# TEACHING DANCES OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

# AN EMANCIPATORY INTERCULTURAL APPROACH

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While serving as a middle school dance teacher in Brooklyn New York, I designed a middle to high school curriculum which stems from my passion for dance and cultural exchange; however, my curricular intentions were also formed by   observations of my African-American students' lack of knowledge and moreover disdainful feelings towards what and who they perceive to be African. Although these practices were generated with primarily African-American students in mind, the research and pedagogy can be used as a template and directly transferred to all intercultural dance classes.

Emancipatory Intercultural Dance Education works from the premise that the understanding of culture through the expression of dance can build self-esteem, encourage a sense of community, and inform a global perspective of citizenry. This approach addresses current standards in dance education and is impactful on the student as a whole being, not just a dancing body. In this way, both teaching and learning dance are mechanisms for self-realization that include exploration, reflection, and production.

**Finding a Voice through Action**

As American schools become more and more diverse and American education takes its place on the global stage, everyone has something to say about our failing schools, and consensus seems impossible. With the profusion of perspectives on pedagogy, the world of dance education has become more and more open to the exploration of a variety of dance genres and teaching practices in classrooms. It is in this context that dance educators are urged to consider content, pedagogy, and cultural factors, equally, when designing and implementing curriculum. In preparing a curriculum on dances of the African diaspora, designed for beginning through intermediate level high school students in an urban setting, I considered the literature on the developmental needs of adolescents, statistics on African-American students, and strategies for creating an engaging, classroom experience. Additionally, I considered responsible intercultural education through community building.

Collected research in developmental psychology discusses how adolescents can often experience a heightened sense of self-consciousness in groups, rely heavily on their peers for support and identity formation, and experience unique physical changes associated with puberty. Research on the effects of in-school and after-school dance programming for adolescents shows that several factors in dance education can directly impact the psychological, kinesthetic, and social development of dance students. Students in dance classes exhibit improvement in overall emotional well-being, increased self-control and self-awareness, confidence, and even stress-relief (Duku, 2006;

Stinson,1997). Those engaging in physical partnering and collaborating to create dances also develop a sense of trust among their peers. Dance students further encounter significant kinesthetic gains as they develop strength and balance, dynamic range, spatial awareness, and the ability to utilize single- and multi-focus perspectives (Leigh, 1994; Stratton-Gonzalez, 2008). As an art form, dance acts as a vehicle for emotional expression, imaginative play, and creative construction vital to the human experience, and holistic development of the individual.

Nonetheless, motivation is a vital issue to educators of adolescents, and should not be ignored for educators of subjects that are generally seen as inherently fun. The literature suggests that students are most motivated to participate and learn when they are given opportunities to make decisions and are given frequent constructive feedback. The challenge to the democratic educator is to mediate between adolescent students' simultaneous expectation of and resistance to teacher authority. Part of this resistance can be mediated by including student-led activities and group work. Teacher authority is more readily acknowledged when teachers make an effort to familiarize themselves with their student and school communities and their relative management strategies; engage students' prior knowledge; and present relevant role models. Although there is some discrepancy among educators as to exactly what is most important for students to learn in a dance class, it is clear that adolescent students must have role models that allow them to see themselves with a sense of belonging in the dance studio (Onyekwuluje, 2000). In addition, development is most

significant when the material and methodology is challenging, engaging, and meaningful to students (Rafferty, 2006; Stinson,1997).

## Critical & Emancipatory Education

I examined prominent theorists' and educators' perspectives on how to best design curriculum to address these concerns. Educational experiences are most effective and enjoyable for students when the learning environment is constructed in a way that is student-centered, so that students draw from prior knowledge and experiences of their own lives and those of their peers. These are sources of information that are relevant and necessary to their learning. Proponents of emancipatory education, developed by Paulo Freire, stress the need to address all aspects of content and pedagogy through a lens that subverts the dominant European male-centered paradigm. It invites all voices in the classroom to affect the curriculum and guide its focus, and offers recommendations for the creation of educational experiences that hold teachers and students equally accountable for learning. Students are asked to formulate their own questions and conclusions, and teachers are encouraged to extend the class dialogue rather than just correct students and offer one pre-determined answer. This is done with the aim of empowering students to be critical thinkers and agents of change within themselves and their communities. The generation of this experience involves the physical arrangement of the class, the images displayed, the necessary inclusion of group discussions and explorations, and the use of students' ideas and experiences in their creation.

