

SAM GILL

University of Colorado

Dancing: Creative, healthy teen activity

ABSTRACT

Focused on the Cuban social salsa dance rueda de casino, which has been especially developed for teens, Sam Gill argues that dancing is an exemplar of the most important activities that teenagers can do to nourish their development and to assure that they will achieve their potential. Gill demonstrates this claim in some detail from a variety of perspectives, including motivation and happiness, touch and contact, movement and the kinaesthetic sense, physical exercise, community and diversity, creativity and individuality, gender, music, and his own theoretical construct self-othering. Gill argues that while teens need to engage in many kinds of experience, and need to learn language arts, history, mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences, and so much more, dancing is one of the fundamental experiences that make our humanness possible.

KEYWORDS

dance
high school dancing
dance theory
dance pedagogy
salsa dance
dance and brain
development

It is 11.00 a.m. on a Tuesday. I enter the Community Room at New Vista High School in Boulder, Colorado. As I try to figure out how to work the school's cheap portable CD player, the students in my new salsa class are drifting in, singly and in groups. Punching all the buttons, I have a moment of laughable panic that I'll have to ask the students how to get the thing to work. That would be a great way to start. 'I'm your dance teacher, but I can't figure how to make a CD play'. Finally, totally by accident it would seem, I hit the right combination of buttons and the CD seems ready to go.

Attendance card in hand, I walk toward the teens clustered across the room. They are freshmen through seniors. What does that mean in age range – fourteen to eighteen? There are more girls than guys; more whites than students of colour (and those are all Latin Americans). I circulate among them asking them to write their names on the card and I make a little small talk with them. There are some small groups of three or four that seem to know one another. Several Latinas are hanging together speaking Spanish and dancing together in close embrace. They are doing a dance I've seen and want to know more about. Perhaps later I can get them to teach me. Quite a few of the teens are just hanging alone.

At 11.05 I begin. 'OK, let's go. Everyone come over here and get in a circle and get a partner. Come on!' They look up and a few begin the trek across the room, clearly a little sceptical about this partner-circle thing. I keep encouraging them to actually arrive on the other side of the room, and as the last are arriving I find those who are without a partner and look around for another until I have everyone paired. The group numbers 23 – an odd number – which is nice because that puts me as a participant in the circle. Everyone is paired and in a bean-shaped circle. 11.07.

I don't introduce myself; I don't talk about the dance; I present no rules to them; I have nothing to say other than, 'Turn to face your partner. OK, this (pointing to the inside of the circle) is the inside of the circle and this (pointing to the outside of the circle) is the outside. Now those facing clockwise hold up your outside hand with the palm facing your partner. OK, the rest of you grip the thumb of your partner's hand. Now close down your hands'. I look quickly around to see if most have done this. Oops, there is one pair holding the inside hands. I make eye contact with them and gesture that they need to switch hands. And we begin. 'Everyone step back on your outside foot leaving your inside foot where it is. Now step back on your inside foot without moving it. Now step back forward with your outside foot. Got it? So it is back on the outside, forward on the inside, and forward on the outside. That's a rock step. Let's repeat it'. And so on repeating until I see that they are all doing these first three steps correctly. For those who are not, usually direct eye contact and maybe a hand gesture result in their change. For the one boy who is stepping the wrong way every time, I look at him and emphasize 'forward' and 'outside' and keep repeating until he is doing it correctly. 'OK, now that is half of it. Next we step forward with the inside foot and rock back on the outside foot and step back on the inside foot. It may seem that you will step on your partner or crack knees, but I know you'll soon adjust'. And they do quickly adjust. Then we put it all together: 'back on the outside, forward on the inside'. Over and over. 'This pattern is our basic; it is called *guapea* or *guapeando*'. Confident that they are comfortable with this pattern, I ask them to turn to the person behind them; this switches the parts and we repeat the whole sequence again. This time it goes very quickly. Now it is time for music. I put on some salsa music, grateful that the machine works, and I count them in – 'six, seven, eight, and' – to start the pattern: 'one, two, three, pause, five, six, seven, pause'.

At the end of the first class, after teaching a number of basic move elements, I tell the students, 'What you are learning is a dance that

developed in Cuba and is popular in Miami and danced all over the world. It is called *rueda de casino*. You will be learning both the “lead” and “follow” parts. As you have experienced, there are moves and they have names, usually in Spanish, that are called out to the dancers. Dancers rotate around the circle or *rueda*, switching partners and doing fancy combinations of moves’. During the class, there has not been a break. There are no moments when I have taken any students aside for instruction. No one has received any treatment or instruction different from any other student despite the large differences in experience, body awareness, coordination, and rhythm. ‘See you all tomorrow’.

This class is part of a nine-week, four hours per week seminar programme that distinguished the New Vista curriculum. Most of the students in the class sign up for it not knowing anything about what it is other than (I suppose) that it is a dance class. Few have had a little dance experience, but most have no dance experience at all. Many have undeveloped coordination; others lack confidence; some exhibit noticeably slumped shoulders and downcast eyes. Some seem glued together, unable to function apart from one another. The developmental differences between freshmen and seniors are significant and noticeable, especially among the boys. There are substantial developmental differences between the boys (who seem like boys, even the big ones) and the girls (many of whom seem like women).

The dance is *rueda de casino*, a form of salsa which was developed in Cuba in the mid-twentieth century, and which involves called moves in a repertoire that has many hundreds of moves, many fairly standard throughout the world. The dance is done with partners arranged in a circle (*rueda*) and often includes extensive patterns of rotation among the partners. I have developed the form, as I teach it to high school students (and I also use these developments in the choreography I do for my adult performance group and for my students at the University of Colorado), to include two innovations. One is a called move that effectively changes the parts being danced by all the dancers during the dance. In other words, all the leads become follows and all the follows leads. This is a twelve-count move, so it also changes the connection of the dance within the distinctive eight-count pattern of salsa music. The other innovation is a pair of moves that simply turn the circle to the outside so that, while all of the moves are done exactly the same, they are oriented as though the centre of the circle is outside of the circle. I have included this innovation for a couple of reasons. One is that *rueda* is a social dance, and with called moves and rapid rotation among the partners the movement tends to be almost totally oriented toward the centre of the circle. This interconnectivity reflects the highly social character of the dance. However, as a performance form it is difficult to watch and appreciate because everything seems to be happening inside the circle, where it is difficult for someone outside the circle to see. So to turn all the dancers to orient to the outside opens it to an audience. The second reason for this pair of moves is that they add major challenge for dancers. While the moves are the same, the orientation within the space is different, and the movement among partners is around the outside of the circle (a larger distance) rather than within the circle. Adding these two innovations has many advantages. It allows everyone to dance with everyone without the need to find equal numbers of dancers who know one or the other part. It allows dancers to dance with everyone without consideration of

gender; all boys dance with other boys, as well as all the girls, and vice versa. It creates multiple axes of orientation that has an amazing impact on whole body/brain acuity. As the teacher, I join the group if they are odd in number, or I teach and call without a partner either outside the circle or in the circle if the students are even in number. This can shift on the fly; so if a student comes in or leaves while we are dancing, then I either step in or out and the dancing doesn't even stop.

I have taught this form for over ten years in high schools and as after-school programmes. I have experience teaching this dance form, along with other Latin American forms, to university students and adults for even more years. One group of high school girls became so proficient that they formed a performance group outside of school and I took them to international competition two years. At that time, an all-girls group that could dance both lead and follow and perform amazing choreography as well was rare in the *rueda de casino* competition circles, as was their youth (*rueda* is often danced by couples in their late twenties to mid-forties it seems).

Now it is a Friday, nine weeks later. It is Exhibition Day, the occasion for students to show what they have learned and accomplished in the various seminar classes and individual projects. At the appointed time, the salsa students enter the stage of the school auditorium and arrange themselves as couples in two rows. They are wearing an eclectic combination of colours and clothing styles that they agreed upon. The music begins and they individually strike a number of poses to the breaks in the introduction to Puerto Rican Power's 'Tu Carinita'; and as the beat begins, they do several multiple eight-count move combinations, selected and agreed upon beforehand, with their partners. Then they perform a move where they proceed, couple following couple, in a line circling around to form the *rueda*. The last three couples peel off and form a small circle in the centre of the larger circle. This circle is in *afuera* ('outside') meaning that they do their moves facing outward from the centre, while the larger surrounding circle is in *adentro* ('inside') meaning they are facing the inside of the circle, which is the standard for *rueda de casino*; that is, as a social dance, the attention and energy are all concentrated inside the circle. In this formation they perform several moves as I call them (standing in the wings behind a curtain) that actually cause the outer and inner circles to interact in complicated moving circulating patterns. Then they merge the two circles and begin a variety of complex moves, some taking several eight-counts to execute, with many effecting patterned rotations around the circle. From here to the end the dance is improvisation, meaning that the students know a large number of moves by name, but do not know what moves will be called. When a move is called, the entire group must do the move simultaneously and accurately in the prescribed rhythmic structure. They perform *confusion* several times during the dance, which changes the 'lead' and 'follow' roles, and shifts the dance from 'on one' to 'on five' in the music. And they also do *afuera*, turning the circle to the outside so that the moves will be performed to the outside, which shows the dance much better to an audience. The students perform well with smiling faces and confidence, and strike their poses as the music ends. The packed auditorium has been in an uproar of cheers and whistles throughout.

