

Alyssa Gersony in conversation with Karen Schupp

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Alyssa Gersony: Can you give a brief history of how you found yourself as a professor working at Arizona State University?

Karen Schupp: I was a graduate student at ASU and then I left to work with Victoria Marks. While I was gone, a visiting position opened up, which I applied for. While I had the visiting position, a more permanent position called "Senior Lecturer" opened up, which I applied for and got. Then after I worked in that position for while, an assistant professorship became open, and I applied for that and got it. That's the short version. I wanted to be an assistant professor at ASU because of the curricular changes we were making -- I've witnessed multiple curricular revisions, but the one that we are still involved in was and is exciting to me, and that's why I wanted to be here.

Alyssa: I spoke with Simon Dove about this year's Dance 2050, but before we talk about that, I'd like to ask you about the first Dance 2050, which was titled *The Future of Dance in Higher Education*. It happened at Temple in May 2012, and I was hoping you could tell me about your role in that meeting and then a quick idea of what went on there.

Karen: In 2012 I was a participant just like everybody else, and this year I was a participant, but I also helped Simon frame the discussion about what curricular changes could happen now to help postsecondary dance programs prepare for the future. Last year's Dance 2050 revolved around four themes: "diversity and globalization", "learning in the new world", "leadership for dance", and "dance in a digital world".

There were four separate themes and of course they are all interconnected, but last year we really tried to address them individually.

This year's symposium focused solely on leadership in higher education, which even though is more specific, is still quite broad.

Alyssa: I'm curious, after looking at the roster of who was there, it seemed like there was a diversity of Universities represented. Was it a similar kind of diversity this year?

Karen: I would say so. As a participant it seemed like there was a younger generation present this year, which I think is important because even though I am relatively young within academe, you know, I hope to be retired by 2050. So, it's people that are younger than me that will really take this forward. In terms of setting a sustainable groundwork, it was good to see graduate students and young faculty members in attendance.

Alyssa: I'd like to hear what you focused on when you spoke with Simon about the practical implementation and application of the ASU curriculum, and then maybe some of the concerns and questions that came up in response to that.

Karen: One the thing I addressed was what our students do with the information they've gained through the curriculum, since I'm actually completing a research project about that. It's a new curricular model and approach, so a big question is: when students have the freedom select the dance practices they are study, what do they actually do with that information? Student learning becomes a little more difficult to measure when they have more options, because there are more outcomes. I was

curious to see what our students were learning.

Three themes emerged from that research:

- the students feel much more empowered in their education because they are allowed to shift according to their needs and interests
- they are more challenged creatively and their problem solving abilities seem to widen because they are working with peers who have different dance interests and study diverse dance practices, which in some way also encourages better communication and collaboration skills because they can't assume that everybody just knows what they're doing and what they're saying
- it led them to find, from their perception, a more personal and unique movement voice, and I would say related to that, they seem to have a deeper somatic understanding because they have to take a lot of responsibility for their own dance learning.

I think people are like, "Well, your curriculum sounds great..." but they don't really have anything to measure it against. So, I wanted it to be really clear that our students are still learning a great deal about dance and about themselves even though they are each going about it in unique ways.

Symposium participants had a lot of questions related to the curriculum's implementation because that's when you get into resources and faculty workload, so I talked a lot about how my personal pedagogy evolved to facilitate the content of the curriculum. I think it was a reassuring for participants to hear how I went about it. You always have to balance the theory and the practicalities. You can really want to do something, but until you can really figure out the steps to get to that, you feel like your hands are tied. So, on day two of the symposium, participants asked Simon and I a lot of practical questions, but that reflects their willingness to embrace a new way of thinking about postsecondary dance curriculums.

Alyssa: Were you there for the full symposium?

Karen: Yeah I was there for the whole thing.

Alyssa: I'd like to get more into your pedagogy a little bit. One of things that we are interested in this particular "University Project" is to learn about different pedagogical approaches to addressing the intersections of dance history, technique, contemporary dance discourse and theory in the classroom.

