

CREATING A CULTURE OF CONSENT

by Nicole Perry

In the past two issues, we have looked at the ways power influences dance spaces. This month, in the conclusion of our series, we explore how to design systems and procedures to create consent in rehearsal rooms and classrooms.

Dance teachers have long used touch as a teaching method—to correct, support, provide a goal, draw awareness to a body part, and more. It can be incredibly useful for clarity of movement and in supporting kinesthetic learners.

Touch can be used choreographically to create beautifully intimate connections between performers onstage. Contact between bodies is standard in many dance performances.

However, with disclosures of sexual misconduct at top artistic institutions, the #MeToo movement, startling statistics regarding young people experiencing trauma, and ongoing concerns around COVID-19, dance teachers and choreographers should be willing to address touch. They can also offer opportunities for dancers to practice consent, rather than assuming consent by their presence in a dance space.

Consent, and the ability to give or withhold it, is at the heart of equity and collaboration. Planned Parenthood, in their oft-used graphic, gives us a clear acrostic of the concept:

CONSENT



Freely Given
Reversible
Informed
Enthusiastic
Specific

 Planned Parenthood*

CONSENT-BASED PRACTICE #1: DIALOGUE

Since consent must be Freely Given, true consent is never available when power dynamics are in play. But those power dynamics are impossible to escape in most dance spaces.

An ethical teacher or choreographer cannot pretend that power dynamics do not exist. Lisa D. Delpit writes, "I further believe that to act as if power does not exist is to ensure that the power status quo remains the same." In last month's article, naming the power dynamics was the first step in disrupting them. Willingness to engage transparently and acknowledge the power dynamics in the room creates the opportunity for what I call "working consent." This consent between dancers and choreographers or teachers recognizes the powers that exist and commits to a dialogue that includes methods of accountability to each other, in order to do the work of learning or creating dance.

To enter into this dialogue requires that each party see the other as equally necessary in the creation and success of the work. Without dialogue, there is no trust. In last month's article, we found trust necessary for creative, confident dancers. Dialogue is how we allow dancers to trust themselves and those who hold power over them, and for choreographers and teachers to trust their dancers.

CONSENT-BASED PRACTICE #2: CHECK-IN PROCEDURES

In the studio, we can continue this dialogue with check-in procedures. Instead of jumping into class, take a few minutes at the top to describe what that day will look like:

- Does the teacher employ touch as a teaching method? When/why might students expect to be touched?
- What alternatives exist to receiving a teaching touch or participating in a movement

experience involving touch?

I use consent cards for students from ages seven through university to signal their willingness to participate in touch. A card can go on the ground in front of them in our check-in circle, or be mounted on doorknob hangers at their spot on the barre. These cards help reduce the stigma between “yes” and “no”—they are literally two identical sides of the same object, and everyone has one, regardless of their answer. They are also time-savers, and reduce the need to ask each student for consent each time (although I recommend still asking, especially if a touch is going to be strong or invasive).

Set out alternatives to touch at the beginning of class to validate “no” as an answer and demonstrate commitment to creating working consent in the room. While various genres of dance and different teachers have diverse approaches to teaching, touch is frequently used for communication. There are other options that may provide for a safer learning environment, offer students opportunities to exercise their agency, or bring creativity to the teaching practices already employed. Imagistic language, prop work, or self-touch are only some of the possibilities.

In rehearsal:

Use the opening check-in to discuss choreographic partnering or contact experiences. If dancers have agreed to touch, partnering, or contact as part of their work, the check-in time can be adapted for them to dialogue with each other around boundaries, types of touch they may encounter, and exercise agency. As such, they are their fullest selves, not simply bodies to be directed by someone else.

CONSENT-BASED PRACTICE #3: **CHECK-OUT PROCEDURES**

Set aside a few moments at the end of class or rehearsal for community closure. In this, dancers are able to put an end to the time that they have made their body available to others, as a partner or a student, and ground into themselves. It also gives them space to reflect on their post-dance state of wellness.



CONSENT-BASED PRACTICE #4: **CHAIN OF COMMUNICATION**

Finally, working consent requires power-holders to be clear on how misuse of power can be addressed. A published and posted Chain of Communication for addressing conflict, as well as consistency in upholding it, is another way to establish working consent. Consent can be more easily given if a party knows that there is available recourse if it is violated.

Much like the practices offered last month to disrupt power dynamics, the practices offered above take time and purposeful implementation. A commitment to dialoguing to achieve working consent and the co-action that develops from this are radical departures from how concert dance is usually made. But this process will allow dancers to evaluate their own states of physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, what they are ready to engage in at this time, and how they might best be present as a learner, performer, or co-creator. These abilities will serve dancers at any age, in their studios, careers and lives.