As I watch the performance, concentrating to make sure I make accurate calls and include all their favourites, I can't help but feel great pride at their stunning performance; but more so, I feel quite frankly amazed by what they have accomplished. In a mere 35 hours of instruction, this motley group has forged themselves into a dance troupe that I know, in certain respects at least, is among the elite *rueda* dance groups anywhere. Of course, they do not have the polish, style, precision, technique or complexity of choreography of many competition groups, most of which are comprised of dancers who are from their late twenties to the mid-forties. However, these high-school dancers can all lead and follow equally after just 35 hours, and they can perform dozens of moves pretty equally in both *afuera* and *adentro* orientations. I know of very few *rueda* groups anywhere that have either of these skills. Many other things also amaze me. As Exhibition Day approached, the students became highly interested in choreographing patterns and forms that would be as challenging to them as possible. Nearly every student provided creative insight into how they should perform. They have become a community – a team – and one distinguished by the clear understanding that everyone's participation is equally important.

1. While throughout this article I will refer to this dance form by the convenient term '*rueda*' or 'teen *rueda* dancing', I intend by it the form of this dance that includes the innovations that I have developed, and also the pedagogy I use for teaching it.

While most people who learn about this form of *rueda de casino* would surely acknowledge that it is an interesting and important activity for teenagers (and even adults), few would hold it as an exemplar of the most important activities that teenagers can do to nourish their development and to assure that they will achieve their potential. I will show in some detail why I believe this to be the case. While teens certainly need to engage in many kinds of experience and need to learn language arts, history, mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences and so much more, I nonetheless believe that none of these are any more fundamental or foundational than the developmental experiences that can be exemplified by *rueda*.¹ I do not believe that *rueda* dancing is the only activity that can accomplish the benefits I will discuss, as many types of challenging, on-demand forms of self-movement have many of the same qualities. As a huge advocate of dancing in any form, I tend to think any dancing has major benefits. There are some benefits quite distinctive to *rueda* and I will discuss them here with the understanding that I do not think them exclusive to this particular dance, but I do consider the various attributes of the dance I will discuss to be exemplary, and therefore may be identified and valued in other movement forms.

Many might say these are crazy claims. It is after all 'just a dance'. Well, yes, and this is at once its greatest difficulty and an important asset. Dancing and body-based activities are typically understood in western societies as different from and of lesser value than serious educational activities. Despite a broad cultural affection for dancing, the valuation of dancing in education and society places it at the bottom of a towering hierarchy. Dancing is valued below music and painting, perhaps because they seem somehow more mindful, reflecting deep values that recognize mind and intellect above body and physicality (a perspective I strongly challenge in this article). Dancing is retained in school environments, if at all, because it is seen as a physical activity necessary for body development (fitness model) or even for release from the rigors of the body-disabling work of the mind (recess model). Some small justification for retaining a tiny element of dancing in public education is that it represents 'culture' in both the sense of cultural heritage (thus square

2. I present this position much more fully in *Dancing Culture Religion* (Gill 2012).
3. Knowing that many readers will be disappointed by my refusal to cite specific reference to this literature, let me explain that, since I have not read this literature systematically and thoroughly, my citations would be somewhat random and, to me, somewhat irresponsible to point to any literature here. Here and several places below I make broad comments that some will want supported by citation. I have made every effort to make such claims only to the degree that they are fairly and broadly uncontested, and to properly qualify them as such.

dancing is taught, but often oddly located in physical education classes) or in the sense of high culture (thus ballet may be studied as a subject related to culture and history, while actual ballet dancing is unlikely to be taught).

This article is focused largely on a consideration and discussion of the many benefits to human development and the enrichment of human life of *rueda de casino* as it is danced by teens. This discussion, supported by my studies of dancing in many cultures, leads to a broad conclusion that dancing is constitutive of our humanity; that dancing is in some senses even more elemental than art, language, ritual and metaphor.² However, it is important to note that, even with such bold claims and even though my field of study is religion, I do not have the need or feel the urge to make reference to dancing as 'spiritual'. In my experience, this word 'spiritual' is a rather slippery one. I think that, in the best and most well-intended uses of the term, it means something like: dancing is a transformative experience; dancing is an experience that feels as though it is the most fundamental of all; dancing has transcendent qualities and affects; and so forth. These are all fine sentiments, yet they need to be supported by careful studies based on specific elements of dancing, so that we may come to understand how dancing is these things. Yet the term 'spiritual' suggests – for me, seemingly unavoidably – the absence of body or the transcendence of body, the mystical, the holy, the Divine, the otherworldly; the term takes us away from the dancing body; the term suggests a premise that the importance of dancing can be articulated only in terms that take us beyond the dancing body; the term, in my view, tends to take the dancing out of dancing. The contemporary use of the term 'spirituality' is strongly associated with the 'New Age', and with those who prefer a more individual sense of their religiousness than that implied by religion. The spiritual often points to something sort of like religion, without the institutions and traditions of specific religions; we say we are 'spiritual but not religious'. It is also often a contemporary euphemism for what a generation ago was called 'primitive'. We need be aware of the potentially pejorative implications of this use of the term. I think many are drawn to this term largely because of the stilted, mechanical, and impersonal objectivist approaches so common to the academy, who often scorn emotion, experience, sensuality and subjectivity. While I concur so wholeheartedly with this assessment that virtually all of my research is directed to exploring alternatives, I don't feel that the use of the term 'spiritual' serves us in this pursuit.

I have to admit that when asked to teach dance to teens for the first time years ago, I did so reluctantly and primarily out of a sense of responsibility to do community service. I had imagined a group of lethargic kids whose attention would be difficult, if not impossible, to hold. Was I ever wrong! The speed and eagerness with which these students learn is – in terms of all my expectations – simply awesome. Having taught the same dance form to adults of various ages, I am stunned by how quickly and happily these kids learn, and how eager they are to learn and help one another learn. It is not unusual to find them in the school hallways practicing moves or simply showing off their moves to their friends.

As I have read the literature focused on teenagers, I am bewildered by the strong tendency to see teenagers as problems.³ I realize now that the attitude of scepticism I had before I started actually working with young people reflects a pervasive societal attitude. I now believe that it is this adult attitude that may be their greatest problem. The kinds of attention given to teens defines them as problems to be understood and solved, more so than as developing human

beings to be nurtured and supported. Attention is on preventing teen pregnancy; reducing teen substance abuse; improving school test scores; reducing teen depression and suicide; encouraging teen rational and responsible behaviour; getting teens to take less risk and to have more foresight, and so on. A large proportion of teen programmes are designed to serve specific teen needs. Grant funding for research on teens and for teen programmes almost invariably requires demonstrated contribution to serving specific teen needs, but where needs are understood often as problems. Whereas the attitude toward children up to age seven is predominantly concerned with providing resources and experiences to contribute to brain and body development, by the beginning of the teenage years, kids have turned into problems to be understood or resolved. Perhaps this attitude correlates well with the commonly accepted (though now recognized as unfounded) understanding that brain development is pretty well complete by the age of seven or before.

My experience with the teen population is certainly limited, and I know full well that there are deep and profound needs that many teens experience. Yet, in my experience working with teenagers, the greater problem is my keeping up with their demands for knowledge, for challenge, for stimulation. I believe that teen problems must be identified and addressed – it ain't easy being a teen, yet we get what we expect. When we see teenagers primarily in terms as perpetrators of anomalous behaviour, as problems to be solved or at least understood (are adults frankly any different?), we are likely to get teens that misbehave, that confound our expectations, and that appear to be problems needing resolution (by us adults). Teens behave in terms of the expectations adults have of them.

Teen *rueda* dancing, as any dancing or educational activity, ought to be appreciated for its intrinsic value, and needs no external justification of its benefits. However, the social needs of teens and adults are well known, and it is worthwhile to say something about needs. Concerns about teens centre on several fronts: a propensity toward high-risk behaviour (driving, drug and alcohol abuse, risky sexual behaviour); a sense of depression due to stress and overwhelmingness; low self-esteem; violence and harassment (bullying); racial, ethnic, age, socio-economic and gender preference discrimination; and failure to achieve full potential (low test scores and grades). While these are identified as youth needs and concerns, it seems to me the list is equally relevant to the adult population. It is important to see that these needs and issues are all of the same fabric, and that this fabric is societal, perhaps now even global. It is important to appreciate how complex the modern world is, and how much pressure we all feel from almost every direction. Perhaps the reason we come to focus these needs more intensely on teenagers is because they fall in that space between the confident parenting practices most families have with pre-teenagers (because they are under greater control in the family) and adulthood, when young people leave home and are less under parental control. Parents of teenagers feel particularly helpless and anxious seeing their children confront the often disenchanting and threatening aspects that accompany being members of our society.

The recommendations for responding to these needs are relatively standard: an environment supported by good family and friends, involvement in meaningful activities, and good food and exercise. Well, yes; aren't these what we all need and want in life. And isn't this easier said than done for teens and adults? Still, the advice is sound if somewhat naïve. It is naïve in that there is some presumption that these things can be delivered to teenagers in

the form of added programmes, whereas it seems rather clear that to actually meet these needs would require a significant shift in society, in the milieu in which we all live.

