Teaching in Motion: Validating Vulnerability

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About a year ago I received an e-mail from a former student. It was one of those we all enjoy—a student expressing thanks and gratitude. I was touched, as the student conveyed appreciation for what she had learned in my classes and continued to use in her dance pursuits.

My first experience teaching this student was an entry level modern dance technique class for freshman students, as they enter the dance program. It has been my pleasure to teach this course many times and first introduce dancers to see beyond the clichés of the field and dance conceptually. This is not always an easy transition. Many dancers enter the university thinking there is little left to learn. However, this student was open and willing to absorb the information cognitively and then embody it physically. As she continued to progress in her dance education, I saw a maturity develop in the short time she attended BYU-Idaho.

Upon reflection, I have thought about my life at the time this particular student was enrolled in my classes. In her first year, I was finishing my graduate work and very busy. I recall thinking that life would be grand if I could enjoy a Friday or Saturday evening without grading or writing papers. I am sure that many educators can relate. After completing my graduate work, I had difficulty knowing which direction to take my life. I was still teaching, but I was struggling somewhat spiritually (though I did not realize it at the time), and it was difficult to look beyond my current situation. I remember feeling that it was all I could do to get myself to work, teach my classes, grade, go home, repeat. My emotions were on the surface and I lived in fear of the students seeing what I really felt. As a performer, I believe I have mastered some skill in concealing unwanted emotions and putting feelings aside. After all, the show must go on. I did not consider the irony that I had just spent two years studying human behavior and performance in various scenarios, but now I was playing one of the most difficult roles of my life, as myself, starring: me.

At this time I happened to be teaching improvisation and choreography—a class which often makes students feel stretched intellectually and emotionally. The student mentioned previously was in this class. Generally, I approach teaching ready to give whatever I am able to my students. This includes my energy, intellect, support, love, time, and whatever else may be needed. However, as I was struggling to simply show up to work, the students began to give and supply these things to me. It was transformative. It was healing. I still feel gratitude for the group of students I had in this class at that time. I believe we grew together in the process of transactional learning. Their spirits touched mine and together we found truth and expression through movement.

Since then, I have updated this course, become clearer in my course outcomes, and improved my presentation of the content. While life continues to accelerate its pace, I no longer feel threatened by vulnerability. I am comfortable and confident in both my understanding of and experience with the content. While I enjoy my current state of comfort, I have also noticed it is necessary to consciously make an I did not have all of the answers, not to life and not in choreography.
effort to slow down and actively choose to connect with my students. This connection became a means of survival when I was struggling with the day-to-day, and more forcibly to be ‘in-tune’ with the present moment. I began to really see my students as my awareness of them was increased. The connection with my students was achieved through our shared state of vulnerability.

I have been contemplating the meaning of these three words over the last several years: connection, authenticity, and vulnerability. As an LDS dance artist, I draw connections from these buzz words, which continually inform my performance research, education and how I live my faith. These words have meaning in every aspect of my life, but how do they apply to the classroom and quality education?

If a student feels a connection with a professor they are not only more likely to perform the desired course outcomes but also become a life-long learner. In order to establish this connection, I propose that authenticity of teaching must occur in which vulnerability is present for both the student and the teacher.

My experience in teaching in higher education is somewhat limited as my career has been solely at BYU-Idaho, and only as a guest at other universities. However, from this experience, I have observed that the majority of the students are eager and willing to learn. Many times, I have fallen into the mode of wanting to prove my authority and validity by belittling the students’ current understanding and knowledge. This may stem from my experiences with traditional modes of teaching in the professional dance setting, where authoritarian teaching practices, often use a vicious shaming cycle. It is easy to fall into patterns of teaching that I have observed, whether these are favorable or not. In the dance department, students often enter the program with habits that hinder their progression. In an effort to demonstrate how much they will learn at this ‘higher level,’ I have pointed out failures and weaknesses and at times made them feel as though they may never measure up to the standard that I set. I am not at all suggesting that we lower standards or expectations for the students. But I am inferring that we take some time to understand where the students’ experiences might have been, and then allow

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them time to navigate their journey. Rather, it is more beneficial to realize that the present knowledge of the student has assisted them to this point in their education and now the professor is in a position to further his/her potential. This is not new information, as the teaching at BYU-Idaho is student focused.

