student had different strengths and learned in different ways (Noble, 2004). To nurture these intelligences, I continually shifted methods of presentation from linguistic to spatial to musical, and so on, often combining intelligences in creative ways (Stanford, 2003) through dancing, singing, clapping and drumming. I exposed students to individual and group activities and tasks such as leading the songs of dances, re-arranging dances, peer demonstration, playing drum rhythms of dances, and appreciation of these dances as art forms that draw inspiration and form from nature (Gardner, 1993).

Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives formed and informed the content, pedagogic, and assessment frame of the course. I provided "a complexity hierarchy that orders cognitive processes from simple remembering to higher order critical and creative thinking" (Noble, 2004, p.194). I developed practical activities, designed analysis formats of written material, and proposed review procedures of visual and audio material to allow progression from simple to complex thinking so that students can relate, remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create (Anderson, 1999;

Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). This application enabled students to acquire knowledge of the specifics, comprehension of literal and symbolic messages, application, analysis of dance material into its constituent parts, synthesis, and evaluation (Fletcher & Patrick, 1999, p. 19).

Finally, while teaching this course, I encountered a constraint of lack of universal academic terminology for techniques, movement vocabularies and body actions of dances from Africa. African dances have native terminologies for movement techniques and skills such as *okutuulira*<sup>8</sup> for *Baakisimba*<sup>9</sup> dance, *okutema*<sup>10</sup> and *okusamba*<sup>11</sup> for *Maggunju* dance, but their application in academic environment in the U.S. is limited due to their indistinctness for non-*Luganda*<sup>12</sup> speakers. To overcome some terminological obstacles, I used Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) to describe and analyze specific dance techniques, skills and movements. Cognizant of the fact that the course included students without training in Laban Movement Analysis, I integrated LMA terminology at a basic level. I taught these basic terminologies to students first, and later used this information to describe movements of the dances. I limited LMA terminology to observation and description of particular movements and techniques of dances. I emphasized space, attention to the surrounding environment; weight, attitude to the movement impact; and time, lack or sense of urgency (Zhao & Badler, 2001).

But Laban movement Analysis was not deep and illustrative enough to clarify complex movement actions and gestures. Nesbit (2012) has argued that it is just conjectural to depend on LMA's capability to provide explanatory depth in describing cultural dances: "Indeed, the concept of culture - and therefore cultural characteristics - as primary "elements" in dance are not often included; instead, it is assumed that terms

like Laban's can be used adequately to neutrally describe the characteristics that are then classified as "cultural." Certainly, LMA could not adequately explain polyrhythmic gestural and postural movements from dances such as *Kitaguriro*, *Maggunju*, *Mwaga*, etc. For such instances, I resorted to an imitational approach, where I demonstrated the movement patterns over and over again for and with students.

### **From simple to complex material:**

#### **A step-by-step approach to teaching East African dances**

African dance skills cannot just be explained and taught only on the basis of body action and starting and ending position (Kimmerle & Cote, 2003). Teaching African dances entails a process that advances from the basic to the complex material.

Because the course represented diverse student population, I developed pedagogy to fit the greater range of differences in ethnicity, gender, developmental levels, motivation to learn, and achievement (Cooper & Larrivee, 2006). I applied scaffolding to make the learning procedures more tractable for students by changing complex and difficult tasks in ways that made these tasks accessible, manageable, and within student's zone of proximal development (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). I supported students' learning of both how to do the dance task as well and why the task should be done that way (Hmelo-Silver, 2006). Scaffolding took the following progression:

#### ***Warm up***

I started classes with the warm up to prepare students for the actual dance activities. The warm ups were designed to introduce students to the dance material, and to orient them to the basic preparatory techniques and movement patterns of the dances. I mostly used indigenous Ugandan children games such as *ekibbobbo*<sup>13</sup>,

*ekidibaga*<sup>14</sup>, in addition to other exercises, for warm ups to orient students into body structure, polyrhythm, orientation towards the earth, using flat feet, body isolation, vocalization, musicality, gestural and postural movement articulation, expressivity, teamwork, and body area of emphasis for the dances.