It is arguable that involvement in meaningful activities that create and nurture human connections, that create communities of acceptance and inclusivity, is vitally important in this most difficult situation. Such activities provide grounding, direction, a base in values that assists us all in navigating the complex, stress-filled modern world. I think there is a difference between something being meaningful and something having meaning. The former aligns with having intrinsic value. We say something is meaningful to us when we love doing it, and yet we may not even be able to say why. The meaningful is usually opaque to the question, 'what does it mean?' For us to ask 'what does it mean?' implies that the thing in itself isn't satisfying; that it needs justifying or being given value by some meaning that can be connected with it. We often use phrases like, 'get the meaning out of it' or 'where is the meaning in it?'

Music and dancing are activities that we describe as meaningful, yet we are often unable to quite articulate what the meaning 'in' them is. Most things that have meaning are what I call propositional; that is, we may propose a statement to 'explain' what something means despite others who may argue with that proposal and offer different statements of meaning. On the other hand, when something is felt to be meaningful, it is something 'known', heartfelt, experienced; there is no proposition; there is no argument or need for explanation. Others may experience it differently, but for us, we simply know that something is meaningful, and we are unlikely to be bothered at all by our difficulty in articulating some kind of meaning. Now, music and art and dance have no exclusive claim on being meaningful as opposed to having meaning; anything can be found to be meaningful by some. I would suggest, however, the activities we find meaningful are those that meet our most basic human needs and that invoke the greatest value. These are the intrinsically valued activities. Almost all education theory I know confirms that intrinsically valued activities have the greatest educational value.

Fitting to a postmodern western culture, teen *rueda* dancing as I have developed and taught it has been engineered to serve identifiable cultural needs, even though I purposefully never explicitly identify those needs to the participants. Teen *rueda* dancing is also fitting to a postmodern world. Characteristic of postmodernity is the absence of anything that is 'real' and dependable. Groundlessness is the hallmark of the postmodern world in which teenagers live and grow to maturity. Everything is seen as questionable. There are no truths. Nothing seems dependable. The angst of the postmodern experience is often felt strongly by teenagers. They are trying to create their adult identities and find grounding for a way of life. Teenage years are often filled with self-doubt, uncertainty, loneliness, disenchantment, overwhelmingness and fear (as are adult years). Teen years are often the occasion for high-risk behaviour, depression and a disregard for possible negative consequences to actions. Teen *rueda* dancing is an activity that is completely engaging, without processing or internal reflection. It is intrinsically motivating. The pace and demands of dancing (if taught effectively) require full presence; therefore processing and reflection are nearly impossible. While it is typically seen as just a fun dance, it is powerfully real in important ways; it is grounded in bodily action and experience. It is mentally challenging and demanding, and it unquestionably engages all the dancers equally with one

another. Touch and contact, cooperation, effort and inclusion are not propositions to be debated or questioned: they are the hard physically experienced facts of teen *rueda* dancing.

In the balance of this article I will discuss the importance of dancing for teens and people of all ages from a number of specific, yet complementing, perspectives.

MOVEMENT AND LEARNING

'Please sit down and be quiet!' 'Stop fidgeting and listen!' 'Keep your hands to yourself'. Most of us have heard these demands from our earliest learning experiences. And most of us continue to say the same things to our children and students. The statements are synonymous with learning. The implication is that movement and touching are the enemies of learning. From earliest childhood we are infused with the unchallenged fact that learning is of the mind, the brain; it occurs best when the body is constrained and movement is discouraged.

Schools are furnished with desks (often ones that are entered like a seat in a cockpit, which makes rapid standing or exiting difficult) that effectively inhibit movement other than of the hands and heads. Classrooms with furniture that limits movement and separates students have existed with little change for centuries. Architecturally speaking, schools are containers where bodies are parked so that learning may take place in the brain. Robust movement of the whole body takes place (when allowed) on the playground or schoolyard or in the gymnasium, all carefully distinguished and separated – both spatially and architecturally – from the classrooms to avoid noise and distraction. Notably, as schools are designed for higher levels of education, the interrelationship between classrooms and gymnasiums and playgrounds shifts to reflect societal intentions. Grammar schools have gymnasiums and playgrounds close at hand. By high school, the playgrounds have become sports fields and the gymnasiums have become athletic centres. Both are clearly removed from classrooms.

Dancing, if it occurs at all in schools, is most likely done in the gymnasium (aligning dancing with sport and fitness) or the cafeteria (often one of the few remaining places not carpeted). In a middle school I recently taught in, the dance room was a dark, low-ceilinged, unventilated, emptied storage room located far from the classrooms. In the high school where I regularly teach, dancing is done in the 'community room', the tile-floored former cafeteria now used primarily as a place where students may congregate to eat lunch.

Societal stereotypes support this separation of moving bodies from learning: dumb jocks (usually boys or masculinized girls) and empty-headed dancers (usually girls or feminized boys). Then there is perhaps the largest secular ritual regularly performed in the USA and Europe today: school graduation exercises, where students and faculty alike don the traditional cap and gown academic garb. These garments, similar to Christian ecclesiastical garments, render the body inarticulate, and actually transform the body to serve as but a pedestal to support the all-important head. Visually, graduation exercises appear as a sea of floating heads. While there is in the USA supposed to be a strict separation of church and state, it seems no mere coincidence that educational, even secular and theological views of the body are about as similar as academic garb is to Christian liturgical vestments (see also Gill 2002).

Clearly we separate mind (brain, soul, spirit) and body, and we value one over the other depending on the context. In education and learning, the mind is central, the body useless, if not the enemy. There are unfortunate implications to this assumption. When we finally realize that the separation and hierarchical valuation of mind and body simply cannot be supported as an accurate understanding of how we function and learn, we must face the negative and limiting implications of continuing to arrange our lives and our educational institutions and practices in alignment with this fundamental principle. I believe that to evaluate learning/teaching environments/methods it is more insightful to focus on movement, and to consider what types of movement are encouraged, enabled and discouraged. This movement approach avoids the rather facile, and often empty, distinction between mind and body.

Recently, a variety of studies, from cognitive science to philosophy, have demonstrated the inseparability of neurology from the experiential perceptual relational activities of the whole person. And studies of teen brains have begun to show that, counter to the common understanding that the brain is physically pretty much fully developed at an early age, there are periods of significant development of the brain throughout the teen years into the early twenties. In a way, this finding seems hardly surprising to anyone who is around teenagers. But it is important to gain this scientific information, as it places some urgency on how teens are treated. Rather than simply focusing on filling and training the brain that has been fixed since kindergarten, we need to nurture its physical growth and its structural transformation. We get a second chance, or a continuing one, to nurture and guide this process. Coincidental to these findings are wide-ranging studies demonstrating remarkable neurobiological plasticity throughout life (Doidge 2007). Indeed, plasticity seems to be an emerging theme characterizing the twenty-first century (Malabou 2009).

What is not yet well known are the details of the impact environment has on brain development during this period. The question is ‘how do we nurture the body in the brain, to use the ideas developed by cognitive scientists?’ Some research has focused on the vulnerability of the brain to long-lasting and critical damage due to such environmental factors as drug and alcohol abuse, and even violent video games (Strauch 2003: 21). It is widely believed that positive environmental factors – exposure to languages, to music, to good families – are vitally important to develop the brains of young children to their fullest potential. It makes sense that positive environmental factors are also important to nurture and shape adolescent brains during this period of exuberance. Marian Diamond, a neuroscientist at the University of California, Berkeley, whose research demonstrates that experience can change the fundamental structure of the brain, supports this view (Strauch 2003: 39). Bill Greenough of the University of Illinois wrote, ‘After adolescence, it’s rare to find a person who can learn and speak a language that is accent-free. There’s something fundamental about how the brain becomes transformed through that period’ (in Strauch 2003: 39).

It is clear from my experience teaching *rueda de casino* to a large number of people, from pre-teen through to 60-year-old adults, that there are very different rates of learning that generally correlate with age. In my experience, pre-teens are rapid learners, but some have difficulty focusing for long periods of time, although many are as capable of extended focus as teens. Teenagers learn with amazing speed and most have the capability to focus for 90 to 120 minutes at a time. By the early twenties, the learning rate begins to decline

and there are significant changes in attitude. Teens usually learn with abandon, with little concern for mistakes or momentary confusion. Adults tend to find mistakes and confusion far less tolerable and take them far more personally. It is clear to me that during adolescence, challenging, on-demand, full-bodied self-movement is essential to growth and development. I believe it continues to be so throughout life, yet aging for various reasons begins to make this sort of movement increasingly difficult to learn and practice.⁴

Other interesting research conducted by Jay Giedd at the National Institute of Health found that the cerebellum continues to change and develop throughout adolescence, and is the part of the brain least affected by heritage or genes. The function of the cerebellum, located near the top of the neck, is not well known, but it is believed to be connected to movement and also to a range of social behaviours, to 'getting' jokes and play. Giedd believes that environment is important, and suggests that the typically prescribed restricted environment may not be best for the brain: 'What if we find out that, in the end, what the brain wants is play, that's certainly possible. [...] What if the brain grows best when it's allowed to play?' (in Strauch 2003: 39).