## Global, Multicultural & Intercultural Education

The literature on emancipatory education is closely related to that of multi-/inter-cultural education. Both are student-centered, and value inclusion and collectivity over competition. Asserting that we are all the same inside is not enough: it is not even accurate. In both systems, educators are urged to be transparent about their biases and expectations in relating to a diverse student body. The goal of assimilation is replaced with integration and a kaleidoscope of mutual respect. Global education has an international focus but doesn't always consider who is actually in the classroom. A dance class with this focus might have students learn ancient traditional dances from other cultures, but fail to draw connections to the students themselves. Multicultural education tends to focus on the cultures of the participants' own nation, state, city, or school. A multicultural dance class might, for example, require that diverse students research and perform traditional or contemporary dances from their own cultures. Both aim to promote awareness of one's own heritage and expose students to other cultures to understand interrelatedness and a sense of global responsibility. Intercultural education goes a step further to examine dance forms in their anthropological global contexts *and* make them relevant to students via their own cultural connections to each other and their communities (Davenport, 2000).

Research in the realm of folklore offers more constructive insight to the discussion on emancipatory intercultural education. It, too, promotes the student's ability to engage in his/her home culture and the dominant culture of the school, examining situations from multiple perspectives rather than

representative or token viewpoints. The concept of "indigenous teachers" is introduced to allow for authentic experts of content to enter the classroom as guest artists or lecturers to validate both the information and the ways of learning that students experience outside of school, and to integrate non-canonized knowledge bases (Hamer, 2000).

Thus, emancipatory intercultural educators must address diversity in the content of their curriculum, and the manner in which it is delivered and received. When teaching traditional dances, educators can utilize strategies more congruent to the way the dance is traditionally learned. Students can mirror each other rather than watching a reflection of their teacher in the mirror. Understanding of movement qualities can be gained through demonstration and analogies from the natural world rather than just verbal terminology. Success can be measured by how harmoniously the group cooperates, and by how well individuals improvise and create variations on the original material, rather than perfectly imitating it. Each student is thereby encouraged to demonstrate creativity and is responsible for elevating the group as a whole.

Classroom management in a democratic, culturally responsive classroom requires the teacher to acknowledge that his/her perspective of acceptable behavior and methods of participation are not universal, and to develop interventions that consider the multiplicity of histories in the room. The teacher must also consider multiple models of intervention to welcome all students and still establish a system of discipline in which everyone can cooperate. Because many urban teachers are not of the same ethnic make-up of their students, and

no teacher can represent the home lives or ethnic experiences of all his/her students, this level of consideration might necessitate additional training in intercultural education, learning about the specific backgrounds of the students one is teaching, and talking to students and parents about the norms and expectations of their home lives.

## Ethnocentric Education and African-American Identity Concerns

In response to these unique challenges and opportunities America's diverse schools present, another approach to responding to students' ethnic backgrounds is ethnocentric education: education based in the students' own ethnic identities. With only 62% of New York State's African-American public school students graduating high school, and only 15.2% of them receiving an 80 or better on the Math Regents Exam and 75 or better on the English Regents Exam (compared to 87% and 56%, respectively, for White students), we cannot ignore the need to target struggling students in our efforts at success in all aspects of the school day (Otterman, 2011). There are many proponents of Afro-centric education who stress the importance of a new paradigm in the classroom that counteracts traditional and still very common Euro-centric content and pedagogy. Much of the African dance education literature centers on the need to include African history alongside dance technique in order to re-situate Africans in American and World History as creators of dynamic and consequential civilizations, not just victims of slavery and subsequent oppression. This is both a drive towards historical accuracy and an important step towards building self-esteem of African-American students.

