

LGBTQIA+ Dance:
An Evolving Guide for the Future of Dance Education
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As a dancer for 19 years of my life, I have been exposed to a variety of styles, movements, and stories told both in the classroom and on the stage through dance over the years. Dance is an art form where the artist moves their body to create pictures and paint a scene for the audience. This can be done using numerous amount of dancers in the work, with intricate visual patterns and formations, all the way down to one dancer on stage performing a work. No matter the number of dancers on stage, the artist still has the freedom to tell their story in whatever way they see fit. These stories are endless and relay themes we have all been exposed to before such as a journey, family, war, and very often love.

As my eyes were glued to the performers on stage I could see movements that expressed the motif of love, an embrace between two dancers, a longing reach to the upstage corner, and even a simple smile. Much of the time when these stories of love were presented on a stage there was a foundation kept constant, no matter the choreographer of the work, the story was told by one female dancer and one male dancer. The story of love is not limited to a heterosexual couple, but this is all I saw on the stage. If dance is an art form where the choreographer and dancers have the opportunity to tell any story they choose, why are these stories often so limited? Do the stories we tell on stage directly reflect how we see the world around us?

Although the public aspect of dancers takes place on a stage it is important to remember the countless hours of training that help a dancer make their way to the stage. Arguably the most important aspect of a dancer is their technique. The way a dancer correctly performs a step, to the best of their abilities. Technique is achieved through the help of a teacher and repetitive practice. Technique lies in the foundation of the dance style and also in its history. For ballet dance steps are taught to students not only based on their abilities but sometimes solely based on gender. For example, a cabriole is a ballet step where one leg is extended straight out above the

floor either to the front or to the back. The second leg then leaves the floor to meet the second leg in the air, creating a beat, before it returns to the floor. A double cabriole is a variation of the step where two beats of the legs occur before the foot returns to the floor. The double cabriole is a step performed almost exclusively by men. It is not impossible for a female to complete the step, it is just that historically the step is only performed by men. As a female dancer, I always wondered why I could not learn these male-exclusive steps. Even further, what steps would an individual who did not identify as either a male or female learn?

Both of these questions transition us to the bigger question, how can the future of dance be more inclusive for members of the LGBTQIA+ community?

The Binary and Heteronormativity of Classical Ballet

The foundation of dance lies in its roots in classical ballet and the gender norms that were created alongside it. Ballet's origin story begins in the 15th century, the Italian Renaissance to be precise, and from Italy, it began to gain popularity around the world. One country that grew fond of the form was France, where Jean Georges Noverre pushed ballet as an expressive art form to be performed on a stage in the mid-1700s.

In France, the reputation of ballet held the principle that the image of a male dancer should be benevolent and a righteous ideal of masculinity during the era. Contrarily, the female was the epitome of femininity. The professional world of ballet began as an entirely male institution, with males playing all roles. Female ballerinas began to take the professional stage in the 1830s in small numbers, and by the 1900s began an almost entirely female profession. The invention of point shoes allowed female dancers to move across the stage with such grace that males became inclined to attend performances. A predominately male audience became common

as ballerinas turned into figures of sex, so much so that in the Paris Opera, economic conditions forced female dancers to turn to prostitution during the hours that were not spent on stage or in rehearsal. The sexualization of female art turned ballet into an erotic spectacle for most of the 1910s. It took almost two decades for males to be reintroduced into the art, as bodies of athleticism and masculinity.

The necessity of both male and female ballet performers came about during the reintroduction of ballet classics such as Giselle and Swan Lake. Each of these stories, and many other classical ballet works, demonstrated love stories of heteronormative couples, where a female is rescued or swept off their feet by the heroic male lead, ultimately saving the day and ending the show. The Pas De Deux or duet was strictly performed by a male and a female. The presence of the male dancer was then acceptable to heterosexual audiences.

The LGBTQIA+ community

The LGBTQIA+ community encompasses many individuals who do not identify as heterosexual or within the gender binary. It is used to refer to a community of sexual and gender minorities. In order to understand the community, it is essential to explore the identities that encompass it.

First, the L in LGBTQIA+ stands for Lesbian. Individuals who identify as lesbian are women who feel a romantic, emotional, and/ or physical attraction towards other women.

The next letter G represents gay individuals. Gay is an adjective used to describe an individual that feels romantic, emotional, and/or physical attraction to the same sex. This can be used to refer to both men and women who are attracted to the same sex but sometimes women prefer the term lesbian. Earlier in LGBTQIA+ history, the term first used was GLBT, but it later

switched to LGBT. The reason for the switch in the order of the letters L and G is because as time went on gay men ultimately had more representation and seemed more accepted by society than lesbians. After the HIV and AIDs epidemic affected gay men, communities of lesbians rose to the challenge to stand up for the community, and from here on the order was changed. Ultimately the L starting the term LGBT was used to honor lesbians for their support, service, and solidarity in the fight against AIDs and HIV.