Research has shown that cross-lateral movement develops the communication between the two halves of the brain. The aspect of teen *rueda* dancing involving constantly changing between lead and follow roles, and turning the *rueda* inside and outside requires dancers to do all movement across several axes of orientation. This ambidextrous movement works similar to cross-lateral movement. The two halves of the brain are connected by the corpus callosum. The lateral division in the body corresponds with the distinct halves of the brain, albeit in a crossed pattern; the right half of the brain is connected with the left half of the body, and vice versa. Cross-lateral movement – even watching one's own hand move across the centre line of the body – increases the communication across the halves of the brain via the corpus callosum, and it is known that this enriches brain development. The ambidextrous nature of doing every dance movement in both lead and follow positions has the benefit of requiring extensive communication within the brain, and requiring both halves of the brain to be equally involved.

The conclusion is that throughout puberty and into the early twenties, brains remain much more flexible than we had, until recently, thought, and they undergo powerful and important changes in ways that have commonly been thought as impossible. The implications of this information are that there is opportunity and responsibility to nurture and feed this brain development through a full range of physical and psychological experiences. Starvation (deprivation of stimulating experience), junk food (mindless television, for example) or poison (abusive behaviour, boring experiences) will have predictable effects. Good brain food is a full range of engaging and challenging physical, social and psychological experiences. The research connecting such teen experiences with positive healthy brain development is now well-established. However, despite them being important, reassuring and comforting, brain studies for me are not actually necessary, and I find it slightly irritating that we need even consider them to justify the importance of dancing to youth development.

4. I'll not take the space here to do so, but it is my view this decline in the learning speed and in the capacity to learn physical skills has at least as much to do with cultural practices that typically lead to a persistently declining engagement in challenging, on-demand self-movement as with chronology.

MOTIVATION AND HAPPINESS

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi articulated for us the character of that wonderful experience we sometimes have when we are totally involved with something we are doing; he called it 'flow', though now it is as often called 'zone' or

'being in the zone' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). His concern was the psychology of 'optimal experience', which he identified with happiness. He studied flow in the context of activities that are widely recognized as being characterized as optimal experiences: basketball ('zone' is closely associated with basketball), rock climbing, surgery, sex, reading a good book, and so on. Flow is experienced when there is an identity of action and awareness. This is the experience of being fully present to the action in which we are engaged. Our awareness is with or within the action, rather than merely standing aside observing. There is minimal self-reflection and external evaluation in flow. The moment we say, 'wow, I'm having fun' or 'oops, I just messed up' we have moved outside of flow. Flow is autotelic activity; that is, the goal or end (telos) that motivates the action is the action itself. Flow occurs when action is intrinsically motivated. Flow occurs when we do what we are doing just for the sake of doing of it. Csikszentmihalyi finds that people closely identify flow – or, optimal experience – with happiness.

Most education is structured around external goals and motivations. Students are constantly pushed to receive high grades, to score higher on tests. Almost everything in learning institutions is evaluated in terms of quantifiable measurements external to the learning experience, and even the content and subject of learning. The measures are almost always artificial and meaningless in themselves: letter or number grades or arbitrary numerical test scores (SAT, for example) or grade point averages. These scores in themselves are artificial and have meaning only in terms of convention (GPA is usually on a 4.0 scale, SAT on a 1600 scale; it would make equal sense if it were the reverse) or correlation with other values (percentiles). For example, scoring above or below a specific number often correlates with acceptance or rejection. Such scores also rank individuals hierarchically within the group. An individual score correlates to a percentile ranking in the group. It is common for parents and even students to translate these scores into monetary value, which is still abstract, but which is now equated with societal, experiential and conventional material values. Sometimes parents 'pay' their children cash for grade achievements, and students often have their GPA translated into potential earning capacity as they advance in education. Test scores are commonly translated into the idea of privileges and freedoms either gained or lost based on levels of performance. This practice correlates with the bonus system and salary levels in jobs in the post-educational world. It persists throughout life, even in the cultural concept of retirement (a relatively recent and culturally specific notion); the freedom to do something intrinsically motivating earned from a life of extrinsically motivated work. There is an implied inverse correlation between extrinsic motivation and optimal experience and happiness.

Almost every student knows from experience that there is, at best, a rough correlation between test scores and learning experiences, or the internal sense of the value of learning. Most students know that there is sometimes even an inverse correlation between test scores and the sensed or intrinsic value of learning. Perhaps one of the things that makes teenagers seem so difficult is that they recognize and acknowledge that all of this is constructed and arbitrary and irrational; and they don't mind saying they know. Adults have come to embrace these as real and meaningful measures of intelligence, achievement, learning and human worth.

Since the educational environment is largely constructed on external artificial goals, there is a disincentive for learning to be autotelic, for students to experience flow while learning. External goals or rewards displace attention

away from the activity, the subject and the experience of learning. It seems flow or optimal experience can occur only in spite of the educational system. If optimal experience, happiness or flow occur primarily when we are doing what we do simply because doing the activity is fully satisfying, if they occur primarily in situations where we need no external rewards or measures, then our educational system often discourages flow, optimal experience or happiness. Should we be surprised that learners are so often bored, uninterested, disenfranchised, unmotivated, difficult and depressed?

Csikszentmihalyi studied what conditions lead to the experience of flow. He understands it, in one way at least, as the correlation of skills and challenges (energetic stress). When the level of challenge matches or slightly exceeds skill level, flow is optimized. If the challenge far outpaces skill, anxiety is likely experienced. If the challenge is far below skill level, boredom is the result. As challenges are met and flow occurs, skill levels rise, and this situation precipitates the need for engaging greater challenge levels (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 74). The idea of flow is important in the attempt to create learning environments that are autotelic; where motivation to learn is intrinsic to the learning experience rather than to artificial external measures. Optimal learning is when learners experience flow; that is, when each learner is in that zone where challenge pushes her or his current level of skill, ability or experience without overwhelming it.

It can be argued that a system where artificial goals serve as primary motivation – and this includes most educational institutions, job situations and even life trajectories – the associated experiences tend to feel meaningless and disenchanting, even overwhelming at times. In such an environment, any experience of flow – anything done for the sake of doing it, anything we do because we love it – creates a grounding experience that helps us understand and experience who we are. Because such experiences are so powerful, so foundational, so necessary, so fun, they profoundly shape our fundamental values and sense of self. They provide self-confidence, meaningful lives, base values and happiness. Teen *rueda* dancing is ‘flow’; that is, doing it is the primary motivation. It is simply fun to do. It offers its own rewards and these cannot be quantified. The dynamics that create flow in teen *rueda* dancing are tied to both the dance form and to specific pedagogy. The conjunction of action and awareness is inseparable from the form. Dancers move together simultaneously based on the demands of the music and the ‘call’. There is a constant challenge to perform actions simultaneously and on the beat. The music does not stop; the calls come constantly, so there is no space to space out, to lose attention, not even to reflect on how well one is dancing. Pedagogically, the pace and the demands presented through the call and the teaching of new moves must be gauged to keep all dancers in the present moment. Most dancers experience the common attribute of flow, which is the loss of the experience of the passage of time. Flow especially occurs when teen *rueda* dancers are dancing to fast music. It is common for a class to run over time simply because the song is still playing and the calls are still coming. Students rarely say, ‘we’re running over time!’ At the end of class it is common to hear students say, ‘Wow! Is class over already?’

The pedagogy I have developed for teen *rueda* dancing is designed to keep dancers in the flow channel as much as possible. Teenagers learn with amazing speed, even though when presented with a challenge they often groan and feign a sense of the impossibility of learning something new. Teaching teens to dance *rueda* requires the fine-tuned awareness of the

students in order to match the challenge being offered to the current skill/experience level of the group – the *rueda*. The *rueda* moves are systematically arranged so that they can be taught in a sequence of increasing levels of challenge. The form can become so complex as to seem endless in the possibility of increasing levels of challenge. It is open-ended in this respect. Properly taught, teen *rueda* dancing can keep dancers almost constantly in flow. In the experience of flow, dancers exert themselves physically and mentally at levels far beyond what would be possible based on external goals and rewards, and often individuals achieve far more in the group than they ever could as an individual. Student attention is highly focused and can last for a much longer period of time than in any system where there are external goals and motivations, or where the challenge differs significantly from the present level of skill/experience.

Teen *rueda* dancing provides the kind of experience that allows the dancers to actually experience what it is like to do something just for the sake of doing it, to be absorbed by the action so fully that they cease to be aware of anything else. The experience of flow is foundational to self-confidence, to an understanding of value and motivation, and to a sense of happiness and satisfaction. There is also something amazingly bonding among members of a group that simultaneously experience flow. The word ‘team’ is a way of designating this experience, as is the word ‘community’.

Stress is attributed as the cause of many of the problems and illnesses of contemporary society. Most of us suffer stresses of schedules, demands, financial pressures, superficialities, a senselessness of so much that we are required to do, and simply the relentless pace of life. Most of us rarely relax; many of us do not even know what it is to relax. Even play and relaxation have become work for many, along with the accompanying stress. The effects of stress are physiological as well as psychological (Jensen 2000: 64). ‘Tension stress’ is often an aspect of the pressures, demands and measurements of externally motivated actions. Tension stress is different from ‘energetic stress’, which is associated with physical challenge, competition and the demands of learning a new skill, particularly intrinsically motivated activities. Energetic stress often enhances learning. One of the most effective reducers of tension stress is movement. Challenging movement, such as teen *rueda* dancing, both reduces tension stress and presents energetic stress.