### ***Introducing the background of dances***

Traditionally, East African dances are taught and performed in particular contexts. These dances are informed by narratives that are specific to their geographic, historic and demographic areas of origin. As such, in African dance education, technique is not only a system of training, but a system of education through which a dancer acquires not only bodily shape and facility but also learns the traditions, conventions, and values which underpin the concept of dances being taught (Challis, 1999, p. 145). For each dance, I explained its historical, cultural, social, economic, and political background and significance in relation to its place of origin. This orientation gave students an understanding of the indigenous circumstances under which the dances are performed. The explanations covered: the form of the dance i.e. courtship, war, royal, worship, rite of passage etc., the purpose of the dance; the people that perform the dance; the mood of performance i.e. sad, celebratory; and when, where, and why the dance is performed.

### ***Demonstrating the footwork of the dances***

From providing background information about dances I progressed to demonstration of the basic footwork of the dance using command style of teaching (Mosston & Asworth, 2008), and direct instructional teaching (Palincsar, 1998). I adhered to Mosston and Asworth's (2008) caution that "a teacher who wishes to use

command style needs to be fully aware of the decision structure the sequence of the decisions, the possible relationships between command signals and expected responses, the appropriateness of the task, and the present level of ability of the learners (their ability to perform the movements with reasonable accuracy and adhere to the demonstrated model)” (p. 81). For this style, through a reasonably formal manner, I described, showed, modeled, demonstrated and taught the skill to be learned (Baumann, 1988, p. 714).

The learning process included: input, identifying the stimuli; processing, selecting a response; and output, executing the motor skill (Kimmerle & Cote, 2003, p. 52). I encouraged students to first watch the footwork, identify the type of step(s), and later imitate the footwork. I wanted them to identify and understand the categories of steps that make up the footwork such as: hop, run, jump, slide, touch, rest, walk, gallop, jump etc.; the degree of energy and level of intensity applied; and the exact part of the foot that performs the steps. In this regard, teaching was a matter of shaping the responses of students through procedures such as modeling, demonstration, and reinforcement of closer approximations to the targeted response. From this perspective, the tasks were analyzed to determine their component parts, and the material was carefully sequenced to ensure that students were receiving the necessary prerequisite skills before the introduction of more advanced material (Palincsar, 1998, pp. 346 - 347).

### ***Combining accompaniment with footwork***

In African dances, accompaniment plays a key role in guiding body action. Frequently the purpose of African music is action, with the dance not an end in itself but a kind of transition to the artistic and cultural experience, a springboard to help the body

fulfill the mission assigned to it. The strength of the music/movement interaction is that thought is eliminated and music dictates the movement (Bebey, 1974, p. 118). Footwork in African dance corresponds with both the instrumental and/or vocal accompaniment. Students embodied music by identifying the central beat of the accompaniment, and how it relates to the footwork. I challenged them to answer the question: at what point within the accompaniment do the feet move? Usually, I would have students clap the rhythm and execute footwork at the same time to establish how movement patterns correspond with the accompaniment. I also paired up students and one student would clap the rhythm while the other performed the footwork, and have them switch roles. Further, students played drum rhythms, sang the dance songs, and later performed the movements.

### ***Understanding the body posture and body area of emphasis***

After establishing the convergence between the footwork and basic accompaniment, I exposed students to the body posture of the dance. Different dances have different body postures. Exploration of body postures covered the spatial placement of body parts, and the different kinespheric directions in which body parts are moved during dance performances. For example, whereas the torso in the basic female movement of *Naleyo* dance is upright on a vertical plane (place high in LMA language), it continually tilts forward middle and backward high along the sagittal plane in *Kimandwa* dance. Students explored how body posture alternates when dancers do flexion, extension, abduction, adduction, and rotation while performing movement patterns from different dances. In addition to body posture, African dances have specific and distinct body areas of emphasis that define their techniques. For each dance,

students concentrated on the body area of emphasis, and how it relates to other movement gestures and accompaniment.

### ***Movement gestures and quality***

After the body posture, I explored multipart movement gestures, resultant movements, and their quality. African dance skills are composite versions of fundamental motor skills (both locomotor and non-locomotor) such as running, jumping, hopping, leaping, and balancing on one foot (Kimmerle & Cote, 2003). This intricacy is compounded by polyrhythmic body gestures that are simultaneously executed by different body parts in the course of performance. I guided students through these movement gestures by isolating each gesture first for every dance, describe it and how it relates with other bodily movements, and later perform these gestures as one combined unit. This descriptive analysis of movement was invaluable as a flexible and comprehensive framework, which I used, in both practical and theoretical contexts in teaching these dances (Smith-Autard, 2002). Students also explored how these movement gestures relate with costume and rhythms of instrumental and vocal accompaniment.

