

# SalsAmigos: Differences and Disabilities<sup>1</sup>

---

2009

## Sam Gill

During the early part of a dance class I taught, a tall young man entered the room well before class time. He struck a strange figure as he paced clockwise around the room, head bent forward with his hands behind his back. His pace was methodical; his legs long. His condition was Asperger Syndrome and he was said to be easily over-stimulated. Well, there was stimulation enough for most to be occasionally overloaded in this SalsAmigos class. Music plays. Dozens of moves may be called. Dancers touch one another all the time to lead and follow. The dance becomes increasingly complicated often involving the circulation among partners. All the moves are learned as both lead and follow. The circle (*rueda*) faces both to the center and away from the center. There is plenty of vocalization among students as they dance. This is a lot of stimulation.

This student was always willing and as eager as any to begin the dancing. He participated fully and, to my knowledge, never felt any overwhelm from all the stimulation and demand. Indeed, as the course continued I began to notice that he spent more and more time before class simply hanging with the other dancers; less and less time pacing around the room. By the end of the nine weeks, he paced hardly at all and he actively participated in the choreography for the performance the group did for the student body. I actually never gave his disability a thought until after the term was over.

The response to difference and disability remains one of the great challenges of American life and culture. From a small teen dance class to international relationships among cultures and countries difference is a central concern. It is the issue of race, gender, culture, ethnicity, age, ability, and every other way we identify and distinguish people. Commonly the greatest comfort is experienced among those who are alike. Difference is often associated with discomfort and disorientation; often feelings of scorn and even hate. For a peaceful and joyous life, surely most central among all the issues across the world today are tolerance, respect, and the appreciation of difference.

Included in these concerns are simple differences based in factors prominent to identity such as gender, color, ethnicity, age, social status, appearance, gender identity, language, and so on. Another area included here is that of documented disabilities including physical disabilities, learning disorders, and psychological conditions. Many schools have testing and counseling centers to deal specifically with these disabilities. The term disability almost always has a negative quality.

I had a young woman take a class from me a few years ago at the University of Colorado. She had been badly burned in an apartment complex fire. Her boyfriend had died in the fire and she had lost both legs and her hands and arms were badly damaged. To write she used her teeth to insert a pen in a holder strapped to her hand and used the full movement of her arm to write. She took this class to see if she could return to academic work. I met with her and confessed that I hadn't a clue how to assist or to even assure her appropriate participation in the class. She said that since her condition was new to her

---

<sup>1</sup> Copyright © 2009 Sam Gill

she really didn't either. So we worked together to explore methods and ideas. I recall one very important paper that she wrote. She printed it but put opaque pages between each printed page. This was her way of showing that as a person with obvious physical disabilities, she wasn't seen or heard directly, but as one behind some opaque shield. In that paper she objected to the simple dual distinction between the abled and the disabled, preferring to advance the notion that we are all "differently abled." I have long remembered and treasured this insight.

In a SalsAmigos dance class it is clear that students span an extensive range of abilities based on dozens of variables. Some are hyperactive and often speed through everything. Others have difficulty paying attention, or translating a verbal command into bodily action. Some hear the rhythm, others have difficulty. Some have great physical agility, while others may be slow or clumsy. Some have full body awareness, while others seem to be hardly aware that they have body parts or where they are. We truly are differently abled and to set apart some as disabled in any sense seems an inappropriate and unfair distinction, yet it seems that this has been the principal method by which difference and disability are treated.

In the high school where I teach there are quite a few Latinos. I found that several of the Latinas in my dance class were routinely pulled out of the class by the Latina counselor to attend a meeting for Latina students. I am quite certain that there are many benefits to bringing together Latina students to talk about their educational experience and to receive support from one another and from their mentor. However, I wonder if there are not also some negative consequences of this as well. They are identified primarily by their ethnicity, gender, and language. By being taken out of the class, they are identified to others as students needing some special help or guidance. Because of their absence from a fast moving class, they miss learning dance elements that are taught while they are absent. Thus they are unable to perform as the others in the class and they may appear clumsy and behind. Where Spanish speaking students have a natural advantage in SalsAmigos dancing since most of the moves are called using Spanish-language terms; this advantage evaporates when they are taken from the class.