Bisexual is a term used to describe an individual who feels attraction, romantic, physical, and/or emotional, towards the same sex or the opposite sex. Bisexuality was originally designed to reflect the gender binary, but it has now evolved to encompass an attraction to the same gender and any other existing gender. It is important to highlight that an individual does not need to experience any specific romantic or sexual experiences in order to identify as bisexual. In fact, the individual does not have to experience any romantic or sexual experiences whatsoever to identify as bisexual.

The letter T is used to refer to transgender individuals. Transgender is a term used as an identity for any individual whose gender expression and/or gender identity does not reflect their sex assigned at birth. Individuals who identify as transgender may change their physical appearance to align with their gender identity. This can be completed by prescribed hormones or surgery. Not all transgender individuals will take these steps to change their appearance and individuals are not required to take those steps in order to identify as transgender.

The letter Q can be used to represent two terms in the acronym, queer or questioning. Queer is used to describe someone who has romantic or sexual preferences that are not exclusively heteronormative. The terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual may not reflect an individual's identity, and therefore queer is used as a term to describe other attractions. Questioning is used to

represent someone who is not heterosexual but is still discovering where they belong in the LGBTQIA+ community. They are unsure of their gender or sexual identity and cause use queer or questioning as a way to describe themselves if they wish.

The I, Intersex. Intersex is used to describe an individual whose physical characteristics or reproductive anatomy does not fit into the slim definitions of a male or a female as defined by biology. This can include external anatomy, internal anatomy, hormones, or chromosomes. Intersex is distinctly different from transgender and that is why they are given two different terms.

The A in LGBTQIA+ can also stand for two terms, asexual and ally. Asexual is used to describe individuals that do not feel physical attraction or sexual attraction to others. Asexuals can still feel romantic attraction towards another sex or the same same, but sexual attraction does not play a role in their romantic relationships. An individual that identifies as aromantic does not feel romantic attraction to others. The other term that the letter A stands for interchangeably is ally. An ally is an individual who identifies as heterosexual or straight, and/or cis-gendered but uses their privilege in their sexuality or gender to lift up and support members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Ways to be an ally can include being educated in the LGBTQIA+ community, asking someone their identity instead of assuming, educating others, and learning from your mistakes.

The + listed at the end of the acronym is used to include any other gender or sexual expressions that are not included under another letter of the acronym (LBGTQIA). These identities may include but are certainly not limited to pansexual, non-binary, demisexual, and genderfluid.

Creating Safe Educational Environments for LBGTQIA+ Youth

The basis of creating a better dance education environment for LGBTQIA+ is to start by making the classroom gender-free. By removing gender from the classroom all students can participate in the same activities and in the same way. This can provide an experience where everyone can be included. The following is a list of some ways that gender can be removed from the classroom but ultimately this list can keep evolving and growing along with the times.

The first way this can be accomplished is by teaching all students in the classroom the same steps. As mentioned before, the foundation of dance that is rooted in ballet focuses on the gender binary. It is expressed by separating males and females in the classroom and giving them both different training experiences. For males, this includes learning steps that highlight athleticism and ‘showy’ tricks. For females, it can mean performing steps that are seemingly feminine and highlight graceful qualities. Giving students the opportunity to do all steps will not only elevate them as a dancer, artists, and performers, but it can help introduce them to movement qualities that they may be interested in.

A study that was conducted on the experiences of trans persons in heteronormative physical education classes reported that separating physical education by gender made them feel extremely excluded from the activities in that they had an interest in participating. Most participants in the study expressed that they began to become self-conscious and aware of their gender expression at elementary school age. This aspect of physical education is also used in dance, therefore, allowing all students to complete different steps is a way to support students in gender identity exploration.

The next way to remove gender from the dance classroom is through partnering. In a typical dance classroom when partnering exercises are performed, educators prefer to partner

males and females together. The common pairing of males and females in the classroom not only reflects the heteronormativity shown on stage but throughout society as a whole. Dance teachers can allow students to choose their own partners in class or encourage students to explore different partner combinations in class as a way to remove gender. By making different gender pairings in class a common practice students can become more comfortable dancing with different people. Allowing students to choose their own partners can also encourage students to explore different pairings that they might want to try.