Issues of self-esteem, representation, and identity formation factor heavily in the discussion surrounding the educating of young African-Americans. CNN recently revisited Mamie and Kenneth Clark's 1947 doll test. The strikingly candid and truly sad experiment revealed that in 2010, most White and Black children still view lighter-skinned images of children as better, smarter, and nicer; further, they think that adults feel the same. Many African-American children said they prefer skin tones much lighter than their own and felt the darker the skin, the worse the child (Cooper, 2010). Thus, there is an identity crisis among African-Americans which is linked to a lack of knowledge of our history, the subsequent inability to produce a historically-rooted personal narrative, and the lack of substantial positive African-American role models being presented in mainstream society and academia. This contributes to low self-esteem, motivation and expectations.

It is widely acknowledged that self-esteem plays a role in adolescent development and well-being. Recent research on self-esteem and ethnic identity shows us that, "Ethnic identity, assessed as a broad construct including sense of belonging, positive attitudes, commitment, and involvement with one's group, was a significant predictor of self-esteem for African-American, Latino, and White students in predominantly White schools. American identity, assessed simply as a sense of being American, strongly predicted self-esteem for the White adolescents but not for the other two groups" (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997, p. 167). In diverse environments, findings show that African American students with a stronger sense of ethnic identity tend to have higher self-esteem, and a more

positive body image (Oney, Cole, & Sellers, 2011; Phinney, 1997). The research also found that students who hold positive attitudes of other groups, as well as maintaining their own ethnic identity had a more well-adjusted learning experience (Phinney, 1997). All of this literature indicates that educators can enhance their students' self-esteem by providing positive role-models representing their students' ethnic backgrounds, and also providing opportunities for them to interact with cultures outside of their own.

When considering traditional dances of the African diaspora, we can continue the discourse on interethnic relations within the diaspora. Jackson and Cothran's recent study has shed light on this often ignored issue, implying that feelings of inferiority and disdain are projected among members of the African diaspora, possibly in part, due to a Euro-centric education which fails to draw connections across the diaspora and reconnect communities that were separated during slavery. A pan-African perspective is necessary to accurately and sufficiently address the scope of African-based dances and history (Jackson & Cothran, 2003). In this way, African-American students can see the bigger picture of their history as it relates to global phenomena.

My biggest critique of Afro-centric education is that although it serves to provide valuable information and rebuild a community's broken self-image, just like Euro-centric education, it leaves out everyone else! Although I am specifically concerned with the dramatic deficiencies of African-American achievement in education, and aesthetically invested in dances of this diaspora, my curriculum aims to encourage engagement and build self-esteem and

communal responsibility of any and all students. Notably, one transferable concept developed by Afro-centric education is self-determination. Although the term is used largely to describe the need for Africans to determine their own destiny, it is also useful in considering emancipatory intercultural education. Dance educators can consider developing self-determination in their students by demanding critical thinking and perseverance. This is in line with the goals of emancipatory educational theory.

## Benefits of Traditional African and other Traditional Dances

With these intentions, African dance has been touted by supporters of intercultural education, Afro-centric education, dance education, and dance therapy for its abundance of benefits. One issue that is problematic in African Dance Education is the concept of what the term African actually means. Often the term African or even West African is used to describe a group of disparate cultures and somatic practices as though they were one thing. This is sometimes the result of a lingering American imperialist practice which bundles together all things that are both different from mainstream European-American practices, and do in fact have some superficial commonalities. Other times it is done with a critical understanding of relevant vestiges of African culture in the Americas in an effort to establish an African identity to which members of the diaspora can trace their roots. Nonetheless, it is worth considering when developing a responsible African dance curriculum that encounters issues of assimilation and appropriation. It is important that dance educators recognize and incorporate the cultural histories of the dances they teach, and offer avenues of understanding

for their students to acknowledge their own cultural lenses. For the purposes of this essay, I will use the term African Dance to describe the plethora of traditional dances originating on the continent and existing there or elsewhere in roughly their original form. Dances of the African diaspora refers to these dances, plus the heterogeneous forms developed by Africans taken to foreign lands as slaves and created via a combination with indigenous forms and/or forms of the invading culture.