### ***Nature of interaction between performers***

African dance performance is not only a cultural activity; it is also a social venture. Therefore, when teaching these dances, it is important to develop practical tasks and activities that allow students to interact and relate with one another. The dances that I taught had specific forms and levels of interaction between dancers that are inherent to cultures where these dances are derived. Some of these interactions

were gender based. For example, Interaction between dancers in *Kizino* dance is celebratory and not restricted to any gender, age, and social class whereas in *Naleyo* dance, the physical interaction is strictly gendered (male and female) and expressively suggestive. By placing emphasis on physical and expressive interaction between learners, I wanted them to get a deeper understanding of the how the psychology that underpins different dances is expressed in the course of performance. Throughout the course, I taught both female and male movements to all the students regardless of their gender. The rationale behind this practice was to equip students with materials and experiences that would allow them to competently and confidently appropriate it in their own academic, cultural, social, professional, and life experiences.

### ***Exploration of dance songs***

All the dance forms that I taught have vocal accompaniment. In some cases, these songs are descriptive of the movements and dictate the movement patterns. Songs that accompanied the dances were in call and response format. Some dances like *Maggunju*, *Kitaguriro*, had choristers separated from dancers, whereas in others such as *Naleyo*, *Kimandwa*, dancers simultaneously sang as they danced. I first taught dance movements and later matched them with songs. I wrote the songs on the whiteboard and explained the meaning of each song. Then, I led students into pronunciation of the words of the songs, and later combined these words into a music melody. I repeatedly called and sung the chorus together with the students. I usually divided students into two groups: callers/soloists and choristers/ responders, and had the two groups repeatedly sing and switch roles. Students also recorded me singing songs for their personal and private reference outside class. I worked with a (non



African) drummer throughout all the semesters, who provided drum accompaniment for the classes. We would find private time before the classes to go through drum rhythms together.

### ***Costume, make-up and props***

Costume, make-up and props play a key role in enriching and defining African dances. I used costume samples and used actual or improvised props in the process of teaching dances. The students were able to experience a particular dance in its entirety using these teaching aids. I explained why costume, make-up and props are central to the dances, and how they relate to the movements and the culture of the people where the dances originate.

I structured my classes to cover a wide range of skills and aspects about selected East African dances. I adopted a scaffolding pattern to not only guide students through the complexities of tasks, but to also problematize important aspects of students' work in order to invite them to engage with key disciplinary frameworks and strategies of learning these dances (Reiser, 2004). The progression covered intrinsic scaffolding, which involves supports that changed the task itself, by reducing the complexity of the task and focusing the learner's attention or by providing mechanisms for visualizing or thinking about a concept; supportive scaffolding where scaffolding was provided alongside the task; and reflective scaffolding, which made the task of reflection explicit by eliciting articulation from the learner (Jackson, Krajcik & Soloway, 1998). I structured classes to start from listening and watching basic rhythms and footwork, to clapping the rhythms, and then imitate it in movement.

### **Pedagogy of African dances**

Pedagogical knowledge is crucial in determining a teacher's ability to interpret the curriculum in the classroom situation, and for students to see the purpose of the learning in relation to their world of understanding (McInerney & McInerney 1998). Kassing (2010) has observed that pedagogical methods can be infused into technique, composition, dance science, and other courses, rather than being isolated as separate courses in the curriculum. This more effectively helps students to see important pedagogical connections and begin to step into the teacher's shoes. Fully aware that "to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to provide possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge" (Freire, 1998, p. 31); I considered the kind of pedagogic strategies to use to teach African dance course. I deeply thought about "separating the teaching of contents from ethical formation, practice and theory, authority and freedom of students, ignorance and knowledge, respect for the teacher and respect for the students, and teaching and learning" (Freire, 1998, p. 88). As a person who learned dance performance in my indigenous community, I decided to integrate indigenous communal-based dance pedagogy that I was exposed to while growing up into the teaching processes.

The pedagogy was "characterized by a move from teacher-directed lessons to more participatory learning, from teacher solicitation of specific student responses to interactive dialogue, and from the teacher questioning students to students generating their own questions" (Cooper & Larrivee, 2006, p.2). Together with students, we held discussions about how the dances relate to their personal, social and cultural backgrounds. My aim was to enable students to build on their vast background to understand the dances that they learned and share this understanding with each other.