Karen: It's a good challenge, is how you have to think of it. One of the things that I've said in a couple of different places -- both in larger group discussions and in the session I had with Simon -- is that in order to make a curricular change, you have to honestly assess your values and be aware of how that shows up in your language and your practice.

Sometimes when you are revising or assessing something that you've done for a long time, you realize there are so many built in assumptions about what you are doing. You can have the best intentions to change your methods, practice, or curriculum, but you don't because you've never looked back. You have to ask yourself "what am I doing consistently and why am I doing that consistently? Is it because it's a habit or is it something I value?"

When it comes to teaching, I am always looking at what I actually did and why I did it. What I found in the new curriculum was that I had to question what I value, and what I value is physical expression. There is something very interesting and special about the physical experience of dancing, but I also value students as independent thinkers and movers and people. I also really value the fact that dance is

so much larger than just physicality, though it is an important part.

The curricular switch actually gave me permission to go deeper into things I was already interested in in the classroom. For example, in my classes we now include contextual knowledge. Not in a lot of depth, admittedly, but just as a way to help students think about how different innovators in the practice or different periods in the development of the technique are still represented in what we do in class today. So usually we will look at someone, watch some videos and read an article, and then I'll give some sort of creative prompt related to it. In a level one class it might just be about what parts of class make you think of this person and why? And then as we go through class I might ask students to kind of just exaggerate those elements so that it becomes really apparent that what we are doing came from somewhere, even if it's questioning where we came from.

This semester when I was teaching "Contemporary Ballet," I structured all of the context assignments around defining contemporary ballet, so students could get to their own assumptions about what ballet is while also relating their definitions to different innovators. When we watched something like Nederlands Dans Theater and they would say, "This is contemporary ballet to me because I see this, this and this..." And then I would ask them, "Okay, well are you doing that in your own practice of contemporary ballet?"

"No."

"Okay, then that's your task for today."

I've also started to incorporate a lot of in-class reflection and self-assessment. The ability to be aware of what you are doing is very important and sometimes that is lost in dance because dance happens so quickly. So I've actually, at times, reduced the amount of verbal and tactile feedback that I give in order to make time for students to, say, draw a picture about something, respond to a question I might ask, or name two things that are working, two things that are not working, so that students can develop their own plan for advancement, which I think is very important in contemporary dance today. It helps students learn to be adaptable, while staying true to themselves.

I'm also trying to maintain physicality both from a safety perspective, but also because I feel, for college students especially at the beginning of their college experience, that's what draws them to dance. So if you are not feeding that, you are not able to get to some of the other things. That's it in a nutshell.

Alyssa: Yeah, and because I was your student for four years I can definitely say that some of those reflective tasks have led me to be more independent as a dancer taking a technique class. I'm also interested in how you address other needs you think your students might need when they leave. How do you prepare them for a professional career in dance?

Karen: Leadership and collaboration are super important. Again, that's why it's beneficial for me to step back a little bit. In class we take turns leading parts of class -- it's both a chance for students to demonstrate their understanding of what they've learned, but it also immediately situates them in a leadership position within dance. Collaboration and creativity have become a part of all of my classes, including technique classes, and it goes beyond improvisation and choreography.

But there is also a lot of choice-making in terms of how students are assessed. It gets back to this idea of self-responsibility. What I am focused on now is incorporating creativity and leadership into everything that I do because that should help students develop the abilities to relate to each other, to

initiate and follow through on an idea, and to think about how their movement training or technical training relates to something much larger.

Alyssa: Who are the students at ASU, who are the faculty? Can you contextualize the economic and racial makeup of the ASU dance program?

Karen: Yeah that is difficult to talk about directly because I don't have any sort of concrete data about the demographics of our students. But I do think from purely observing (so this is just completely my perception) that our student body has become much more diverse since we've expanded the curriculum beyond modern and ballet. I think that is because the new curricular model embraces and promotes this idea of individual voices and it makes room for people from diverse backgrounds. We have students from very formal and intense training backgrounds and students were exposed to dance through community centers and socially engaged dance practices.

So in terms of diversity, anyway you define it, our program has become more diverse. I would say overall our students are very smart, but I realize that I'm biased because I work with them. They challenge me as much as I challenge them.