In addition to promoting a sense of ethnic identity and increasing self-esteem, African dance is significant as a means to explore and highlight desirable values and social practices not sufficiently addressed in other dance classes or typical American educational experiences. These include a holistic worldview, communal work and responsibility, individual creativity, the idea of the body as a spiritual vehicle, and dance as a tool for emotional healing, and a significant element in rites of passage.

Research on the effects of traditional dances in therapy also provides some useful insight. Dance therapists using various genres of traditional dance have found some global commonalities in their therapeutic benefits. Traditional dances can promote the feeling of belonging and socio-cultural identity, as they emphasize ritual and group identity rather than performance. Most traditional forms encourage a non-judgmental environment with an emphasis on play and individual exploration of the group's aim. A focus on natural phenomena also reconnects mind, body, and environment, giving participants a sense of place and of harmony. Furthermore, dancing one's own traditional dance can lead the

dancer to embody happy childhood memories, self-dignity, and a sense of community (Capello, 2007; Harris, 2007).

## Curriculum Content

I have outlined the structure of a year-long curriculum for Dances of the African Diaspora. Each class will incorporate movement and discussion. After the introductory sessions, each class will include a warm-up which varies by unit, but draws upon principles of the previous unit. In this way, students' short attention spans are kept alert, but they are able to reference and build from prior knowledge. Meeting twice per week, on day one, students receive a journal prompt to complete for homework and turn in on day two. The outline below describes the unique features of each class that take place in addition to the aforementioned routine.

### Aim

This curriculum encourages creative interaction between dances and perspectives of the African diaspora, with those of students' home cultures and personal experiences. It addresses gaps in the current literature with regard to the practical application of emancipatory education for adolescents and dance students. It offers links between the need to address students' personal experiences and the desire to broaden their horizons with a global perspective.

### Goal

At the end of the year, students should be able to explain the ways in which dance can be integrated into everyday and ritualized life, understand that West African music and dance has laid the groundwork for popular music and

dance in the "Africanized" Americas, and apply this knowledge to create movement and improve positive self identity and intercultural interactions.

**Objectives**

• Students will identify aspects of their own and foreign cultures.

• Students will explain connections between dances of the African diaspora.

• Students will independently demonstrate the movement vocabulary of West African (Lamba),  Afro-Cuban (Yoruba Orixá), and Afro-American (Jazz and Hip-Hop) Dance.

• Students will compose dance pieces comparing dance and music styles.

• Students will reflect on their experience & illustrate understanding through journal writing.

## Unit Outlines

**Unit One:  Lamba, West African Dance Technique and Culture**

**New York City Standards Addressed:** Dance Making, Developing Dance Literacy, Making Connections, Working with Community & Cultural Resources

• Students share their own traditions and dances with classmates, defining tradition and culture.

• Students identify Call and Response in African music, practice through hand claps and creating their own verbal and physical calls and responses.

• Students begin learning the traditional West African movements through mimicking. Homework: Students interview family members about their cultural traditions & dances.

• Discuss the function of Call & Response and practice Lamba in groups.

- Continue learning Lamba, adding 2-4 movements and practicing across the floor. Volunteers share what they learned from their families and identify various functions of dance in culture.

- Students practice Lamba movements 1-6 in small groups and place a pin in the map where their parents were born, connected by string to a pin at Guinea, the birthplace of Lamba.

- Community members (such as parents) visit class to share oral histories from their cultures.

- Students share examples of improvisation known as freestyle. They identify values of freestyle music and dance and practice improvising the sequencing of Lamba movements, as well as adding their own.

- Guest artist gives Lamba percussion workshop.

- Students choreograph phrases using the vocabulary from Lamba.

- Students critique and communicate about African dance when watching and analyzing video clips.

- They will compare various West African Dance styles with each other and with other styles they've previously studied.

- In discussions and in a research essay, students will identify various aspects of the culture, countries, and continent Lamba comes from and explain the presence of the African Dance continuum in the United States as a result of the slave trade.

-  In class, students perform for invited classmates and friends and teacher assess performance with a rubric.