The journey of education is a unique discovery for the student. It may help to remember our own journey of personal discovery and how it was a process that required vulnerability. As we may all be too familiar, the learning process happens line upon line, learning from taking risks and failures. It is not done in an instant. The magic of being an educator is that we, too, continue to learn and grow. As mentioned earlier, I re-vamped the improvisation and choreography course. It is updated, with more current research and ideas. While I would not return to what (i.e. content) I was teaching before, I continue to remember how (i.e. with honesty and vulnerability) I was teaching before. Together with the students, I question the content and ideas presented. At first, some students are confused when I express disagreement with the text, which I chose for the course. This questioning leads to searching. With the spirit, the searching seeks to bring understanding. Because I was searching in my life when I was teaching the before mentioned class, this unmasked a part of me to allow the students to see me a little more genuinely. They did not know what was going on in my life, nor did they need to. This shared state of vulnerability allowed openness in the classroom as a means of discovery. I did not have all of the answers, not to life and not in choreography. As perceived truths in our field change, it is essential for us to continue to allow some level of uncertainty into our classroom. If we claim to ‘know it all,’ not only are the students turned away by such an approach, but we indicate to them that there is an end to the learning process. In a recent faculty meeting it was asked, how do we foster a passion that is curious? One requirement may be vulnerability.

Vulnerability may not always be in the form sharing personal stories that bring us to tears but may include anything that assists us in being as authentic as possible. The word authentic currently has many connotations. In dance performance research, being authentic could be viewed as giving into the natural man, which is not regarded as a positive in our progression in LDS culture. Yet, there is truth in our human weaknesses and allowing the reality of the ‘weaknesses’ to work for us, rather than against us. I do not believe that my students know or understand the personal difficulties with which I currently struggle. However, I do want them to know that I too, struggle and question in order to seek and gain knowledge. Elder Bednar said, “We are disciples, and our messages should be authentic. A person or product that is not authentic is false, fake, and fraudulent. Our messages should be truthful, honest, and accurate. We should not exaggerate, embellish, or pretend to be someone we are not.”

Being authentic as an instructor begs some interesting questions. Can this truly be done while being observed as a teacher/professor? How is this to be done? Should it be done? Perhaps you have observed your colleagues in what I term, ‘teacher mode.’ Is this one authentic version of ourselves? Or not? This is usually quite different than how we interact with them as friends and colleagues who learn about our families, hobbies and other random tidbits. It may be different than how the students interact with them. Yet, is ‘teacher mode’ part of our identity? Authentically? Perhaps.

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Elder Bednar was relating this idea in a gospel context, but there are many parallels in an educational setting. Perhaps there is more strength in the authenticity of what we are and utilizing the vulnerability of our weaknesses, as we channel them into strengths. We become more relatable as individuals and therefore are better able to connect with our students.
When students connect a concept with experience, the retention of that concept increases exponentially. For example, in dance instruction, a student has the opportunity to connect the concept of what is being learned physically in his or her body. The concept is applied and better retained. Often a student connects interest in a subject or discipline with a positive experience with a teacher as they may say, “Well, I just had a really great teacher.” As we strive to be the positive connection with our students in our discipline, we will open minds. I may never convert all of my students to love modern dance, but I do believe they leave with a broader vision of what dance could be.

As we guide students on the path of discovery, perhaps we re-evaluate what our ‘teacher mode’ includes. Perhaps it is as simple as sharing our entire passion, not withholding, of the discipline we teach. It may be sharing the updates in our fields’ research that we are still exploring and are not yet an authority. Maybe it is seeking inspiration from the students, as guided by the spirit and sharing a personal antidote. Whatever form it takes, I would invite you to explore the vulnerability that leads to authenticity and connection. In so doing, we progress in this process of shared experience and becoming.

References: