Should We Have a Code of Ethics as Dance Makers and Teachers?

In creative fields such as dance, we are constantly trying to push the boundaries of imagination and improve our students' abilities, but at what point are we pushing dancers too far? How can we ensure we are treating our dancers ethically? What are the guidelines for safe and effective dance teaching?

by Sophia Vangelatos

As dancers, we are trained to be adaptable, dynamic, and to always say yes. As students, we never rest; instead, we keep pushing when our teachers say, "One more time" for the third or fourth time. We are often taught that putting our physical or emotional needs first is somehow disrespectful to our teachers and choreographers. Even when the person in the front of the room asks us how we are doing, we bite our tongues and often refrain from telling the truth, in fear that we could disappoint them. There's no doubt about dancers being some of the hardest working people, but why do we lack the ability to advocate for ourselves when we are being pushed too far?

When and how does this absence of individual advocacy develop? Among other possible individual reasons, a prominent answer could be how our dance teachers taught us as children.

Authoritarian methods in dance are commonly experienced by dancers, even if they have never before recognized certain behaviors as such. It's difficult to define specific behaviors as authoritarian, but one could think of them as a type of bullying or belittlement. Common examples can be seen in a ballet class—when a teacher pushes a dancer's leg higher, or even hits their abdomen to encourage the dancer to "suck in." While dancers have become desensitized to such behaviors, these types of practices are actually rooted in authoritarian methods, passed down from several generations of dance teachers (Lakes).

My own dance training experience was less physically abusive and more about emotional forms of authoritarian methods. Critiques came in the form of comparisons to my peers, rather than explanations of how I could improve as an individual. Uniformity is one thing in choreography, but urging that each dancer look like the next in a technique class is unrealistic and harmful for the dancer's mindset. Instead of safely practicing techniques to improve individual facility and artistry, we are now focused on getting our legs as high as the dancer next to us or getting our turnout to be 180 degrees, to fit the standards of the ideal body.

Mindsets such as this, are extremely dangerous for the development of dancers. Because of this, several studios and teaching organizations have created codes of conduct for their teachers. One

Code of Ethics, written by The Chicago National Association of Dance Masters, states that, “A child’s body is a precious thing. A dance teacher is responsible for the physical development of this student; therefore, YOU must be proficient in the art forms that you teach.”

In this code of ethics, the CNADM focuses on the physical safety of students. They urge dance teachers to be proficient in their styles of dance in order to teach accurately and safely. There is no mention of how teachers and choreographers have the power to harm students mentally and emotionally through their behaviors. While it’s a start, there hasn’t been much attention paid to ways of creating dance using ethical principles until recently.

As Robin Lakes puts it in her essay on authoritarian practices in dance, “In the quest for brilliance… something has gone amiss in the daily treatment of the very dancers who contribute to making the artistic product brilliant.” Too many times have I heard of choreographers who are renowned for their beautiful and inventive work, yet emotionally exploit or mentally abuse dancers during rehearsal processes. I’ve even worked with a few. Some of the most famous choreographers win awards and create pieces about progressive social change and profound human values, yet somehow they don’t include their own dancers in the message of progressive treatment (Lakes).

Even though I haven’t experienced extreme behavior from choreographers who ask dancers to perform dangerous tasks or subject them to emotional abuse, I have felt a lack of empathy and understanding from certain choreographers. By this I mean the way they constantly demand full emotional, mental, and physical commitment from me and my fellow dancers, with little regard for our personal situations and happenings. It can be extremely taxing. It would even get to the point where I would prioritize dance rehearsal over school, relationships, family, and my mental health, rather than disappoint my choreographer.

The ballerina Katherine Morgan, who has a large YouTube channel following, is on the record for being frank about her negative experiences in the ballet world and encouraging dancers to respect themselves. In a segment where she explained her reasons for leaving a renowned American ballet company, she said, “No company contract is worth your mental or physical health...you are worth so much more than that. You are a human being, not a human dancer.”

Morgan emphasizes an important point, which is that dancers are still humans and should be treated with humanity. Sometimes we forget too, that as people with opinions, ideas, and emotions, we have agency in our decisions. We use our bodies as our medium for creating art, and because of this, we forget we can use our voices too.

As dancers and dance creators we know this need for dedication to the art form is necessary for effective creations. The line between speaking up for ourselves as dancers and trying to remain

respectful is sometimes hard to identify, but I believe that we should speak out against harmful teaching behaviors and make the conscious effort to become better dance teachers and dance makers for our future students.

So, what is an ethical way to teach and create with dancers?

One approach could be to implement the ideas of Care ethics and Kantian ethics in your dance making practice, an emphasis I started to explore after a lecture by dance ethics scholar Naomi Jackson. A specific principle of Care Ethics that resonates with me is that humans cannot be objects and cannot be treated as such. This idea seems so simple and obvious, yet when it comes to dancers, we seem to forget that they too are human beings. Another principle that should be considered when creating dance comes from Kantian ethics. This is that one should "Act always so as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end, and never simply as a means only" (Kerstein). In other words, dancers should not be treated as a means to an end goal (a performance or finished piece), and abusive methods in a rehearsal process cannot be justified, even if they accomplished their desired artistic outcome.

Additionally, I've based my personal beliefs about ethical dancemaking on the several fulfilling and joyful creative processes I have been a part of during my time as a dance major at the University of California, Irvine. Whether my choreographer was a professor, a graduate student, or one of my peers, I always felt the most accomplished and content when my input was welcomed during the creative process. The idea of communicating with your dancers to discover movements that are meaningful and important to both the mover and maker fosters an environment and a truly gratifying experience.

Still, dancers are so often not given much agency, nor are they encouraged to speak up about their thoughts. It is only ethical, according to the principles of Care Ethics, to treat dancers as humans, not objects. Though dancers use their bodies to communicate silently, dancers are still people with feelings, emotions, and opinions. The more dancers may have input, and become included in the conversation, the more they will develop their ability to advocate for themselves.

When dancers are empowered to become advocates for themselves there can be various positive impacts. For one, there will be increased mental health in dancers, as well as greater respect between choreographers and dancers. Further, when dancers start speaking up, it re-humanizes them in the eyes of the public and could overall create greater respect for the arts in society at large.

After all, how can we expect society to accept being a dancer as a serious career path if our own teachers and choreographers don't respect and hold us in equally high regard?

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