## Unit Two:  Afro-Cuban Dance Technique and Culture

**New York City Standards Addressed:** Dance Making, Developing Dance Literacy, Making Connections, Working with Community & Cultural Resources

• In groups, students imagine they are ancestral gods. Each group will invent a name and several characteristics for this deity. Then they will explore how this deity would dance.

• Students will link Mali, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Cuba on class map and discuss how/why slaves were taken to Cuba and how this affected dances that were indigenous to Cuba and Nigeria.

• Students practice the dances of the Orixá - ancestor/deities while learning the role of each.

• Students revisit Call and Response in Cuban music and consider its function during slavery.

• Guest artist gives Afro-Cuban percussion workshop.

• Students continue to learn one new Orixá dance each week and practice the others.

• Discuss rituals in students' lives, both banal and profound. Compare to Cuban rituals via videos.

• Discuss gender roles in performance and how one can perform another's gender as people do when performing in trance/possession.

• Students learn that Afro-Cuban dance is a fusion of styles. They work in groups to fuse two styles and create a new movement phrase of their own.

- Students create a graphic organizer to compare and contrast characteristics of Lamba and orixá movements.

- Students work in groups to design and create costumes for an Orixá dance.

- Students are grouped by their favorite Orixá and choreograph short dances using the traditional vocabulary.

- Students peer assess each other's mastery of Cuban dance using a checklist, and share constructive criticism.

- Students present their choreography for visiting teachers and classmates.

- Introductory Salsa lesson with video presentation.

- Students investigate and discuss connections between Orixá dances and Salsa and how they developed and function within the culture.

**Unit Three:  Afro-Brazilian Dance Technique and Culture**

**New York City Standards Addressed:** Dance Making, Developing Dance Literacy, Making Connections, Working with Community & Cultural Resources

- Students learn the Brazilian manifestation of the Orixá dances.

- Students read about ways slavery in Brazil was similar and different to slavery in the United States and Caribbean.

- Students explore the Samba rhythm through clapping, and dancing.

- Students compare and contrast Salsa and Samba via movement and written expression.

- Students demonstrate the basic Samba step adding their own formations.

- Watch videos of carnival in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia and chart similarities and differences and why they exist.

- Over two days, through texts and videos, students compare and contrast Mardi Gras with Caribbean and Brazilian Carnival and discuss their shared multicultural heritage.

- Add Samba Reggae movements to Samba routine and explore the Pan-African movement towards Black pride that this dance and music style was born from.

- Students attend Alvin Ailey performance and write a review incorporating analysis based on information explored in class.

- Students write 1 year, 5 year, and 10 year goals and how dance can play a role in them.

- Over the remaining sessions, students prepare a carnival parade incorporating aspects of the carnivals they studied: procession with music and dancing, role reversals, inclusive community dynamics, home-made costumes, food, cultural pride, and culminating performance.

**Unit Four:  African-American Jazz Dance Technique and Culture**

**New York City Standards Addressed:** Dance Making, Developing Dance Literacy, Making Connections, Working with Community & Cultural Resources, Exploring Careers & Lifelong Learning

- Explore isolating different body parts and their range of motion. Compose an isolation dance.

- Practice coordinating isolations within the body, creating bodily poly-rhythms.

- View clips of Hellzapoppin' and Idlewild and recreate a partner dance to Jazz music.

- View Katherine Dunham's Casbah, identifying cultural influences, isolations, and coordination.

- Learn a short piece of Alvin Ailey's Revelations and discuss the relevance of the context in which it was created and continues to live in.

- Continue to develop the Revelations phrase and give peer-to-peer constructive criticism.

- Learn a short phrase from Michael Jackson's Smooth Criminal video.

- Work in groups to create your own ending to the Smooth Criminal dance phrase.

- Watch a clip of Bob Fosse's choreography and learn a short phrase from it.

- Continue to rehearse the Fosse choreography and chart similarities to Michael Jackson's.

- Students demonstrate isolations, coordinations, pelvic initiations, and grounded movement in the dances they observed and danced.

