

North Carolina Dance Theatre

Charlotte, North Carolina

Category: Partnerships; Teacher Training; Evaluation; Curriculum Writing

Dance is all about the combination of beauty and efficiency: no movement is wasted. So it's no surprise that a group of dance educators has choreographed a collaboration that is beautiful, efficient and unique in this country. The North Carolina Dance Theatre (NCDT), the Dance and Theatre Department of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC-C) and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System have united to create a curriculum for teaching creative problem solving in dance. This program is based on national and state standards for dance. It's a curriculum that is as grounded as a plié, as powerful and astonishing as a tour jeté.

The partnership started in 1998, with Alain Charron from NCDT, Pamela Sofras from UNC-C, Deborah Cooper from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and videographer Stuart Grasberg. Ambre Emory-Maier of NCDT later brought it to the next level, put it together for a publisher, and created a professional development program: Dance Educator Enrichment Program (DEEP). "Everybody's had a hand in it," says Ambre.

Each unit in this curriculum spotlights a different piece of choreography, not some old dance resurrected from the basements of ballet, but a contemporary piece performed by the North Carolina Dance Theatre. Students live the creative process of bringing a dance from vision to footlights. Ambre says, "You're actually following the inception of a work all the way through its creation and performance. You are learning to experiment and explore and evaluate the process that artist has chosen to use, and applying it to your own work."

The theme of beauty and efficiency is most evident when you look at how this project uses all its resources. It starts when the North Carolina Dance Theatre carefully documents the rehearsal process so it can be used as a basis for lesson plans. The documentation includes making a video and/or CD-ROM of the choreography, which is later used by teachers to complement the lesson plans. Classes that participate in the Capturing Creativity project travel to the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center to see the NCDT perform, thereby having the opportunity to experience a professional performance in a professional setting. The project concludes with a showing of works the students have created, based on the lesson plans and NCDT's original choreography. Finally, after each set of lesson plans is piloted and revised, the complete plans and educational packet are presented at a DEEP professional development workshop.

Dance is not just about beauty but also about strength and enormously hard work, so it stands to reason that a curriculum developed by three groups of working dancers wouldn't just look pretty; it would also have to work. "I see a lot of things out there whose graphics are top-notch," Ambre says, "but when I look at them, the meat of it, it doesn't have much depth. It has to be standards-aligned and sophisticated." To be sure of this, NCDT, in partnership with UNC-C and CMS, is conducting formal evaluations of this multiple-year project, using videotapes, teacher surveys, interviews and focus groups.

One of the most amazing results of this collaboration is that the curriculum was not developed to be used in just one place. Each of the partners has made this curriculum a central part of the work being done. Charlotte-Mecklenburg is using the curriculum in its middle and high schools and even in some elementary schools, NCDT is using the curriculum in its residencies, to train artists and dancers and in its school. UNC-Charlotte's Dance and Theatre Department has incorporated the curriculum into its licensure program for dance teachers. From these three partners, the curriculum has spread to other organizations, and shows every sign of going national.

So what's next for this dynamic partnership? Learning from ongoing evaluations, getting the word out, and creating the pièce de resistance of the curriculum: a unit based on the choreography of Balanchine, in honor of his centennial year, called *Hearing the Dancing and Seeing the Music*.

North Carolina Dance Theatre: www.ncdance.org