TOUCH AND CONTACT

Teen *rueda* dancing requires touching. And look who is touching whom. Boys are holding other boys’ hands, girls girls’ hands, and boys and girls are connected with their hands and bodies. Look at the way they are touching. This connection results in the lead’s palm in contact with the back of the follow’s hand. Compared with a palm-to-palm hold where fingers may intertwine, this is a safer, somewhat less personal kind of touching. Touch is basic to *rueda* dancing and communication. It is introduced immediately, without reflective comment or use of the word touch.

The other common hand-to-hand connection in *rueda* dancing is where the dancers have an open hand with fingers overlapping; that is, where the tips of the fingers of each dancer are at the base of the partner’s fingers. In the *guapea* (basic) connection, the hands correspond with the roles. Left hand on top is lead; right hand holding the partner’s thumb and grasped from the back is follow.

Popular author Diane Ackerman (1990: 80) concluded insightfully that 'touch seems to be as essential as sunlight'. Touch is, in evolutionary terms, often considered the first sense to come into being, and is developed even in the simplest single cell creatures such as the amoeba. All the other human senses can be understood as specialized touch sensations: hearing as the compression of air on the ear drum; smell as the contact of chemicals on the nasal membrane and taste buds; and sight as photons encountered by the retina. Based on concrete anatomical and physiological connections, the skin can be understood as the surface of the brain; or, equally as important, the brain is the deepest layer of the skin. At birth, physical and mental development are both dependent upon the child being touched. Massaged premature babies gain weight as much as 50 per cent faster than those who are not massaged. Studies in early twentieth-century orphanages by paediatrician Dr Henry Dwight Chapin found a mortality rate of over 90 per cent during the first year for infants deprived of touch (Juhan 2003: 43–44).

At a conference on touch called by Johnson & Johnson in 1989, Saul Schanberg noted, 'We forget that touch is not only basic to our species, but the key to it' (in Ackerman 1990: 78). Helen Keller gave us profound insights about the importance of touch to being human. Keller lived a full and amazingly rich and productive life in a world without sight or hearing, relying extensively, almost exclusively, on touch. It is unimaginable that one could survive without the sense of touch. Constance Classen (2005: 1) wrote that touch 'is a fundamental human medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies' The complexity, profundity and importance of touch are reflected in the fact that 'touch' is the longest single entry in the unabridged dictionaries of many languages. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, runs fourteen full columns (not that physical dictionaries are very common these days). Add to that related words such as 'touchable', 'touching', and 'touchy' and it fills 21 columns.

Touch – the sensory organ distributed throughout the skin that encloses and defines the body – teaches us the difference between self and other. While touch seems located on the surface of the skin, touch clearly denotes depth and contour. Our skin, the tactile surface, is the interface between our bodies and the world, but just as importantly, it is the interface between our physical existence and our thought and emotional processes. We say we are 'touched' by something when we feel deeply about it. Touch gives experiential shape to the world around us. Without touch, we 'feel' the true isolation that is at the heart of the enigma of being human; we experience the anxiety of separation and being alone. No wonder touch-based therapies are so common in our society today, from the scalp massage of our hair stylist to massage therapists and a host of body workers. Philosopher and scholar of human perception Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) created an entire philosophical system based on the metaphor of touch.

Feeling is something we do with the skin sensors to engage the world around us, but it is also a reflection of our inner being and emotions – our feelings. It is no accident that this sense incorporates both these meanings, and that physical touch is closely associated with emotions. Since touch is the sense that connects us to the world, to others, even to our sense of ourselves; since touch is surface (our entire skin surface), but also depth (our complete emotional landscape), it is little wonder that touch is both indulged and feared. The awareness of the connection of emotion with touch has allowed us to appreciate the depth of impact of physical and sexual abuse on the total

human being. The societal reaction to abusive touching has often been to avoid, even forbid touch in many public and social contexts. There was a time early on in the twentieth century when psychologists warned parents against touching their children, and counselled to avoid touching them as much as possible ('Unconditional Love' 2007). In the past couple of decades, to prevent inappropriate touching and bullying, schools have widely prohibited touching of any kind by any one. Touch scholar Tiffany Field recounts a poignant example of the possible negative effects of this prohibition:

A recent Oprah Winfrey show focused on this issue of teachers touching children. The president of the National Education Association said, 'Our slogan is, teach, don't touch.' One of the teachers on the show taught music. In the green room before the show, she told me that of course she had to touch children, as for example when she taught them to play the violin. But on air she said, 'In our classroom, we hug with our eyes.' Oprah walked over to her and said, 'Did you get that hug I just sent you?'

(Field 2001: 3)

Rules against any kind of touching in learning environments are ubiquitous. Yet, while it is essential to create effective safeguards to prevent and discourage inappropriate and abusive touch, the elimination of touch altogether amounts to the deprivation of the inarguably nurturing and healthy forms of touch that enable any person to feel connected to others and to the world, and to understand herself or himself emotionally and physically. Touch has unfortunately become taboo, and is now identified with risk and danger.

We must find ways to incorporate safe and appropriate touch in our lives, particularly the lives of our developing young people. We learn of the importance of touch in the studies of Dr James Prescott, a developmental neurophysiologist at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, who wrote, 'I believe that the deprivation of body touch, contact, and movement are the basic causes of a number of emotional disturbances which include depressive and autistic behaviors, hyperactivity, sexual aberrations, drug abuse, violence, and aggression' (Prescott 1971: 1–20).

To my knowledge, few if any movement forms are considered in terms of their importance in engaging the sense of touch and human contact. I believe that teen *rueda* dancing incorporates touch and contact in healthy, safe and important ways. First, I do not believe that teen *rueda* teachers should ever explicitly discuss or comment on touch and touching in terms of possible appropriateness or dangers, or include warnings. Touch is necessary to the dance, and the focus must be totally on how dancers physically connect to accomplish the demands of partner communication and interaction. The dance simply cannot be done without physical connection; that is, without touching one another. The characteristics of this physical connection, this touching, is safe in several senses. The actual touching has a clear utilitarian and necessary value, with nothing suggesting anything personal, sensual or sexual. Furthermore, physical contact is brief and open for all to see, and it is incidental to other-directed micro-goals like completing a move. So it is safe; it is appropriate; it is necessary; it does not call attention to itself; it is something most dancers are scarcely aware of; they know they are connecting physically, but they do not think of it as touching with the supersensitive connotations society, and especially schools, now associate with it.

Yet, this touch is amazingly important. It is through physical contact that dancers connect and communicate with one another. It is an essential medium of exchange one has with every other dancer. The communication that is involved between dancers connected only by fingers is truly astounding. All dancers quickly become experts at reading their partner's rhythm, knowledge of a particular move, attitude and style, energy, individuality, and so on, and immediately react and respond to their partners with their whole bodies connected through touching. The rapidly acquired micro-skills of leading, following and back leading (when a follow leads a move rather than the lead) are all based on touch and contact. In a world where one of the most common and troubling experiences of not only our young people, but also of all people, is a sense of being isolated and alone, this amazing ability to communicate through touch must surely have a significantly positive impact on these feelings.

The touch and contact involved in teen *rueda* dancing stands in sharp contrast with 'contact sports' like football and soccer, both so beloved by our society. The touch and contact in 'contact sports' are based largely on violence and brute strength. It seems that a great deal can be said about a society that embraces and values contact based on violence, while offering so little opportunities for contact forms based on refined subtle touch.

MOVEMENT AND THE KINAESTHETIC SENSE

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle wrote:

The entire preoccupation of the physicist is with things that contain within themselves a principle of movement and rest. And to seek for this is to seek for the second kind of principle, that from which comes the beginning of the change.

(Aristotle 340 BC)

Motion is life. Motion is key to depth perception. Movement is freedom.

Any skill – for example, dancing – requires sensorimotor interplay involving movement and contact (proprioceptive) with the environment. The acquisition of a skill is accompanied by a feeling of 'rightness'; that sense that the movement produces satisfactory results. The movement sometimes becomes habitual, or it is relied upon for both quotidian tasks and artistic endeavours. In *Job's Body* (2003), Deane Juhan comments on the importance of this feeling of 'rightness':

So much of my sense of psychological and physical continuity, my sense of unity and security, depends upon my ability to repeat appropriate and predictable actions, that this feeling of 'rightness' can scarcely be overestimated in its importance as an element of my psychic integration as a whole. Each time I 'get the feel' for a new response, I also get a new feel for myself and for my relation to the world of external objects at large.