- Create a new Jazz dance with a partner that utilizes isolations, coordination, undulations, and sharp accents.

- Continue to chart similarities and differences between African, Brazilian, Cuban, and American dance forms and the communities that created them.

- Students will perform their favorite dance of this unit for assessment of rhythm, performance quality, and correct technique.

**Unit Five: Hip-Hop Dance Technique and Culture**

**New York City Standards Addressed:** Dance Making, Developing Dance Literacy, Making Connections, Working with Community & Cultural Resources

- Students watch clips of Wild Style and Breakin' to see early Hip-Hop dancing and how it was mainstreamed with elements of Jazz.

- Revisit the Call and Response in the form of dance "battles" with student-generated movement.

- Pop 'n' Lock master class with guest teacher.

- Students identify and explore the five elements of Hip-Hop through photos, videos, and lyrical analysis.

- Create movement metaphors from metaphors in Hip-Hop lyrics.

- Attend a Dance Africa performance and write an observational report: describe, define, and distinguish how the performance relates to what we've studied and what they may have seen before.

- Students learn a Hip-Hop dance phrase and work in pairs to make a variation of it.

- Discuss Hip-Hop as it functions as survival skill, and community building block and present Hip-Hop dance phrase to classmates.

- Groups prepare a new Hip-Hop step from their communities that they can teach.

- Teach a Teacher Day: Students teach teachers what's new on the block.

- Create a family tree for dances of the African diaspora.

- Present your family trees to social Studies/History classes.

<u>**Unit Six:  Composition, Continuum and Celebration**</u>

**New York City Standards Addressed:** Dance Making, Developing Dance Literacy, Making Connections, Working with Community & Cultural Resources, Exploring Careers & Lifelong Learning

• Watch video of Rennie Harris' Pure Movement and identify characteristics of African Dance.

• Research dance programs and revisit goals, incorporating college plans.

• Present poster projects on college dance programs.

• Explore various formations and pathways through space using games.

• Begin group choreography expressing community interdependence, and incorporating dances of the African diaspora.

• Continue with choreography adding formations, pathways and levels.

• Present choreography in class for teacher assessment

• Present teacher and student choreography to school in final performance.

## Assessment

Assessment is an important element in any Dance class, and has become a key buzzword in the current dialogue on best practices in public school education. This curriculum includes the following assessments to help establish a starting point, guide class progression, and document success.

**Baseline Assessments**

• On day one, students discuss and write about their prior knowledge of Africa and African Dance.

- On day one and two, volunteer students share dances and other traditions of their home cultures.

**Formative Assessments**

- Teacher and peer observation followed by verbal constructive criticism at least once each unit.

- Weekly student journal entries responding to teacher prompt encouraging personal reflection and critical thinking (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).

- KWL charts posted in the room are on-going throughout each unit. (K-What I know, W-What I want to know, L-What I learned)

- Within each unit, students start with a free-write expressing what they know or perceive to be true about each culture. At the end of the unit they write about what they learned, any stereotypes that were dispelled, and something their own culture has in common with it.

**Summative Assessments**

- One informal performance at the end of each unit

- One formal performance at the end of each semester

- Vocabulary quizzes assessing student understanding of each unit's vocabulary

- In-class performances assessed by peers using checklists, once per unit

- In-class performances assessed by teacher using rubric, once per unit

## Looking Backward to Move Forward

I developed these lessons aimed at Brooklyn's largely African-American community, that encourage creative interaction between dances and perspectives of the African diaspora, with those of students' home cultures and

personal experiences. They address gaps in the current literature with regard to the practical application of emancipatory education for adolescents and dance students. They offer links between the need to address students' personal experiences and the desire to broaden their horizons with a global perspective. The curriculum responds to what research in Psychology and Sociology teaches us about adolescent development, as well as the ideals of prominent educational theorists, and the experiences of contemporary educators. These practices teach dances of the African diaspora for middle and high school students through an emancipatory, intercultural approach, thus incorporating the practicable, the relevant, and the current with emphasis on the profound potential for change we can help to manifest and appreciate in our young adult student population.

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