

Circling Forward: DanceAbility Teacher Trainings

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I've been putting a lot of energy into DanceAbility Teacher Trainings in the past few years-evolution by going around in circles: teaching trainings for wannabe teachers, writing about trainings for a book I'm working on, reading my writings to improve my



teaching, and taking notes on my teaching to improve my writing! In this article, I will summarize what I've been learning and teaching, and will share the experiences of a couple of participants of the most recent training in the Netherlands

(Left to right) Petra Zingel, Anna Worrell, and Fienie Gerekind, participants in the DanceAbility Teacher Training in Holland, spring 2002, dancing in a Performance Parade at the largest mall in the Netherlands, in Utrecht.

DanceAbility Teacher Training Overview

Teaching dance in mixed-abilities groups (i.e., people with and without physical and mental disabilities) is where I feel the best about myself and about humanity. It seems natural that dance and Contact Improvisation have continued to evolve in a direction of broader inclusivity. It's been great to see the level of interest in learning how to teach this work stay high all around the world. I've led five well-attended teacher trainings now, on three continents. The first two trainings, in Eugene (Oregon) and Buenos Aires (Argentina), were each three weeks long. Now the trainings entail four weeks of full-time study, accompanied by a manual including 100 exercises.

WEEK ONE is the introduction. Students learn how to identify the physical possibilities and 'common denominators' of each new group they work with to ensure that no one is isolated. They learn how to lead the core set of DanceAbility exercises, which can be done no matter how diverse the group. These core exercises introduce people to basic considerations for communicating, relating, and shaping dances through improvised movement. One example is an exercise for pairs in which they create a movement dialogue. Each person takes turns improvising a movement action, which is followed by a response from the partner - back and forth, listening and making movement statements. Another example is improvising with time in small groups, each person can choose to move either quickly or slowly, or to be still at any given moment.

WEEK TWO focuses on integrating Contact Improvisation and physicality. Rolling, using momentum, providing structures for taking weight, learning how to lean and give

weight, counterbalancing, relaxing, and engaging in physical bodywork care are all explored. Students also continue deepening their understanding of non-isolation/inclusion and movement communication through structured improvisations and discussion.

WEEK THREE covers 'Variations on the Theme' and artistic collaboration. Students learn how to adapt their lesson plans and teaching styles depending on participants' specific characteristics, such as blindness, deafness, and age. Student teachers also learn how to empower their students by facilitating small groups to collaboratively create their own performance pieces. Student teachers learn how to teach, evaluate, and give feedback on choreography and on shaping performances.

WEEK FOUR is for integration of the material and for teaching practice. Student teachers learn recipes for various lengths of workshops, from three hours to two weeks, and learn how to adapt them as necessary. The general public is invited to one or two days of classes that student teachers design and team-teach. I give the student teachers feedback on their class plan before they teach. Afterward, they receive feedback from their fellow students and me. We also design a site-specific Street Performance Parade or a performance! demonstration for the general public on one of the last days.

My passion is for the process of improvisation and what the wisdom of our bodies can teach us, both as individuals and as communities. Facing the unknown calls upon our intuition to guide us in making choices. The expressions of the body that arise reveal what we need from, and offer to, the community. DanceAbility is simply a method of researching movement improvisation. To be honest, I don't really have a special interest in 'disability issues.' I don't really think 'disabled' is a relevant classifier. It doesn't tell you anything about what a person is like except that there is a strong likelihood that they've had to deal with the oppression of many societal and maybe physical barriers.

In the DanceAbility work, I'm committed to facilitating improvisation in such a way that anybody who wants to dance, can. People actually learn the most about improvisation by working with as much diversity as possible, because working beyond familiarity teaches people to be more creative. So not only do people with disabilities benefit from diverse, accessible dance, but the dance world also benefits and expands by including more diversity. The feeling of strength and joy is amazing in diverse groups where each person's abilities, potential, and creativity are being fully shared.