(Juhan 2003: 188–89)

Proprioception (from the Latin *proprius*, meaning 'one's own' plus receptor) – sometimes referred to as the kinaesthetic sense – is fundamental to human life. Too few of us know anything about it. Proprioceptors of several types are sensory

receptors located in muscles, tendons and joints. They convey information about the physical state and position of skeletal muscles and joints. Proprioceptors provide essential information for smooth coordinated safe movement and the maintenance of body posture (Beck 1992: 28–35). Proprioceptors give intercommunication for the organization of movement and the body's orientation in space. The kinaesthetic sense is the feeling we have for the size, shape, location and motion of our bodies. Proprioception gives us a sense of ourselves as active moving subjects. We must have a kinaesthetic sense in order to walk upright in the dark, or move our hands and all our body parts without seeing them. The kinaesthetic sense is how we feel who and where we are. Notably, the kinaesthetic sense is based on movement and muscular responses, often to peripheral sensation; yet every muscular movement in turn initiates a reciprocal change in peripheral sensation (Juhan 2003: 186). Perception and movement are inseparable. Movement unites perception with self-awareness. Movement connects us to the world, uniting while at the same time distinguishing the world outside and the world inside.

Teen *rueda* dancing is constant movement requiring proprioceptive awareness of the body in all of its parts. The proprioceptive and exteroceptive awareness that connect dancer to dancer, dancers to music, and dancers to the precise execution of movement are demanding, and it is through the ongoing dancing that the enhancement and refinement of proprioception is demonstrable among all dancers. An increase in an individual's sense of her or his own body, body image and its place in the world is accompanied by increases in self-esteem and confidence.

PHYSICAL EXERCISE

Clearly teen *rueda* dancing aligns with almost all movement forms in achieving the benefits of physical exercise. The obvious first thing anyone would think of is the benefit of physical exertion and activity. However, very few dancers mention exercise when asked why they enjoy dancing. All dancers feel physically and mentally tired at the end of a class or party, and with good reason. Most have broken a sweat. When done to music, each dancer steps between 4000 and 6000 steps per hour. This is equivalent to a brisk two- to three-mile walk per hour, and most classes or parties are one-and-a-half to two hours long. Physical exercise obviously increases heart rate, arousal and oxygen intake; it helps control weight, increases one's sense of well-being and helps manage stress. Plenty of research exists that extol the benefits of these physical states. And, of course, teen *rueda* dancing is not mindless gross body exercise like running on a treadmill. It is also a challenging, whole-bodied movement. Nor does it focus on limited muscle groups, but engages many parts of the body. Teen *rueda* dancing engages young people in vigorous exercise without them even thinking of it as exercise. My experience of teaching teens over the years provides insight into the importance of this physical exercise. I have been stunned at how sedentary most teens have become, and how physically exhausted many of them seem constantly to be. Pedagogically, I have learned never to stop dancing; even the slightest pause commonly results in at least half of the teens dropping to the floor. While their apparent exhaustion may stem from their lifestyle, surely some of it is simply due to their very low level of fitness.

COMMUNITY AND DIVERSITY

Teen *rueda* dancing is an experiential laboratory on building community. In the *rueda*, when a dancer does not do her or his part, there is a natural inclination and incentive for others to assist. While this may be done verbally (and in my experience it is usually done fairly gently), it is more often done by simply physically assisting the dancer-in-need (this too is, in my experience, done gently). This assist often requires no more than a gentle guiding of another with the hand on the back or arm. It is part of the pedagogy I have developed that such cooperation is not explicitly taught or commented on as part of my instruction. Only occasionally do I say, 'If someone needs help, tell them what to do, or give them a little push'. It is a simple fact that sooner or later all dancers will find themselves lost or going in the wrong direction, and will appreciate that softly spoken word, or little push or pull. I believe that this gentle, mutual yet tacit assistance is an important part of the dancers' experiences. It tells dancers that it is OK to mess up; it is also OK to reach out and help; it is OK to be helped. In the fast pace of the dance, the circle quickly absorbs these little glitches with gracious assistances. And when the circle totally breaks down – which it does once in a while – it is the occasion for laughter, the expression of acceptance. When this happened, the circle can quickly be reformed because all dancers both lead and follow, so there is no need for sorting out time. 'Grab a partner; let's go!' I shout, and usually by the next 'one' count we are back in sync. Dancers quickly learn to do this themselves. In a circle of a dozen couples it is fairly common for a small error to confuse several couples in one area of the circle. The circle doesn't stop and wait for them to sort things out. It goes on, and the pressure – the good stress – of the dancing circle beseeches the dancers to get with the circle, even if they are now in a different role and with a 'wrong' or unintended partner. It is pedagogically essential to believe in the *rueda*, the community. *Rueda* dancers are never removed from the circle for instruction. Even individual instruction is given, as necessary, on the fly, simultaneous with the group dance movement. It is my policy to never call attention to individual errors. It is far more effective to allow the principle of acceptance and mutual cooperation to be a discovery of all the members of the group through their dancing experience.

A bit more might be said about pedagogy. While in teaching there is no reflection on the meta matters – that is, on anything secondary, such as telling people to be kind and respectful to others, or to tell dancers to help others, or to reflect on how much fun we are having, or what great exercise this is, or that isn't it nice that dancing is changing our mood or helping us connect with people different from us – this kind of reflection is, I believe, not only unnecessary, but also actually distracting from the many benefits of simply allowing the dancers to experience the dancing in their dancing. Such reflection would disrupt the 'flow' of the dance. The core principle of the pedagogy is to create a highly energized environment of expectation, achieved by sticking to the task, which is dancing in the *rueda* and constantly moving the *rueda* to a new level of experience – to higher levels of challenge. The emphasis is on connectivity and inclusivity, and these are not propositional ideas or goals: they are the unquestioned expectations of all dancers.

Rueda dancing generally makes quick work of adjusting for individual differences among the dancers, and for adjusting to dancers that may not yet be comfortable with the moves. As the moves become more and more advanced, the follows may back-lead leads who are confused or learning

a move. This practice becomes common and is scarcely noticeable to most observers. What happens is that the follow actually assists the lead to lead them in a move. While back-leading can become a bad habit of some dancers (and for some teachers) who think they must lead everything even when they are following, the fact that all dancers learn how to do this (and they learn without being explicitly taught, I must add) adds an entirely new dimension to the cross-lateral ambidextrous aspects of this dance. The physical connection of partners is interactive, and dancers are constantly testing through touch and contact the physical micro-signals to assess the status of their partner. If the lead actually needs some help, the follow will sense this and, without a word spoken, instantly engage the back-lead so that their partners can help them get through the move successfully and keep up with the circle. There is never time to simply stop and work it out. Leads will often say a quiet 'thank you' to a follow at the end of a back-led move. Sometimes leads that do not know a move will quickly ask their follow to help them. This is learning to be sensitive to another, to help when needed and to do so without calling attention to the exchange. This also is an amazing experiential metaphor for partner relationships of all kinds.

The dancers learn that every member of the *rueda* must perform her or his role responsibly and immediately on demand. The dancers also learn that all members of a community sometimes need help and guidance. They learn that providing help is best done gently and even silently. There is no need to criticize those who need help or to call attention to them. A little help is all that is needed and it will soon be reciprocated. A community is an interactive, interdependent, inclusive entity. The rewards of the community are in the experience of doing things as a group that an individual could never do alone. The motivation is in the experience of cooperation, coordination and a joyous experience of the group activity. Dancers learn that leadership is necessary; there must be a caller for the group to initiate action. Dancers know that they may strive to play that leadership/initiating role by learning to call. Dancers learn that there is room for the expression of their individuality through, for example, styling elements. So teen *rueda* dancing is inclusive and it creates community – a sense of unity we might call a 'team'.

Achieving acceptance among people who are different from one another is one of the world's greatest challenges today. It seems the whole world is divided and at war over the misunderstanding or intolerance of difference, as evident in international politics. The whole colonial era has habitually approached difference negatively; as a problem to be resolved by forced sameness. Even the common educational device of comparison – surely the most fundamental operation of all learning – conventionally implies discerning similarity rather than the more technically accurate inclusion of both similarity and difference. The implication is that meaning is strongly associated with sameness, whereas meaninglessness is associated with its absence. This is why teachers must ask students to 'compare and contrast'.

The terms we use to describe types of difference are telling. Ethnic (and that horrible objectivizing pluralisation of the term, 'ethnics') commonly refers to the ethnically other or different, or to people of colour. The term 'ethnic' commonly has pejorative connotations, yet every human being has an ethnicity. Disabled seems to divide the world into like us and not like us, isolating the others – the disabled. Yet there are countless abilities we all possess, and there is never a simple distinction between abled and disabled in any area of ability. Clearly we are all differently abled. We divide along lines of difference,

fear and hate, even though homogeneity is not always clearly enriching, challenging or healthy. Solve the issue of difference – our attitudes and valuations of difference – and most of the other problems like violence and harassment will go away.

Dancing has long served as the bridge to integration; not just the artificial studied tolerance of difference, but also its true appreciation. Today, dance groups from all over the world fill entertainment venues. We enjoy the dances of others and seek to be enriched by both observing them and learning to dance them. Most cultures are pleased that others are interested in learning their dances.⁵ Dancing is a natural and common bridge between people and cultures. In the flow of dancing, the issues of political, economic, racial and religious differences often have no place.

During the swing/Lindy Hop era of the 1920s and 1930s, thousands of whites in New York City danced in the great ballrooms of Harlem, such as The Savoy; more importantly, they learned to dance from the black dancers. Decades before the civil rights movement, blacks and whites danced together peacefully and joyfully, and whites voluntarily embraced black dances and dancers.