Pedagogy emphasized several critical aspects of the learning process as viewed from experiential perspective (Kolb, 1984, p. 33). The rationale behind this pedagogy was to expose students to communal-based contexts, contextual and textual applications of movements and techniques, and social experiences in which East African dances are taught and learned. I considered different approaches to teaching and learning and “different forms of instruction - from imitation, to instruction, to discovery, to collaboration – reflecting different beliefs and assumptions about the learner- from actor, to knower, to private experienter to collaborative thinker” (Tomasello, Kruger & Ratner as cited in Bruner, 1996, p. 50). Often times, I taught students material, allowed them to share it through peer tutorship, encouraged them to re-arrange this material into their own patterns, and created opportunities for students to relate this material to their socio-cultural, artistic and personal backgrounds.

### ***Foundations of African dances***

The pedagogic framework was based on the five central foundations on which East African dance artistry is based: ancestry, spirituality, nature, continuity of life, and the people/community. Emphasis on these foundations stemmed from the principle that African dances encode both general and dance-specific cultural meaning. I considered these dances as culturally-produced phenomenon which can reveal psychological perspectives of the communities, ideology, social values, sexual politics and views pertaining to class, race and so on (Smith-Autard, 2002, p. 186). Through lectures, I explored how: ancestry gives these dances a sense of durability and sustains their longevity; spirituality facilitates connectivity between the dancer and his/her inner and outer super-natural world, and entrenches a sense of immortality; nature acts as a

source of material for dances; continuity of life encourages inter and intra-generational exchange and sharing of dance skills and knowledge; and how the people act as laboratories where dance theories and ideas are invented and experimented, and libraries where dance knowledge and heritage is stored, archived and preserved.

### ***Mirroring without physical mirrors***

With or without physical mirrors, teaching and learning of African dances involves mirroring. Since African dances are natively taught and learned in open spaces without mirrors, I wanted to focus on the kind of mirroring that does happen during this process: using fellow dancers as a mirror. In addition to adhering the traditional contexts in which these dances are taught (without mirrors), I was guided by findings made by Radell et al's (2003) study about the effects of teaching with mirrors on ballet performance, which revealed that "Perhaps the use of the mirror was distracting and inhibited the dancers' ability to focus more internally on the performance of the phrase and thus resulted in less improvement in performance" (pp. 963 – 964). Elsewhere, Burt (2000) has also reaffirmed thus: "In the mirror, girls run the risk of turning voyeurism upon themselves and internalizing their physical subordination. This threatens to transform their dance experience from one of kinesthetic education into a lesson in self-objectification" (p. 127). In African dance, "all human interaction is social action, requiring meaningful orientation to others in any setting" (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 47). Learners imitate one another to polish their movements. They engage in imitational learning as "all interaction between people require a reciprocal exchange or negotiation of information in which individuals fit their own actions to the ongoing action of one another, shaping each other's behavior. This communication creates a feedback loop in which individuals act in

response to how they read one's behavior and vice versa (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 48).

I repeatedly conducted dance classes without use of physical mirror to challenge students to interact and learn from one another as a community. Based on the philosophy "*I am because we are, and because we are therefore I am*" of the Luba people of Congo, I led students through movement routines and later left them to interactively perform together and learn from one another since "collective life generates an emergent property, a form of social consciousness that is altogether different from states of individual consciousness" (Parkin, 1992, p. 11). In this process, students were able to form a community of learners in large and small groups with me as a guide, and to share their individual competences and experiences with one another.

#### ***"Kola nga bwoyiga ate oyige nga bwokola" as a teaching philosophy***

The pedagogy for this course was derived from Baganda's (a tribe in central Uganda) education philosophy: "*kola nga bwoyiga ate oyige nga bwokola*" (learn as you do, and do as you learn). Typically, African dance education and training is based on what I call "communal apprenticeship". This approach emphasizes hands-on experience where participants, whom Brunner (1996) refers to as "community of learners" express, share, and cultivate their artistic pluralities and competences in the learning and performance trajectories. In the context of collective learning, Atken (1994) describes relationships between a teacher and learner in terms of production and reproduction of knowledge through two distinct models of teaching: the transmission model and the interaction model (cited in Melchior, 2005, p. 24). Since African dances are inherently participatory and "exist in both communal and societal structures" (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 49), each student actively engaged in class activities for them to independently partake

in collaborative learning processes. This model of teaching was a catalyst for experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), situated learning (Wenger & Lave, 1991), and self-guided discovery (Mosston & Asworth, 2008).