To distinguish and isolate students in terms of elements of identity or ability seems standard for our culture. A large number of grant funded school and after-school programs are aimed at populations identified by their specific "disability" or "minority" identity feature. Attention and funding are given disproportionately to students with labeled problems and needs. Such an approach depends on a standard of "normalcy" that is used to identify those who supposedly comprise the broad majority of the population. Unfortunately the politics and funding risks of ignoring to some degree a broad swath of society results in often uninspired methods and routine expectations. Many of the so-called "normal" students find their way to the back of the room where they go unnoticed.

Dancing itself is one of the most common media for cultural exchange. Whereas politics, economics, and language tend to negatively emphasize difference and actually create division, dancing is often an activity that is inclusive and crosses over seemingly impossible differences. The early twentieth century popularity of swing music gave rise to huge dance venues, such as the Savoy Ballroom, in Harlem. People of all races came to Harlem from all over New York City and, indeed, throughout the country to dance Lindy Hop and blues dancing with African Americans. Racial integration was not the intention;

the intention was to enjoy music and dancing together. Yet racial, ethnic, and cultural integration happened on a large scale decades before the Civil Rights Movement. It was not only peaceful, it was joyful and it was based on the appreciation of difference based in music and dancing.

For almost a decade I developed a dance studio named “Bantaba World Dance and Music” which brought together accomplished dance teachers representing cultures throughout the world to teach music and dancing to local Boulder Colorado people. A major objective was to bring teachers from other cultures to live for a period of time in Boulder where they might live among and befriend those people they taught. Now years later, and years after closing this dance studio, there remain large numbers of people who are deeply engaged in the cultures, languages, and the arts of people very different from themselves. Dancing and music are powerful media for cultural exchange, for the appreciation of others, for the very reason that they are different from oneself.

Over the years teaching SalsAmigos dancing I have taught a large number of students with amazingly varying degrees of ability and a large range of factors of personal identity. The remarkable thing I have observed is how the *rueda* seems to incorporate and embrace these abilities and identity differences.

One of the most powerful aspects of the way SalsAmigos dancing manages difference is that the dancing takes place in a circle, the *rueda*. All students are equal in every respect from the perspective of the circle. There is no front row and, even more importantly, no back row where some might hang out and be ignored. All students learn all parts. All students are included in the circle at all times. Students are never identified by their ability or a personal identity feature. To the *rueda* there is no ethnicity, age, gender, gender preference, disability or ability, social standing, popularity, or anything else that distinguishes individuals.

When teaching adult partner salsa dancing I am a stickler for technique, providing skill drills and constant critique. Yet, in SalsAmigos my focus must be on the group. Any teaching responding to an individual concern is always directed to the whole group. Any correction and critique to the individual is done either in progress, that is, as the circle is dancing, or to the whole group. The magic of SalsAmigos with respect to difference and ability is achieved by keeping the circle moving and keeping every dancer in the circle. Teens pick up technique when they realize, through experience, that technique is actually essential to keeping up with the group.

In SalsAmigos dancing we do not identify teens by documented disabilities, that doesn't mean that we don't notice the presence of these conditions. ADHD is a relatively common one. These students may be among those that cannot seem to hear or pay attention to the dance “call.” Their difficulty to attend to task may leave them standing when others are moving. For some of these students you can see them trying to process what should happen given that they have heard a move called, yet they cannot seem to initiate any appropriate action. The circle works well to assist these teens. The dance has both lead and follow parts or roles, and in SalsAmigos dancing all dancers learn both parts equally. Because all dancers are following half the time, students who have difficulty processing and immediately initiating actions can be lead through these actions. Because students learn to effectively “backlead” leaders who do not know some moves through their move, then there is almost always a physical assist when

needed. The circle does not stop, so any correction encouragement or attention given ADHD kids, or others with similar abilities, are incorporated with little notice. Even the most attentive dancers sometimes blank out a move and need an assist, so these students with documented disabilities do not stand out.

