**Modern Dance and Education in the United States**

**Summary**

The history of dance instruction in educational settings in the United States dates back to the early twentieth century. A number of female physical education teachers, including Gertrude Colby and Bird Larson, became interested in dance and experimented with rhythmic and ‘natural’ movements as they developed technique classes in physical education curricula. John Dewey’s ideas about art in education and the rise of the progressive education movement in the earlier part of the century were particularly present in the work of Margaret H’Doubler at the University of Wisconsin as well as in some elementary school programs that focused on creative movement as a holistic means to help students develop their individual talents and abilities. In the 1930s, artistic goals came to the fore at educational institutions such as the Bennington School of Dance, which hosted a summer program from 1934 until 1942, with a break during the 1939 term when the school was held at Mills College. This summer school led to the development of the ‘Gymnasium Circuit’ – a series of universities and colleges that provided a touring network for modern dancers. The Bennington School also led to the American Dance Festival, an important forum for modern dance, which was held at Connecticut College beginning in 1947. The Department of Dance at the Juilliard School was founded in 1951 under Martha Hill. It attracted modern dance innovators and such as José Limón to teach on the faculty, and exemplified the view that dance should be positioned as a fine arts discipline within post-secondary institutions. Although modernism still exists in higher education dance in the United States, the close of the twentieth century reoriented dance scholarship toward dance history, criticism, and global and postcolonial thinking that favours a pluralistic world view and challenges the presumed ‘high art’ elitism and Eurocentrism of modern dance.

**Modernism and Dance Education in Higher Education**

Many dance education programs in universities in the United States were founded in the 1920s and 1930s by teachers of physical education interested in dance and creative movement. Kraus, Hilsendager, and Dixon attribute the beginning of higher education in dance to three major figures. (1991: 299). Gertrude Colby brought what she called *natural dance*, a forerunner of modern dance to Teachers College, Columbia University. This was the first substantive teacher-training program in dance and included an emphasis on rhythms, dramatic games, and folk dance from European countries for teachers teaching in elementary schools as well as those teaching concert dance in high schools and colleges (Hagood, 2000: 22-23).

Bird Larson, more interested in technique and the science of movement, was in charge of dance at Barnard College. She required her students to learn about anatomy and was initially was more interested in creative exploration than performance. Instead of implementing a codified technique, Larson used ‘technical bases’ in her pedagogy – a method intended to heighten students’ awareness of their bodies and their mobility potential.

Margaret H’Doubler taught physical education at the University of Wisconsin. She studied at Teachers College for her Masters degree and was very influenced by the child-centred pedagogical theories of John Dewey. While at Teachers College, she also studied the work of Colby and Larson. Most notably, she helped to establish dance education as a separate area of study when she founded the first dance education major at the University of Wisconsin in 1926.

Higher education institutions were essential to the development of modern dance in the United States. As Hagood states,

In the 1930s and 1940s, dance educators, seeking an academic identity separate from that of their colleagues in physical education – and exposed to the dynamic of the early modern dancers via the Bennington School of Dance and the developing ‘Gymnasium Circuit’ – began to turn toward the professional realm of concert dance for models in training, art making, and thinking. (22)

The Bennington School of the Dance, which began in 1934, quickly became an important centre for modern dance study, attracting leading choreographers and teachers, including Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. Later, the Bennington School of Dance transformed into the American Dance Festival.

The Department of Dance at the Juilliard School in New York was established in 1951 under Martha Hill. The faculty included modern dance innovators and such as José Limón and Martha Graham. The school was one of the first institutions to place equal emphasis on modern and ballet technique in its curriculum (www.juilliard.edu/degrees-programs/dance/history). By including a dance program in the school, the founders advanced the view that dance should be positioned as a fine arts discipline within post-secondary institutions.

While modern dance became a signature of most university dance programs in the United States, ballet, music for dance, and choreography were also offered in many of these schools. Later in the century, in a movement away from modernism and towards more postmodern and critical theory, classes such as African dance forms and other non-Western dance techniques, as well as dance history, and ethnography were often added to create a more comprehensive dance curriculum. In addition, dance research emerged as an area of study, particularly with the establishment of Masters programs. With the emergence of theory courses came new subjects such as performance studies, cultural studies, and body theories and practices that facilitated the critique of ‘high art’ and Eurocentric artistic practices, including those underpinning modern dance.

**Modernism in Primary and Secondary Education**

Dance education in primary schools grew along with an interest in progressive education. As a reflection of John Dewey’s ideas about art in education, and the rise of the progressive education movement in the earlier part of the twentieth century, some elementary school programs included creative movement in the curriculum. Beginning with movement fundamentals studies in physical education programs, to more dance-centered programs in creative movement as well as movement and rhythmic skills, creative and expressive forms began to take hold. Dewey and the progressive movement brought educational reform to the schools, particularly to students in early education. The movement held the belief that children have individual rights to participate in the educational process experientially. As the arts and aesthetic thinking developed, children were encouraged not to sit still and consume knowledge but rather to take active part in the learning process. The arts and play were valued as part of the learning process. In early dance education, this meant that students were encouraged to physically engage in movement games, rhythmic activities, and ‘natural movement’.

Up until the 1970s and 1980s, many programs in secondary schools included dance as an alternative to physical education classes, but were housed in physical education departments. Dance was also sometimes offered as arts electives or requirements, depending on the particular state or area.

In short, while elementary schools tended to focus on creative dance movement, high schools often focused on modern dance techniques and choreography preparing students for further experience in dance at the university level.

**Issues in Dance Education**

During the 1980s and 1990s, proponents of arts-based education argued that schools should teach dance literacy rather than creative movement. This was a critical time because dance education was moving away from modernist techniques and approaches. Arts-based issues brought a focus on the study of historic works of art and the skills necessary to view choreography and performance. Proponents of discipline-based arts education, such as Dwain Greer, placed a greater emphasis on the study of the arts fields of study, rather than the experiential activity or creative exercise. At the same time, educators devoted to creative movement continued their focus on the experience of dance.

Diversity issues began to emerge as well. Some higher education programs began to include a variety of world dance forms as part of their dance technique offerings. The dance program at UCLA transformed into a cultural studies program with dance as an area of study. Towards the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as universities began to grapple with postcolonial studies, the idea of curricula based in modern/contemporary dance was challenged as privileging Western views and artistic traditions. A number of universities began to explore coursework that does not separate traditional areas of study but offers a more interdisciplinary take on dance education. For instance, dance scholars Danielle Robinson and Eloisa Domenici have argued that contemporary dance education must be rooted in intercultural dialogue. This perspective ‘refers to the interweaving of different dance forms, at all levels of the dance curriculum -- including technique, composition, pedagogy, and history’ (214).

**Jill Green**

**References and Further Reading**

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