Experiential learning, situated learning and self-guided discovery in this case, featured three sequential elements: action, which is field experience; reflection, which is the process of attaining greater knowledge of something as a result of thinking through the action, a process made possible through gaining more information about, assimilating, and accepting ownership of the experience; response, which involves attitudinal or behavioral modification (Hess, 1997). Learning took place through the differential strengthening of bonds between situations and actions (Thorndiek, 1906).

There was no right thinking without understanding, and this understanding, from a correct thinking point of view, was not something transferrable but something that belonged to the process of co-participation (Freire, 1998). Jointly, students practiced movement routines repeatedly. Dance skills for African dances cannot be learned without practice; practice is, therefore, a critical factor for learning through a cyclic process of attempting, correction and perfection (Kimmerle & Cote, 2003, p. 52).

### ***Music as a teaching and learning aid***

The African dance course combined visual and auditory learners. To respond to this diverse population, I used music as a teaching aid. As H'Doubler (1940) has posited: "to accept aid from music intelligently is, after all, an exercise to knowledge essential to the creation and teaching of any dance" (p. 156). In African dances, music "dictates directly to the body the movements to be performed" (Bebey, 1974, p. 118). Music and dance are interwoven, which is demonstrated through the performers'

gnashing of the teeth, taping of feet, and engaging in multiple activities, such as playing drums, singing, displaying expression (Amegago, 2011, p. 48).

To dance is to embody music. In the classes, I highlighted the use of drum signals, songs, sounds, ululations, and other instrumental rhythms as different ways of segmenting different dance sequences as opposed to use of counts (fours, eights, etc.) and recorded music. Students sung and played drums, and later performed movements. The accompanist played music for me to demonstrate movement patterns, which the student later imitated. Further, I used accompaniment (both vocal and instrumental) to give students a deep comprehension of social and cultural understanding of the dance since rhythm in African art emphasizes the African worldview and when applied to dance it is a visual illumination of that particular worldview (Welsh-Asante, 2004).

### ***Focus on experience more than movement accuracy***

As I was developing the pedagogy for this course, a number of questions about African dances emerged: why are these dances performed? What is the role of individual dancers within a group? What is the impact of the group on individual performance and vice versa? When and how do these two (the group and an individual) interface? Is emphasis on the process or the final product? Does the concept “accuracy” exist in the indigenous learning processes of African dances? What is the cultural interpretation of energy in East African dance? I considered that through the course, I should let students know African dances for what they really are: in rural African communities, dance is meant to prepare a person for life, not for a job or career; emphasis is put on individual participation and community building, not movement perfection.

Through dance, people perceive human life as social life that involves interpreting 'data' about people and other things within the environment and subsequently interacting in ways that make sense of dances (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 51). African dances are a set of actions that bridge experiences and contexts. Participation in dance nurtures experiences and clarifies contexts. Experience, as well as context, informs all actions (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 51). Therefore, I set out to have students immerse themselves into sociocultural experiences that are created and embodied through the performance of dances. Students participated in dance activities with an aim to connect external actions to their environment and internal emotions with psychological antiphons. This transactional relationship between the person and the environment was symbolized in the dual meaning of the word experience – one subjective and personal, and the other objective and environmental (Kolb, 1984, p. 35).

In this process, students interactively and collaboratively engaged in movement activities and acquired multiple perspectives to enable comprehensive appreciation of cognitively, culturally, socially, and kinesthetically diverse information imbedded in the dances (Vissicaro, 2004, p. 52). For example, for the movement phrase of *okujja obutiko*<sup>15</sup> in *Maggunju* dance, I asked students to visualize carrying a big basket on their flat backs in order to envision the kinesthetic quality of the movement and embody the agricultural experience of *okujja obutiko*. This explanation cultivated an “organic connection between education and personal experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 28). My aim was to enable students to use this encounter to make further and deeper inquiries, since every experience is a moving force, which arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense (Dewey, 1938, p. 39).



