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Salsa Steps Toward Intercultural Education

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Arguably the world’s most popular partnered social dance form, salsa attracts devotees far beyond the Latino communities in which this pungent “sauce” was brewed. The cross-cultural appeal of salsa, which celebrates its mixed origins in the Caribbean and Spanish Harlem, makes it a prime candidate for inclusion in university dance curricula. I have been teaching salsa in university dance departments since 1999. In this article, I share pedagogical strategies I have developed over 15 years in hopes that they can be of use to other educators striving to address recent calls to decolonize dance curricula (McCarthy-Brown 2014).

Salsa music was “born” in 1970s New York, where Puerto Rican musicians began modernizing Afro-Cuban mambo and son music to reflect a rising urban Latino pride movement. Salsa dance evolved over the next decade as Latino music fans incorporated hustle turn patterns into mambo dancing. By the mid-1990s, popularity of a softer, less politically charged style of salsa music—salsa romántica—that was more accessible to crossover audiences helped to spread salsa music and dance outside Latino communities, leading to the emergence of an international salsa dance craze.

I began salsa dancing in 1997. My first love was the L.A. style, but over the next decade as I spent more time on the East Coast, I was converted to a New York-style fanatic. I now teach both styles and their predominant rhythms (on-1 and on-2), as well as basic casino (Cuban-style salsa). Although I was hardly an expert when I began teaching salsa, I was already deeply invested in a salsa community and maintained a commitment to educating myself about salsa history, both of which I believe are essential prerequisites for any teacher of the form.

STARTING FROM THE MUSIC

I require students to read and write about the sociocultural and historical context of the dance forms they are studying in every technique class I teach at the university level, and salsa is no exception. I have gradually expanded the academic aspects of my salsa course so that it now meets one day a week in a classroom (for every two days in the studio). When I first began teaching, the only scholarly texts available were on salsa music, so I have always included lessons on the evolution of music in my salsa dance classes (Kent 2005; Manuel 1994; Waxer 2002; Padura Fuentes 2003; Rondón 2008; Washburne 2008). Although my choice to begin with music history was based on limited availability of dance-specific literature, circumstance helped me to recognize its vital role in fostering a deep connection to the art. I now believe so strongly in the value of music education for dance students that I would never teach salsa dance without introducing students to the Afro-Cuban genres of rumba, danzón, and son. Nor would I ever skip over the role Fania Records artists played in creating salsa in 1970s New York. The PBS film Latin Music USA and accompanying online materials are phenomenal resources for teachers and students to use in studying both the mambo era of the 1950s and the salsa revolution of the 1970s.

Musical knowledge helps students become more sophisticated dancers. For example, a dancer who can recognize a few bars of rumba guaguancó featured in a salsa song or understand that the refrain in Héctor Lavoe’s “Mi gente” is an invitation to “my people” to sing with him can make musically informed movement choices. More important than the way they enrich artistic practice, lessons in salsa music history...
often help students develop a deeper connection to salsa culture even if their bodies are slower to relate to its physical techniques. I recall that one Latino student, who struggled to master even the most basic of dance moves, wrote more eloquently than his classmates about the music. He regularly came to school excited to discuss the lyrics of salsa songs that, although written by New Yorkers (New Yorkers of Puerto Rican ancestry) 40 years prior, also spoke to his own experiences of overcoming hardship as a Mexican immigrant.

In addition to lectures and homework, students learn about the music through oral presentations of their peers who are required to research and present findings on the important innovations of individual salsa musicians. In the studio, I make an effort to play music by artists we study in the classroom the week each is introduced so that students begin to develop informed personal taste in salsa music. Artists we cover include Africando, Arsenio Rodriguez, Celia Cruz, Eddie Palmieri, El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, Héctor Lavoe, Israel “Cachao” López, Los Van Van, Orquesta de la Luz, Ray Barretto, Roberto Roena, Rubén Blades, Sonora Ponceña, Tito Puente, and Willie Colón.

Dancing to recordings of artists they have studied helps to reinforce budding musical interests, but it is the presence of live salsa musicians playing during select classes that is the most powerful pedagogical strategy I have implemented in recent years. We are able to finance live music sessions through modest course fees charged to each enrolled student, the same fees that allow our department to hire accompanists for modern and ballet classes. Because salsa music depends so heavily on improvisation, a pickup salsa band can be constructed by hiring a pianist, conguero, tumbao, and bassist. When individual musicians play solo, students can understand the role each instrument plays in the ensemble. For example, the slap of the conga drum on beat two, fundamental to understanding the on-2 salsa rhythm, can be identified much more readily when isolated from the group. As each instrument is layered on, students can begin to recognize individual rhythms as well as how they interlock to produce the infectious polyrhythm that compels dancers into motion. Dancing alongside the musicians, improvising their own dance in response to the improvised choices of the musicians who are inspired by the shimmies and swivels of the dancers, students learn to recognize a key value that is often lost in the age of salsa dance commercialization. Salsa is an improvisational dialogue between musicians and dancers.