Teen *rueda* dancing achieves integration as well. The *rueda* is inclusive, with the ability to integrate along many axes of difference: age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, religion, politics, personal style, ability, skill, experience, et cetera. Teen *rueda* pedagogy never verbally reflects on the acceptance of difference, but rather acts unquestionably inclusively at all times.

Dancing – both dance programmes created for young people and also dancing as it commonly occurs in our culture generally – is often based on a competitive sport model. Breakdance (breakin') and hip hop are dance forms based on symbols of aggression and competition. Historically, they arose as less violent alternatives to physical aggression, to gang-like behaviour. The progressive elimination model of sport and reality television is central to the hugely popular television shows *Dancing with the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, which is more appealing to teens. It is also the basis of the Dancing Classrooms programme offered to over 40,000 students in over 500 schools centred in New York City schools by the American Ballroom Theater Company, and now presented in cities throughout the world. As depicted in the popular documentary film *Mad Hot Ballroom* (Agrelo, 2005) and the commercial film *Take the Lead* (Friedlander, 2006), Dancing Classrooms is based on the progressive elimination of dance groups from various schools until a single school's dancers are found to be the winners. In contrast to the competition sport model with progressive eliminations, teen *rueda* dancing relies primarily on intrinsic motivation and inclusivity. It has no back row and is not focused on selecting the winner out of all the others who, it would seem, must see themselves, in some sense, as losers.⁶

INDIVIDUALITY AND CREATIVITY

But what about individuality? In such a group-centred activity, it seems fair to ask whether there is any room for individuality and for distinctively individual expression. Contemporary society places high value on individuality and freedom of expression. Every person in teen *rueda* must be on the same beat in the music, and accurately and simultaneously execute the moves that are called. In dancers' experience, every individual has a responsibility to the community,

5. This attitude is certainly not universal. For example, despite having written a number of books on Native American religious cultures and having spent a great deal of time observing Native American dancing, I rarely make mention to any of these dances in my academic studies, and I can't imagine including one of these dances as something for students to experience. This is simply because Native Americans have made it quite clear that they do not consider it to be respectful to make such reference to or participate in their dancing. Cultural wishes must always be honoured.
6. There is also the large American industry of dance competition focused primarily on jazz, lyrical, contemporary, hip hop and tap, all with a strong ballet base. Girls almost exclusively participate in these competitions, although boys are not excluded. The competition is designed so that all dancers and dance groups are judged and receive an award based on their performance. So although no one is left out in terms of awards, there are many other ways that dancers are distinguished hierarchically.

and that achieving one's individual potential is satisfying because of the effect on the group. Individual achievement and expressiveness is always possible through the endless potential for styling, technique, form, partnering skill, and the level of dancing experience and knowledge. Dancers can move from circle to circle based on their level of skill and experience. Dancers can learn to call the moves, thus engaging higher and higher levels of challenge, and the accompanying experience of fun and satisfaction.

So-called 'creative dance' is often understood as that sort of dance where an individual is flitting about in totally 'free form', unrestricted in any way, even by music or any movement conventions. Many may experience this kind of formless (which, by the way, it is not) dancing as creative. However, the act of creating something involves creating form. The most satisfying creation comes within the context of some form; exercising its energetics, pushing its limits, discovering something others have yet to accomplish. This is why almost all creativity occurs within a genre, often a tiny sub-genre. Photography is a good example. While most of us snap a picture now and then, only the accomplished and creative photographer can create images that are art. Dancers in the *rueda* learn that endless creativity and potential are enabled by the conventions and form of the dance.

Dancers are often amazed when shown a move they are about to learn. When they see a new move for the first time, many see it as utterly novel, and they often think it will be impossible to learn it. Yet, while learning the move later, they realize it is comprised of different ways of executing and combining the simpler elements they already know into a flowing remarkably delightful new move – a work of art. *Rueda de casino*, while comprised of hundreds of named moves, is based on about a half dozen basic elements.

Teen *rueda* dancers can (and often do) make up new moves and variations on moves, but they do not have to do so in order to gain essential insights about creativity through their dancing experiences.

GENDER

Society presents rather clear images of gender roles and the expectations of gender relationships. This aspect of society is among the most controversial and contentious around. Failure or refusal to conform to the established gender roles often comes at a great personal cost. Gender roles related to dancing are particularly strongly enforced by our society. It is a fairly pervasive view that dancing is for females only. We have all heard the phrase 'white men can't dance', which can be used in so many unfortunate ways. The popular film *Billy Elliot* (Daldry, 2000), set in County Durham, England in 1984, explored the family and community repercussions of a boy who wanted to dance ballet. Boys are rarely enrolled in ballet classes or any of the other dance classes for young people. Even hip hop, despite its roots in breakdance, is more commonly danced by girls in many places across the world. The principal bastion of male dancing is breakdance. It tends to be gender exclusive as well. Until the last decade or so, girls have been largely excluded. The so-called B-girl was rare indeed, and when present, she usually danced in a marginal role. Dancing and gender role go hand in hand, in ways I feel are often anything but healthy.

Teen *rueda* dancing deals with the gender issue most effectively by actually not paying attention to it at all. Certainly the pedagogy acknowledges that dancers are gendered people, but the dancing does not associate any dance

role expectations with a dancer's gender. Furthermore, there are no gender associations with any aspect of the dance. The results are not to simply ignore gender and gender roles, but to open the space for individuals to explore and experience various roles that they know have gender connotations in the larger society. Everyone knows that in society at large and in history, the male is the lead, and by leading actually acts out his masculinity. Females follow with the connotations of being secondary and passive and responsive. I have often heard male social dance teachers describe gender associations with dance roles this way: 'The lead's [meaning the man's] job is to show off the beauty of the follow [the woman, of course]'. Or: 'The lead asks [through bodily action presumably] the follow "will you take this action?" and the follow graciously accepting, "Yes, I'd be most happy to do so"'. The intention of these statements may seem nice, but the gendered values maintain the same gendered images: the woman is the passive pretty one to be humoured into the man's strong, wilful yet sensitive guidance or manipulation.

In teen *rueda* dancing, everyone experiences every role without anything being identified as gendered. Through this experience, dancers learn that following is as demanding as leading, but that it is also different. I believe that most teen dancers have few if any explicit thoughts about gender and gender role when they dance (at least, I never hear them say anything).⁷ Particularly for young people developing gendered identities and exploring gender roles, this dancing experience offers a healthy accepting context whereby gender does not equate to role expectation. I knew this worked when one day I drove up in front of the high school where I was teaching and saw two boys on the school ground in plain sight of many other students practicing salsa moves together. It was also amazingly clear when one session of the class was made up of a dozen boys and three girls. They received huge school support when they performed for the whole school at the end of the term. Teen *rueda* dancing provides a safe comfortable environment for gay, bisexual and undecided young people.

7. Interestingly, I have noticed a slight hesitation a couple of times with boys from cultures that have strong gender identities related to touching and dancing. One boy from a Middle Eastern culture modified his touch behaviour by not placing his hand on his partner's back. Boys from cultures that expect the male to lead usually lose their hesitancy as soon as they experience the difficulty of following.

MUSIC

Teen *rueda* dancing is done to music. Music is the tapestry that holds all the dance designs woven into it. The rhythm is what grounds the simultaneity of the movement by all the dancers. The tempo of the music corresponds with the dancers' levels of energy, intensity, focus and motivation. Interestingly, adults tend to prefer slower music while learning, yet teenagers absolutely love fast music that pushes them and challenges them, and that helps them to stay focused and in the zone.

It is vogueish today to attempt to argue the importance of music to education based on scientific studies that indicate its impact on brain development and on student performance as based on academic test scores. While clearly well intentioned, this sort of effort seems narrow-minded to me; yet it is played to the narrow-mindedness of an educational system that seems to measure everything in terms of cost per student per year in relation to test scores. It seems that if one cannot demonstrate that the inclusion of music in school curricula does not cost-effectively produce increases in test scores, it should not be included. But the question might be asked: What is so important about young people learning the math, science, language, history, and so forth, that is included in academic testing? Can it be anything other than to allow the development of healthy, happy, responsible, well-adjusted human

beings whose lives are enriched in every possible way? Is there anyone on earth that would contest that music and art and dance and literature and beautiful things are essentials of the sought-after life?

Cultural, historical, sub-cultural and individual identities are all created through music and dancing. There has never been a community in human history without these. That there needs be any discussion of the importance of music and dancing at all suggests a shameful and alarming narrow-mindedness and a failure of education. Anyone even modestly educated in the humanities and in history would appreciate the importance of music, dance and art in all human cultures. I like to think of the story of the Inuit woman who was isolated from her people and lived alone for many years. When she was found and rejoined her community, all the clothing she had made herself while alone was elaborately decorated. So while it is certainly interesting to learn about the impact of music on brains and test scores, I have to respond to this laboured effort to justify music as powerfully affecting human beings in the same way most teenagers surely would: 'Duh!'

Furthermore, I find these studies narrow-minded in another way. All that I have read seems to understand music as limited largely to western commercial and classical music. The controversial 'Mozart effect' is a good example. The Mozart effect is a theory suggesting that classical music – particularly Mozart (and specific Mozart compositions at that) – increases brain activity, and is accompanied by short-term improvements in certain brain functions such as spatial-temporal reasoning. Some have even suggested that particular works by Mozart reduce the number of seizures in people with epilepsy.