While teaching East African dances, my concern was to assist students to develop the power of expression through the study of these dances. In considering dance as an educational tool, I ensured that students know East African dances as a special way of re-experiencing aesthetic values discovered in reality (H'Doubler, 1940, p. 64). I focused on having students experience these dances from inside out and not the other way around.

### **Assessment of students and giving feedback**

Nesbit (2012) has observed that “When teachers are able to evaluate ideas, appreciate nuances of dance, and address the constraints and opportunities in their own context, then they may foster an emerging lexicon in their own particular environment that responds to the needs and interest of all dance-makers” (pp. 6-7). In any education context, good teaching and learning may be examined at three levels: what goes on prior to, during and after the dance lesson (Kimmerle & Cote, 2003, p. 3). These three levels entail baseline, formative and summative assessment. Traditionally, assessment and feedback provision in Africa dance is different from the formal/classroom-based assessment strategies. Evaluation of traditional dance knowledge is mainly informal and generally takes the form of positive comments, praises, reinforcement, counseling, and reprimands expressed by peer groups, parents, and traditional leaders within the entire learning process, on the basis of social ethics (Amegago, 2011). Assessment “contains the potential for immediate feedback on how one is doing, which, again, keeps the mind focused on the activity at hand” (Turino, 2008, p. 5). Welsh-Asante (2004) has noted, that for this assessment:

The dancer and drummer are evaluated with the context of society... An outstanding performance is a reflection of a person's high moral character. This connection between character and skill is an important one, and indicative of the holistic way in which many Africans see each other. (pp. 21 - 22).

In a typical African setting, dance is meant to prepare a person to embody and articulate collectively agreed upon socio-cultural values. Learning progress is not measured through quantifiable grades. To this end, it was difficult for me to apply this model in an academic setting where performance of students is measured using computable scores. I developed assessment rubrics based on the following three forms of assessment:

### ***Baseline assessment***

For baseline assessment, my focus was to know the students' level of awareness and understanding of African dances and the cultures from where they originate, and their expectations of the course. I conducted this assessment at the beginning of every semester using guided questions such as: what is your understanding of African dances? Why did you enroll for the African dance course? What are your expectations of this class? Have you ever interacted with African dance? If yes, how? Baseline assessment was the initial point of convergence between the students and me, and acted as a springboard for our subsequent interaction. It also provided insights into the different levels of abilities of students and their learning needs.

### ***Formative and summative assessment***

According to Stiggins (2005), "Formative assessment has been thought of as

providing teachers with more frequent evidence of students' mastery of standards to help teachers make useful instructional decisions" (p. 326). For African dance course, formative assessment was continuous throughout the semester. It involved in-class evaluation of the students in both their practical and theoretical undertakings, and emphasized "student involvement in the assessment process, student-involved record keeping and student-involved communication" (Stiggin & Chappuis, p. 12). The formative assessment rubric emphasized attendance of classes, participation in practical tasks and activities, participation in class discussions, writing of papers, and review of recordings. I gave students midterm practical assignments where, in groups of 5-6, they re-arranged some traditional dances that I taught them with accompanying songs, drum rhythms, and props for assessment. I also encouraged students to make personal journal entries for each class from which they wrote a 4 – 7 page paper for assessment.

Another form of formative assessment was the midterm written papers. The assignments focused on the following areas: review of recorded African dance performances, comparative written analysis of selected African dances, examination of students' class experiences, comparison between the students' class experience and their social, cultural and artistic background and experiences outside the class, analysis of the choreographic processes of the dances, among others. The papers were aimed at broadening the students' theoretical, critical and analytical foundation and understanding of the course. For summative assessment, students rearranged all the dances that they learned throughout the semester into a group choreography, which they presented at the end of the semester.

During the time of leading class activities, I allowed for open interaction with students. I gave students (as individuals and in groups) specific and descriptive verbal, anatomical, imagery, and auditory feedback. I relied on descriptive feedback to provide ways for students to improve in clear, positive, and constructive language. Instead of simply labeling student errors or omissions, descriptive feedback guided students to better performance throughout the learning process and raised their motivation to participate in the learning process (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). For example, I explored a four-stage process in which I asked questions, the students responded, I recognized the response, and then used the information collected to facilitate student learning (Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009).