A large component of a dance class is spending time in front of a mirror. Although a mirror is useful for learning choreography and perfecting movement and unison, a mirror can translate to body and self-image issues. A way that dance educators can help dancers feel more comfortable in the classroom is by providing gender-neutral attire for participants. Clothing is important in dance for many reasons such as safety, cleanliness, and comfort, but forcing a child or dancer to wear specific clothing based on their perceived gender expression can be bad for one's mental health. Creating a uniform that all students can wear, that is not determined by gender can help all students feel supported and help them feel more comfortable. Overall when a student is able to enjoy how they feel in their clothing they can perform better overall.

Improvisation is another technique to easily incorporate into a dance curriculum. Improvisation is an exercise and tool that is done when the dancer creates their own movement. Improvisation is done on the fly and is a free-flowing expression of the artist's instant thoughts and ideas. Utilizing improvisation can allow students to dance in whatever way they see fit and help them explore different movement qualities. If a student wants to explore dancing masculine but does not have the ability to try it in a choreographic exercise improvisation can give them

time to try it out on their body. Improvisation can also be utilized in all styles of dance so it is extremely easy to incorporate as an exercise in a lesson plan.

LGBTGIA+ Dance Roots

The introduction of dance styles rooted in LGBTQIA+ history is an integral part of dance education and creates a more open environment for LGBTQIA+ students. Three of these styles can easily be introduced into the classroom and give students artists that reflect their own identities.

House and ball culture is derived from Black and Latinx LGBTQIA+ individuals. Houses are a social group that members of the house and ball community join. Most houses are recognized as a community where an individual can feel a sense of belonging and join a family. Within a house, there are parents known as ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’ responsible for recruiting members and being mentors. Balls are social events hosted by a house where members of other houses may join them in competing for prizes. These can include cash prizes, social status, and recognition from peers. The aspect of this genre of dance that can be extremely useful for incorporation into a dance curriculum is the family component. The ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’ are not assigned by gender in House and Ball culture but by status and experience. Therefore, in a classroom setting teachers can use House and Ball culture to provide students with mentors and give other students the opportunity to be mentors for other dancers. This yet again will give dancers role models to look up to.

House and Ball culture was created through a combination of house, a genre of hip hop based on quick footwork, and ballroom. A partial aspect of ballroom is partnered steps. In House and Ball partners are not assigned by gender and do not have to reflect a heteronormative culture.

Integrating this aspect of House and Ball dance into the classroom can be done by allowing students to choose their own partners in class or changing up dance couple combinations frequently. This will allow students to choose what partner combinations they would like to explore and make them feel more comfortable while dancing.

Vogue is a style of dance attributed to the house and ballroom communities, specifically lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, and non-binary people of color. Vogue dance encompasses elements such as a catwalk, hand performance, floor-work, and tricks. Hand performance can be added to any style of dance because of its versatility. This hand performance can also be narrowed down to a style known as Waacking. Waacking is an expressive form of dance using rapid arm movements and posing. Vogue dance and Waacking have also been featured on popular television shows such as RuPaul's Drag Race. By showing students elements of Vogue they can see other individuals doing the same dance moves as them on popular television shows.

An additional method that to create a more inclusive dance experience for LGBTQIA+ youth is through exposure to LGBTQIA+ dance represented in media. Showcasing videos has already become an integral portion of dance education in a society where media surrounds us. It is important to show a variety of dance in media in order to give a proper representation of all possible identities of students.

The first example of this can be used in a ballroom class setting. A video that an instructor may want to showcase to their students is an example of a couple properly executing a waltz step. Highlighting both a video of a heterosexual pairing and an LGBTQIA+ couple is important for representation in the classroom. A way to do this may be through showing a video of JoJo Siwa and Jenna Johnson performing a waltz on the 2021 season of ABC's Dancing With

The Stars. Siwa and Johnson were the first same-sex couple to compete on the show that has been airing since 2005.

Another example of representing possible identities of youth in your classroom can be done even in a ballet class. Swan Lake is a classical ballet production that many teachers replicate and introduce the repertoire into their classrooms. Swan Lake is typically performed by a cast of both males and females, where the White Swan Queen and Princess Odette, are typically performed by women, and Prince Siegfried and Baron Von Rothbart, who enchant the White Swan Queen, are typically played by men. By showing students Matthew Bourne's rendition of Swan Lake teachers can showcase LGBTQIA+ performance on a professional stage. Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake highlights both a queer love story and males performing movement with a feminine quality. Both of these examples can help dancing youth establish role models in media and hopefully see someone who they can put themselves in their shoes one day.

The Future of Dance

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the under-representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals not only on stage but in the classroom. As our society keeps evolving, art forms such as dance should transform alongside it, instead of being stuck in the past. Although history and foundation are an extremely important segment of dance and the evolution that it has overcome throughout time, modifying aspects of dance to make it more inclusive is only to make sure it evolves along with society. This evolving guide can help us find a way to start creating a better future of dance for LGBTQIA+ youth.

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