While these studies seem to have a limited understanding of music, they also seem rarely to differentiate between music styles. Not surprisingly, classical seems the standard; but should there not be studies to determine the effects on learning of all forms of music, particularly the genres popular among teens? I have often let students select their own music to use to dance *rueda* to. Anything with a beat can work, and it is often fun for them to select their favourite music and dance to it. The enormous range of music that they enjoy always surprises me. Another thing I find missing in the studies promoting music as fundamental to learning is the acknowledgement that while schools may have reduced or stopped teaching music, students are not thereby deprived of music. In my experience, the student without an iPod or MP3 player is even more rare than the student without a cell phone that has ring tones of all the latest tunes. Every school has quite a few students involved in garage bands, kids hanging out together endlessly making music. The music-is-good-for-learning studies do not take into account that almost all young people spend a large percentage of their time listening to and making music; nor do they seem aware that most teachers strictly forbid the use of music players during class.

One last complaint of these studies – as well-meaning as I believe them to be – is that they almost never mention the relationship between music and movement/dance. It is a simple fact that almost all the world's music throughout human history has been dance music. Throughout its history, the successful salsa bands and musical developments in salsa have been those that have most delighted dancers. This is true of most forms of music. In the history of the development of jazz music, it was enormously popular so long as people could dance to it. When it developed into music that wasn't danceable, its popularity dropped and it became music for an esoteric and elite segment of society (Burn 2001, 2002). We all know that, long before they talk, small children in all cultures 'dance' when they hear music. Only fairly recently have we

begun to lose that sense of the close proximity of music and dancing, and this shift aligns with the duplication and commercialization of music recordings.

Teen *rueda* dancing is done to music and it is also the participation of extending the rhythm while dancing. In the eight-count rhythm, dancers step on counts one, two, three, five, six and seven.⁸ There are rarely instruments in Latin music that play this rhythm explicitly. The rhythmic structure of salsa music is created through the interplay of many different instruments and musicians – timbales, bongos, congas, cowbell, and so on – and the dancers' step-patterning participate in this complex layering of rhythms. Salsa dancing is making rhythm; that is, making music, while at the same time carefully listening to the music, its character, flavour, colour. Spanish-speaking dancers also enjoy the lyrics.⁹ Dancing and music are as inseparable as dance and music have been throughout human history. Salsa dancers experience this interplay bodily, both absorbed in it and creatively participating in it like members of the band.

It may also be argued that since music and rhythm are powerfully connected with cultural and historical identity, the participation in these rhythms is an experientially based way of learning about and appreciating cultures and histories. Latin rhythms are very different to Top 40 hit music.

DANCING AS SELF-OTHERING: THE HUMAN DISTINCTION

Of all human art and cultural forms, dancing is arguably the most bodied; the most neurobiologically integrative. Dancing is the body. Dancing is done with the body being both the means and the outcome. In dancing, the body is both instrument and outcome; both process and product. I find that while dancing does many things – such as create and enact identity, negotiate differences, enact protest, effect change – and it is thus powerful, it is in some greater sense constitutive of being human. This is what interests me most (Gill 2012). That is, as I understand dancing, it is inseparable from that which distinguishes us as human beings. Dancing is the very source of the powers, behaviours and abilities that make us human. In terms of human development, dancing is pre-linguistic; children dance before they speak. In terms of cultural views, more than one religion – a wonderful example is the Hindu form of Shiva known as Nataraja – sees the creation and destruction of the universe both occurring in the frame of dancing. Dancing means nothing, does nothing; but it is in dancing that meaning and doing and making are possible at all. Dancing is a kind of relationality that founds the very possibility of symbol and language, art and ritual. I personally believe dancing to be more fundamental – one might even use Merleau-Ponty's term 'elemental' – than ritual, art, metaphor and language because it engages the body in the felt experience of the structurality that is fundamental to all of these (1968).

Dancing does what ought not to be possible; that is, dancing creates an artifice, an other, something made up, something that is not the dancer; however, because this made-up thing, this artifice, is created of the dancing body, it is experienced as self. Inspired by my studies of dancing, I call this aspect of dancing 'self-othering': it is the experiential bridge between self and other. Arguably, there must be some initial experiential foundation that underlies all the connectivities that constitute our humanity; those 'this-is-not-that, but this-is-that' kinds of connections that distinguish language, art, metaphor, ritual and religion. Dancing is one of the fundamental experiences that make our humanness possible.

8. Dancing 'on one' is a convention most common in North America. In Cuba, New York and many other places, dancing is commonly done 'on two' or 'on clave'. Yet, dancing can be done on most any beat. When I was in Vancouver a few years ago, I found that many dancers there seemed to like to dance 'on seven'.
9. Non-Spanish speaking students often sing the lyrics along to the music, even though they do not know what the lyrics mean.

REFERENCES

- Anon (2007), 'Unconditional Love', *This American Life* (episode 317), 31 August.
- Ackerman, Diane (1990), *A Natural History of the Senses*, New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Beck, Mark, (1992) 'Proprioception: The Seventh Sense', *The Massage Journal*, winter, pp. 28–35.
- Burn, Ken (2001), *Jazz: A Film*, UK & USA: BBC, Florentine Films, Jazz Film Project & Weta.
- (2002), *Jazz: A History of America's Music*, New York, NY: Knopf.
- Classen, Constance (ed.) (2005), *The Book of Touch*, New York, NY: Berg.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1990), *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Doidge, Norman (2007), *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*, New York, NY: Penguin.
- Field, Tiffany (2001), *Touch*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gill, Sam (2002), 'Embodied Theology', in Delwin Brown and Linell Cady (eds), *Shifting Paradigms: Theology, Religious Studies, and the University*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 81–92.
- (2012), *Dancing Culture Religion*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jensen, Eric (2000), *Learning with the Body in Mind*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Juhan, Deane (2003), *Job's Body: A Handbook for Bodywork*, Barrytown, NY: Station Hill.
- Malabou, Catherine (2009), *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1968), *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Prescott, J. H. (1971), 'Early somatosensory deprivation as an ontogenetic process in the abnormal development of the brain and behavior', in E. I. Goldsmith and J. Moor-Janowski (eds), *Medical Primatology*, New York, NY: S. Karger, pp. 1–20.
- (1975), 'Body pleasure and the origins of violence', *The Futurist*, April, pp. 64–65.
- Strauch, Barbara (2003), *The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain Tell Us about Our Kids*, New York, NY: Anchor Books.

SUGGESTED CITATION

- Gill, S. (2014), 'Dancing: Creative, healthy teen activity', *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities* 1: 1, pp. 181–207, doi: 10.1386/dmas.1.1.181_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Sam Gill is professor of religious studies at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and founder of Bantaba World Dance and Music, a studio in Boulder that operated from 1999 through 2006. Enriched by his study of dance cultures in many African, Latin American and Asian countries, Sam has taught dance courses and researched dances and dance theory for many years. Sam also teaches salsa and other Latin American dances. He has published many books and articles on a wide range of topics, including Native American religions, Australian Aboriginal religions and religious studies theory. His latest book

Dancing Culture Religion (2012) is followed by *Brain Body Movement* (under consideration for publication). His current research is on moving and touching as foundational to perception.

E-mail: sam.gill@colorado.edu

Sam Gill has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.



intellect

www.intellectbooks.com

publishers
of original
thinking

Journal of Urban Cultural Studies

ISSN 20509-790 | Online ISSN 20509804
2 issues per volume | Volume 1, 2014

In recent years, cities have been increasingly at the forefront of debate in both humanities and social science disciplines, but there has been relatively little real dialogue across these disciplinary boundaries. On the one hand, journals in social science fields that use urban studies methods to look at life in cities rarely explore the cultural aspects of urban life in any depth or delve into close-readings of the representation of cities in individual novels, music albums/songs, graphic novels, films, videogames, online 'virtual' spaces, or other artistic and cultural products. On the other hand, while there is increasing discussion of urban topics and themes in the humanities, broadly considered, there are very few journal publications that are open to these new interdisciplinary directions of scholarship. This means that scholars in Language and Literature fields are forced to submit their innovative work to journals that, in general, do not yet admit the link between humanities studies of the representations of cities and more social-science focused urban studies approaches.

The *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* is thus open to scholarship from any and all linguistic, cultural and geographical traditions—provided that English translations are provided for all primary and secondary sources citations. Articles published in the journal cross the humanities and the social sciences while giving priority to the urban phenomenon, in order to better understand the culture(s) of cities. Although the journal is open to many specific methodologies that blend humanities research with social-science perspectives on the city, the central methodological premise of the journal is perhaps best summed up by cultural studies-pioneer Raymond Williams—who emphasized giving equal weight to the “project (art)” and the “formation (society).” We are particularly interested in essays that achieve some balance between discussing an individual (or multiple) cultural/artistic product(s) in depth and also using one of many social-science (geographical, anthropological, sociological...) urban approaches to investigate a given city. Essays will ideally address both an individual city itself and also its cultural representation.



Executive Editor

Benjamin Fraser
The College of Charleston
urbanculturalstudies@gmail.com

Associate Editors

Araceli Masterson-Algar
Augustana College

Stephen Vilaseca
Northern Illinois University