Some students have a tendency to be hyperactive and these will often perform a move in 3 counts when the move should be done in 8 counts. I remember one young man in particular who did this. He would race through the move without regard to the music or rhythm. I'd often catch him looking at me with a smile when he finished the move early suddenly realizing that he was then forced by the circle to await the rest to complete the move before he could go on. In this case every move he did served to remind him to slow down, to coordinate his moves to the music and to the other dancers. Gradually, he was able to contextualize his movement paying much more attention to his partners, to the music, to the flow of the group in the circle.

Gender is among our most immediate markers of identity. SalsAmigos dancing pays no attention to gender or gender roles. This means that students routinely dance with both same and different gendered partners. Social and cultural dancing often enforces gender roles. Ballet, for example, is commonly selected by parents for their daughters as a way to bodily instill posture, carriage, dress, and attitude proper for young women. The possible feminization of a boy interested in ballet is a parental, especially fatherly, concern. These attitudes are explored in the popular film "Billy Elliot" recently made into a Broadway musical. Hip hop and breaking are similarly dances that teach masculine and macho attitude. Perhaps some parents worry about what affect breaking will have on their daughters' gender identity. Social dancing such as salsa, including *rueda* de casino the dance on which SalsAmigos has been developed, have gendered roles with the males leading and the females following. While in their respective cultural settings dancing may function to instill and embody gender roles, in SalsAmigos gender roles are ignored. These adaptations reflect gender politics of the feminist and postmodern west. The result, we believe, is for dancers to become comfortable and enjoy dancing with any other dancer without concern for gender.

The teen years are important years for youth to explore gender identity. There is one boy we have worked with extensively who is openly gay and clearly enjoys this identity. Yet many others may simply be experimenting with gender roles and identities. Given that SalsAmigos dancing has no regard for gender roles, it does not place gender role expectations on gay or lesbian students and it provides a context in which others who are undecided to explore gender identities as they might be seen by the larger culture.

At my age, it is frankly difficult for me to make a very clear distinction between freshman and senior students, yet, I have come to understand, that age identity is amazingly powerful among teens. I have been surprised to hear from students that they actually got to know someone who is at a different grade level and unexpectedly enjoyed it. They often say that they frankly would not even have known these persons, in other grades, even exist.

It is always a kick to walk down the student-crowded corridors of a high school. Groups stand and travel together. These groups have many identities and it is often not so difficult to identify them. There is that group of guys that have their pants below their butts and their pants are so tight I don't think they could pull them up anyway. I don't know how they can walk or how their pants stay up once they stop. There are the goth kids with black outfits and black-dyed hair and black makeup. There are the nerds. There are students of a common ethnicity and language. In the school where I teach, these are commonly Latino kids. They speak Spanish and the girls often dance holding onto one another. There are the jocks and cheerleaders. There are the costume kids who clearly spend their time and money shopping thrift stores to create daily outfits. I really love all this and feel that in the relative monotone culture of Boulder, kids create a kind of rich diversity in their own fascinating ways. Still, one potentially negative side of these cliques and groups is that they are insular, excluding any who are not like them. While the creation of identity is powerful and serves these kids in many obvious ways, it also serves to divide them and to create tensions among them.

Again the SalsAmigos circle serves to integrate individuals through the constant interaction of individuals from these many groups. One of the most common statements we receive from students on what they find is important and enjoyable about SalsAmigos dancing is that they get to know others that, except for dancing, they would never even know existed. Indeed, they indicate that the dance experience tends to create another kind of identity that allows kids from different groups to connect. They report greeting one another in the corridors and classrooms that they have gotten to know through SalsAmigos dancing.

I want to talk briefly about one other way that SalsAmigos dancing deals with diversity and difference. Teen years are important ones for developing and establishing self esteem and self image. When young people who are shy and perhaps lack self-confidence dance with others who are mature, popular, and self-confident, they discover that the gap is not so great, that they are not so pathetic as they might have thought themselves. It is common to see self-image and self-confidence grow among students dancing SalsAmigos.

SalsAmigos dancers commonly talk about how the dance experience shows them the importance of tolerance. They often indicate that they have become much more tolerant of others and they say they understand the importance of tolerance because they experience times when they too need help, when they don't perform well, when they don't know the moves or do them wrong.

SalsAmigos does not lecture or discuss tolerance and the acceptance of diversity or the existence of differing abilities, yet the dance form seems effective in providing embodied experience for the development of these qualities among the dancers.