The faculty I think is pretty diverse too, both in terms of what we are interested in, but also in the length of time we've been affiliated with ASU dance. It's great to have people who have been on faculty for over twenty years and people who just joined this year. It helps things to feel like they are evolving instead of being stagnant or instead of just fracturing and going in a completely different direction.

Alyssa: Simon also said that when he was at ASU, the students that were coming into the undergraduate program were looking for this kind of curriculum -- it wasn't a surprise to them that they would have the choice to either study ballet, urban movement practices, postmodern contemporary dance or somatic practices. Have you noticed an increase in applicants? Are there more students looking to get their M.F.A at ASU or undergraduates?

Karen: That again is something that would be difficult for me to measure.

Alyssa: What about the currency of the Master's degrees? Can you talk about need to have an M.F.A. in order to be teaching in higher education? How do you see the shift in economy impacting jobs in dance and the need for degrees, or the presence of midcareer choreographers in institutions?

Karen: Well I think the M.F.A. has long been the standard requirement to teach in higher education. To my knowledge that's been the standard for at least fifteen years, if not longer. That doesn't mean that there are not exceptions. I would say that 90% of our graduate students have the goal of teaching at a university or college at some point; although, that may not be the only reason they come to graduate school, it is a recurring reason why people come. I haven't seen that change as a result of the curricular shift. I think it's been that way for a while.

One concern I have is for us to move past modern and ballet, meaning the type of M.F.A.s we offer, not just ASU, but as a field. Most M.F.A. programs are still oriented toward expertise in modern dance, which means people who are most eligible to teach in a University teach modern dance and other related areas so that's something we need to think about.

Alyssa: Was that a topic of conversation at Dance 2050 at all?

Karen: Not directly, but it was something brought it up.

Alyssa: Anything you can share?

Karen: Not too much because the goals of dance programs are so diverse. The Dance 2050 participants from departments with a M.F.A. program were in the minority. I think it's something we need to think about as a group of dance educators.

The economic climate is going to be what it is -- the dance world responds to it just like everything else does. I think what we've learned over the past ten years is that everybody has to be adaptable and everybody has to be comfortable with change because things just change.

One of the things I'm most proud of is that we are both explicitly and implicitly helping students develop skills to be individual thinkers, and to think very widely about what could be done with dance, and more specifically about what *they* can do with dance or what they can learn from dance. It's those lifetime learning skills in relationship to dance that will allow people to navigate changing economies and situations. So that is something that I would like to see be a theme within postsecondary dance curriculums.

I am by no means devaluing the desire to perform and choreograph, because again that is something that is important to me. You have to have that, but then think wider. You have to be able to be adaptable: how can you be true to what you value about dance, but then find multiple ways to apply that so that you stay engaged in dance? So that you can sustain a career and profession in dance, widely defined, until you don't want to do that anymore.

Alyssa: Do you see a lot of students who leave ASU go into dance as a profession, and if not, what do you see from them or hear about the paths they've chosen?

Karen: It changes from year group to year group. And it's also difficult to assess because the group that just graduated is the first group to do the whole curriculum, and they only graduated like three or four weeks ago, so I'm kind of unable to answer that. I know that they have big plans and that their plans are also very specific to who they are as individuals, which is good to see because that sets them up for more success. Most of our students who graduate with a B.F.A. in Dance Education and wanted to start teaching right away, are able to do that. That's a different framework.

Alyssa: And the M.F.A. students?

Karen: A lot of them end up piecing together adjunct work before they can find something more permanent. At the same time, I'm finding that a lot of M.F.A. students like the adjunct experience because it allows them to pursue other things. Sometimes they don't realize they are interested in all these other things until they leave school, especially those students who come directly from undergraduate to graduate school. I think, because they've never had any time outside of the academic setting, they feel like they are still learning if they are working part-time as an adjunct but then also engaging in all these other projects.

The higher education market -- there aren't that many jobs, so that's hard. Most of the students who stay in contact with me are teaching something in a University, somewhere, even if it isn't their full-time thing.