The Training in the Netherlands

The most recent teacher training was in Amstelveen, near Amsterdam produced by a woman named Petra Zingel. For the first several years of her life, she lived in an institution for people with mental disabilities. She learned to communicate by copying everyone around her-which meant not communicating at all or else screaming or crying

when she wanted something. The staff assumed she was mentally retarded. When Petra was five years old, a new doctor visited the facility and asked some questions about her. He was told she couldn't speak, but all he perceived was cerebral palsy, which doesn't affect a person's mental abilities. After working with this doctor briefly, Petra made remarkable improvements, and everyone around her realized she was a bright young girl who only needed a more supportive and stimulating atmosphere to catch up on her language skills and develop herself. Now she speaks Dutch and English fluently, and heads up an organization called FIDODA (Foundation Promoting Integration through Movement in Society), which uses movement and dance to provide new means of communication for people with various disabilities. Since completing this DanceAbility Teacher Training, she's been leading mixed abilities classes weekly and producing many related events around the Netherlands. Petra is rocking the boat in Holland.

Pictured right: Ron Huisman (in chair) and Midas Mozaik at the DanceAbility Teacher Training in Holland, spring 2002.



The training was co-sponsored by the Dutch American Embassy, the United States State Department Cultural Affairs Program, and a couple of other Dutch organizations. We held the training in two two-week sessions-the first in December 2001 and the second in April 2002. Petra says, *"People with a disability in Holland have few possibilities to follow a regular dance class because teachers don't know how to work with them. DanceAbility is a very important tool to increase opportunities."* Sara Zolbrod, a fellow dancer who helped me write this article, asked Petra and another participant of the training, Kolja Seifert, what their experience was like doing the training:

"What I liked most," Petra said, "was the open lessons that we gave as student teachers. In the class I taught, people came from a seniors' home. One man couldn't connect with the group. But we had learned to set up a 'satellite support system' ahead of time, and that's something that I take with me into my continuing work. That support gave him some possibilities for remaining part of the group ... Another big thing for me was learning to perform - that it's easy to do and how to support other people with that."

Kolja said, *"In a way, this training really brought along a whole new philosophy of life for me, and of theatrical and dance work. It touched something so essential in me, a new way of perceiving the surrounding. That impact is still going like a stone thrown in the water, and still the waves are going. It's mainly the intention to strive towards acceptance and equality-to really treat each other as equals and follow those consequences."*

“I’ve never been confronted with so many of my limitations. Every day I felt very strong and open, but at the same time, I was seeing so many limiting layers. I thought I was already quite far, but it confronted me with the fact that there’s so much to learn. At first, when Alito pointed out my attitudes, I tried to defend my way of doing things. But then I saw that letting go of these places I’m trying to protect is another form of acceptance. Accepting others’ limitations helped me to accept my own. “I’m a theater maker and director and actor. I studied physical theater-movement theater based on Le Coq, who does a lot of mime. Before the training, I had given’ some workshops and made a few productions, nothing big. I had worked with people with disabilities before, and I was just starting to see how I could combine theater with handicaps. DanceAbility opened so many new possibilities. “You can feel Alito’s drive for the work. I know he’s been doing this a long time, so I was amazed at how much he could still be touched and also be fragile and open at times.”

Circling Forward

Evolution by going around in circles... My first trip ever to Europe was to this very country, to the School for New Dance Development in Amsterdam. I went with Nancy Stark Smith, assisting her and performing. Now, fifteen years later, I am here as a part of a blossoming of dance opportunities. The sponsoring Dutch American Embassy’s wish for this teacher training was that it would *“eventually have a considerable spin-off in the field of dance and disability in the Netherlands, a country in which dance gets major attention, but never in connection with disability.”* The level of activity in the ten months since the training seems to bode well.

On the one hand, I’m happy that more people are benefiting from increased diversity in dance. On the other hand, I also feel like “IT’S ABOUT TIME!” It’s no surprise that this could and would happen, because it seems so natural to me that anybody and everybody who wants to dance should have the opportunity to do so.



In session at the DanceAbility Teacher Training in Holland, spring 2002.
(Front right) Erwin Lindeiger,
Ron Huisman (in chair),
Linde Schwarz (lying on floor),
Martijn Landsaat (elbows up)