KEEPING IMPROVISATION CENTRAL

Improvisation is central to salsa music and dance. When taught in formal dance classes, however, this core value of improvisation often takes a back seat in deference to codified steps and combinations. Although my own classes include choreographed patterns, I encourage students to develop their own improvisational voices starting on their first day of class. For example, when teaching a basic Suzi Q, I give specific instructions for where dancers should place their feet in relation to the music. The rest of the body, I tell them, is available to flavor the step, to give it sabor. A Suzi Q can be spiced up with a shoulder roll, a shimmy, a body ripple, or a swivel of the hips. Even if their body control is not refined enough to perform a supple ripple or shimmy, the sensation of personal expression is immediately available to students.

In addition to encouraging them to develop personal style in the way they execute codified steps, I also stress taking ownership over musical interpretation. I am a stickler for maintaining rhythmic consistency in the dance and actually require students to pass a rhythm test in which they must be able to dance on time for a minute, dancing solo and with a partner. But even before students can hear the clave or tumbao in salsa music, before they can maintain their eight-count basic in time with the music, they can hear and respond to breaks. Breaks in salsa music—rhythmic accents followed by a pause—are often repeated throughout a song. Thus, asking students to choose or even invent their own movements to express the breaks offers them a chance to make improvisational choices to express the music within a tightly structured space. Long recognized by teachers of dance composition and improvisation, instructional constraints are useful tools for generating new artistic material, as demonstrated in a recent study on creativity in dance (Torrents Martin, Ric, and Hristovski 2015). Just as too many options on a menu at a restaurant can be overwhelming and often result in diners gravitating toward the familiar, telling students to improvise a whole song rarely produces the most creative innovation. Instead, I give students a short choreographed phrase with instructions to improvise during the musical break. Choosing a song like Celia Cruz and Tito Puente’s “Cao Cao Mani Picao,” which includes the same break (with minor variations) repeated seven times within the first minute and a half, offers students multiple opportunities to experience the sensation of spontaneously coordinating their own moves with the music.

My goal is to foster an addiction to the pleasure of reacting to the music before students habituate to executing choreographed combinations not directly inspired by the music, a common result of repeating patterns copied from a teacher. Requiring students to make improvisational choices within a tightly delimited structure encourages them to begin to make musically informed improvisational choices. Not only does this strategy engender a sense of ownership over the dance, but it teaches students to develop musicality and personal style alongside their technical skills. As with any dance technique, salsa takes many years of study to master, but to wait until technical competence is achieved before practicing improvisational strategies is to ignore the very heart of the art form.
SOCIOHISTORICAL CONTEXT

Reading in my salsa classes now extends beyond music history to include articles on salsa dance and its evolution in New York, Puerto Rico, Los Angeles, and Cuba. My frustration with not being able to find scholarship specifically addressing salsa dance inspired me to begin researching its history, culminating in a recently published salsa history book (McMains 2015). Since I began my own research, many other scholars have published rich and varied literature on salsa dance, so instructors have a wide range of texts to choose from when assigning readings to their students, several of which are listed in the bibliography (Pietrobruno 2006; Borland 2009; García 2008, 2013; McMains 2013; Hutchinson 2014). We use a combination of lecture, discussion, and video viewing to examine each topic included in the course, which is divided into eight units: the mambo era, the salsa revolution, salsa dance commercialization, regional styles (focus on New York and Los Angeles), ethnic identity and stereotype (includes comparison to ballroom Latin), gender in salsa, Cuban *timba* and casino, and competitive and stage salsa.

The range of subjects examined helps students to recognize that salsa dance and the cultures out of which it emerged are not static or one-dimensional. Rather than engaging with salsa dance as an exotic practice of racial others, non-Latino students are able to confront and move beyond stereotypes of Latinness. I am not suggesting that study of salsa eradicates racism, but its multifaceted engagement through lenses of history, gender, race, ethnicity, and embodied practice encourages reflection at a deeper level than is typical when Latin dance is taught suspended outside of its cultural and historical context. Many Latino students have told me that they feel proud that their own cultural history is being validated through formal study in a university class. The hybridity of salsa, which evolved through the merging of multiple cultural streams (African, Spanish, Caribbean, Puerto Rican, Cuban, African American, Mexican, Venezuelan, Colombian) that can all lay claim to salsa as “our music,” means that students from many different ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds are able to feel a personal connection to the form. The course always draws a more ethnically and racially diverse student body than any other course I teach, inspiring dialogue that is intercultural in practice, not just in theory.