### ***Self-reflection and assessment***

Part of developing self-knowledge as teachers is coming to see what and how we are learning about teaching (Brookfield, 1995, p. 75). Because teaching dance is an interactive and collaborative process between the instructor and learners, it is vital for the instructor to be aware of his/her performance. To understand and evaluate my role as an instructor, I carried out weekly pedagogical reflection to understand the theoretical basis for classroom practice and foster consistency between espoused theory (what I set out to teach) and theory-in-use (how I delivered it in the classroom) (Cooper & Larrivee, 2006, p. 11). I developed a weekly teaching and assessment log/journal where I recorded experiences, concerns, questions, and issues related to how I interacted with students; how students responded to my teaching styles, class task and activities and questions; the methods and techniques that I used to support students overcome their challenges, and suggestion to make teaching and learning smoother.

Additionally, the university provided a mechanism for students to conduct online assessment of my classes. The assessment focused on my understanding of the field, assessment strategies, teaching techniques, relationship with students, organization of the teaching material, among others. The feedback from students provided suggestions that I integrated into my subsequent syllabuses and pedagogic framework.

## **Conclusion**

East African dances have just been integrated into higher education curriculum in institutions in the U.S. In native African dance traditions and contexts, teaching and learning of these dances exists and happens within communities that create and perform them. This is in contrast with western dance education paradigm where there is use of mirrors, recorded music, and rhythmic counts as teaching aids. In the same paradigm, assessment is structured and grades are awarded based on a student's fulfillment of the standards set in assessment rubrics. When I was appointed to teach East African dances at New York University, I devised a means of adapting material of these dances to western higher education paradigm. As such, I reconciled content (dance material) and pedagogy (how I taught them). This scholarly and pedagogic configuration entailed selecting appropriate material for students, identifying relevant theoretical frameworks in which to anchor pedagogy and content, developing syllabi and lesson plans for the course that catered to the diverse needs of students, designing teaching progression that focused on dance content, developing pedagogic models to deliver content, adopting a process oriented teaching approach that focused on scaffolding from basic to complex material, and designing effective assessment procedures and feedback delivery strategies for students, and for myself as a teacher.

Reconciling content and pedagogy focused on facilitating a process that would allow learners to generate their own knowledge through collaborative, participatory, and interactive class experience. To achieve this, students actively partook in class activities such as warm up, playing drum rhythms, re-arranging dance, class discussions, leading dance songs, writing papers and reviews, analyzing dances, etc. The activities centered on pedagogy that integrated the content of the dances; incorporated the cultural narratives, histories, and experiences of the dances; and allowed students to ingress and share their personal proficiencies in the learning process. This exposure gave students an understanding of cultural, social, textual, and contextual applications of the material for the dances.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kimandwa is a worship dance that is performed by the Bairu sect of the Banyankole people of South Western Uganda.
- <sup>2</sup> Naleyo is a courtship dance that is performed by the Karamojong people of North Eastern Uganda.
- <sup>3</sup> Agwara is a procession dance that is performed by the Alur people from West Nile, North Western Uganda.
- <sup>4</sup> Maggunju is a royal dance performed by the Baganda people of Central Uganda who live around Lake Victoria.

- <sup>5</sup> Mwaga is a rites of passage dance that is performed by the Bagisu people of Eastern Uganda who live around Mount Elgon
- <sup>6</sup> Kizino is a ceremonial dance that is performed by the Bakiga people who in live in Kigezi, South Western Uganda
- <sup>7</sup> Malivata is a ceremonial dance that is performed by the Wakamua people of South Western Tanzania.
- <sup>8</sup> Okutuulira is a technique in baakisimba dance where female dancers perform as they lower their bodies down. The technique comes from a word okutuula, which means sitting.
- <sup>9</sup> Baakisimba is a ceremonial dance that is performed by the Baganda people of Central Uganda who live around Lake Victoria.
- <sup>10</sup> Okutema in Maggunju dance is a male motif where dancers represent the activity of cutting grass.
- <sup>11</sup> Okusamba is a Luganda word for kicking.
- <sup>12</sup> Luganda is a native language that is spoken by the Baganda people of central Uganda.
- <sup>13</sup> Ekibbobo is a children's game that is common among the Baganda people of Uganda. Childen sing and perform movements in one big circle at the same time.
- <sup>14</sup> Ekidibaga is a children's game from Buganda that entails simultaneous performance of movements and body percussion.
- <sup>15</sup> Okujja obutiko is a Luganda expression for harvesting of mushrooms.