GENDER ROLES

When I began partner dancing in college, I continually questioned the gender politics of social dance. Why were decisions about where and when to move on the dance floor the sole purview of my male partners? When I began teaching salsa at universities myself, I was determined to redress this gender politics. For several years, I required all students to learn both the man’s role and the woman’s role (leading and following as I called it more often). Although the students enjoyed the courses, they had trouble mastering either role very well when they were continually switching back and forth between them. Gradually, I began dropping the requirement for all students to study both roles and began offering two concurrent sections, one for leaders and one for followers. I always get a few women who sign up for the leader’s section because they have already studied the dance and want to expand their skills, or because they feel drawn to the leader’s role, or because the follower’s section was full, and they are desperate to take the class. Sadly, I have never had a man sign up for the follower’s section. Even in the liberal city of Seattle from which Dan Savage launched the “It Gets Better” campaign to support bullied gay teens, the social stigma for a man following appears to be too great for college students to confront.

Despite this disheartening fact, the results of my switch to a two-section enrollment system have been largely positive. I was able to cover much more material and many more students continued dancing after the conclusion of the course because they felt more confident in their dancing. My new enrollment strategy significantly increased the number of men in my courses, which had previously filled up the first day of registration with a majority of female students. The upswing in male participation made the women happy because the majority of them were eager to dance with men. And I am thrilled to be able to introduce so many young men to dance, several of whom have gone on to take ballet and modern courses in our department. Women taking the follower’s section still have opportunities to exert creative control over the dance during the shines. I am, however, occasionally wracked by pangs of feminist guilt. Am I thwarting development of leadership skills in my female students who are so focused on following that they never practice initiating action in partnered turns? Am I cheating the young men of an opportunity to get in touch with a softer, more receptive part of themselves by not requiring them to learn to follow?

When I have had the luxury of offering an intermediate section of salsa, I revive my policy of requiring all students to learn both roles, with positive results. Not only does experience dancing the other role improve students’ execution of the more familiar part, but the required role switching takes away any stigma of crossing gender roles. One male student explained, “Personally I love to follow, enjoy it more so than leading . . . .” I’ve never understood why females in the dance community can partner up with each other much more readily and comfortably than male partners. Quite jealous I must say.” Only when same-sex dancing became the expected norm in our class did this man begin to feel free to explore his interest in following. I am still hesitant to require my beginning students to learn both roles, as they are so overwhelmed by the challenge of dancing at all that the added burden might be counterproductive. However, I am convinced that by their second quarter of study, students have enough confidence in one role to benefit from required role switching.
PRACTICE IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

There is one requirement in my salsa classes that I have never changed since I first began teaching. Each student is required to go out social dancing at least once during the course and write a brief paper about the experience. It might seem counterintuitive that I need to assign clubbing as a homework assignment to college students, but many would not find the courage to venture out into an unfamiliar social setting were it not a required assignment. In general, grading papers is the least enjoyable part of my job, but I love reading social outing papers. Students recount with awe and delight discoveries they rarely make in the studio—the pleasure of improvisational dialogue with a stranger, the challenge of leading or following someone who does not have the same movement vocabulary, how their own confidence improves after several hours of repetition, inspiration from watching advanced dancers, and the excitement of entering a new community that welcomes them. No one actually learns to dance salsa in a classroom. Tools and techniques for dancing can be learned in the classroom, but to actually learn how to put those skills to use on the social dance floor requires repeated practice and immersion in a social dance community.

MOVING TOWARD INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

The wide appeal of salsa draws a broad demographic, expanding ethnic and gender diversity in our department. The majority of students who enroll in salsa are not experienced dancers, but even those who are accomplished dancers in other genres learn transferrable technical skills, including increased rhythmical awareness, improvisational acumen, and partnering. These skills also give beginning students confidence to take other dance classes, salsa becoming a gateway for many to begin a lifelong engagement with dance.

Beyond their value in luring diverse students into dance departments, university salsa classes can help shift Eurocentric models of dance education that have predominantly focused on ballet, modern and contemporary dance. To move beyond tokenism toward a true intercultural model would require that multiple levels of salsa be offered each year. Although I am rarely able to offer more than one salsa course per year, the multiple-level model remains my ideal. However, even in the absence of this reality, the hybrid studio–classroom model moves toward an intercultural approach. University dance curricula ask students to study dance from multiple perspectives—historically, culturally, creatively, scientifically, philosophically, physically—each approach often the topic of a separate course (e.g., dance history, cross-cultural dance, composition, anatomy, aesthetics, technique). Dance scholars Danielle Robinson and Eloisa Domenici (2010) suggested that for dance education to be truly intercultural, non-Western dance forms should be integrated into all aspects of the curriculum. Although we have a long way to go before achieving full integration, encouraging students to study salsa from multiple perspectives within one course prevents them from regarding salsa as an “other” dance form suspended outside of history and culture, inferior to their more “serious” practice of ballet and modern dance. Thus, even a single salsa course that engages students in rigorous creative, technical, historical, cultural, and social study of the form can be a valuable step toward intercultural dance education.

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