

SalsAmigos: “It’s Just a Dance!”¹

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Sir Ken Robinson speaking to an education conference said, “There isn’t an educational system on the planet that teaches dance every day to children the way we teach them mathematics. Why? Why not? I think this is rather important. I think that math is very important, but so is dance.”² The only justification Robinson gave was that we all have bodies. Not quite enough to convince most school administrations, I’d guess. In this series of presentations, I am actually arguing this position and I’m offering a wide range of reasons that should be more compelling to school administrators. However, that is not my topic in this presentation. I want here to consider that often heard phrase, “It is just a dance!”

Years ago in Brazil, Afro-Brazilians developed a form of dancing that had martial arts qualities to it called capoeira. Today it is not only widely popular in Brazil, but also throughout the world. As the story goes, Afro-Brazilians would congregate in a remote location to learn and practice capoeira. They knew that their owners and masters would not approve, fearing they were preparing some revolt. They posted lookouts to inform the group when someone was coming. Warned, the group would start dancing samba and tell their intruding guests, “It is just a dance!” This seemed to work.

I have always suspected that these Afro-Brazilians actually used the Euro-Brazilian sentiment that dancing is always something appropriate described by the dismissive word “just” as a way of hiding what they were really about. In many important ways that I will argue throughout these presentations, dancing is never “just a dance.” But then, in this presentation, I want to discuss a couple ways in which we will be surprised by there being unexpected strengths and values hidden in this dismissive phrase.

In this presentation I want to show that one of the most important pedagogical elements in SalsAmigos dancing is that young people take the course in school and get involved in doing the dancing simply because they find it fun. Rather than emphasize that SalsAmigos dancing can improve brain development, help students lose weight, help students become physically fit, help them develop important social relationships and self esteem and so on, we simply offer it as a fun dance form. We actually encourage teens to think of SalsAmigos dancing as “just a fun dance.” I often think of this, inspired by the capoeiristas, as a powerful secret weapon.

It is quite remarkable how persistent and extensive are western attitudes toward dancing. It is widely understood as entertainment as evident in the popularity of television reality dance shows. In the west dancing has been an important part of film, stage, television, and live entertainment for a very long time. Ballet and modern dancing are considered important genres of high culture. Children, especially

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² http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html See also <http://www.sirkenrobinson.com/>

girls, are still encouraged to take ballet and, amazingly, many girls take ballet for much of their youth. I sometimes take informal surveys in my classes at the University of Colorado and find that often more than half of the women in my classes indicate that in their youth they took more than five years of ballet. However, few continue to dance ballet.

Dancing is also a popular form of social activity. Swing, salsa, tango, and country dancing are common activities performed by large numbers of people in social settings. All these dances are partner dances particularly appropriate for socialization. These dances each have specific historical and cultural identities, yet often the participating dancers do not identify themselves as members of the culture relevant to the dance they are doing nor are they aware of much of the history. Combined with a somewhat greater cultural connection, folk dancing also remains popular. There are sometimes relative age correlations with social dances. Hip hop, breaking, and reggaeton dances are more often identified with the young, while waltz and foxtrot are dances more likely associated with an older generation.

Dancing is fairly often associated with exercise, although in my experience this has shifted significantly in the last decade. For many years I was an addicted aerobic dance exerciser. Now it is difficult for me to find any aerobic dance classes offered in fitness centers. They have gone quite extensively to machine based exercise. Jazzercise can still be found here and there. Many social dancers may talk of the fitness value to their dancing and many lose weight. However, I am sure this is not the prime motivator for their social dancing.

Dancing rarely occurs in a religious setting in American and European Christianity. It is often strongly discouraged; sometimes even forbidden. Where it does occur, it is rarely more than rhythmic walking.

While many consider dancing fun and social, few believe that it does much of anything. It is something like a respite from work and stress; kind of an adult recess. I suggest that for dancing to be taken somewhat seriously it has to be presented in the terms appropriate to a male-oriented production-oriented society. Thus dance groups are referred to as "companies." It is their job to put on "productions." Admission is charged. Paper programs are available telling the stories and meanings of the dances and recounting the dancers' credentials. Here dance aligns with theater, but both present themselves in terms of a production model.

In colleges and universities, dance departments and programs focus on dances of high culture and perhaps include occasional samplings of other dances that are referred to as ethnic, folk, or even primitive. Most public high schools include no dancing at all; or include a bit in physical education classes. There are, of course, some arts based high schools that include dancing. Even in the alternative high school where I teach, I find that counselors commonly consider my class as a fun reward for students. I remember one student who clearly had some behavioral and adjustment problems. Initially he had trouble focusing and he tended to act up a bit now and then. However, the *rueda*, the circle, was having a clear affect on him. As the dancing became more and more demanding and complex, he had to focus more and he was successfully doing so. One day he disappeared from the class and I found a note in my box from his counselor indicating that he was being pulled from the class because his agreement had been that he could take the class only if he kept up his work in other classes. He was being sent to

study hall rather than dance class. I did talk with him later and he had recognized that his participation in the dance class was having a positive impact on his work, but it was cut short perhaps too soon. It was not recognized that dancing could have any value to academic development.

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Importantly, people in American and European cultures simply take these understandings of dancing for granted and believe they are common throughout the world. This is simply not the case as evident in the common practice of identifying cultures and places with a form of dancing distinctive to culture and place. Travel guides and promotional brochures frequently pair costumed dancing with distinctive scenery. Outside of Christianity, dancing is closely synonymous with religion.

In Hindu India, the figure Nataraja, the Lord of Dance, is an important form of the deity Shiva. Nataraja is often depicted as in the thirteenth century bronze sculptures as arrested in a moment of his cosmic dancing. Surrounded by an arc of flames, that corresponds with the syllable Om. Nataraja holds in his hands symbols representing the five cosmic processes creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment, and release. His dancing is not a part of these cosmic processes, but the primordial grounding upon which all these cosmic processes become possible. His dancing is understood as *lila* or play and, as such, it is not done for any reason. Reason or meaning can occur only inside the cosmic processes. Nataraja dances simply because it is his own nature to do so.



Many other cultures have similarly high valuations of dancing. Southern hemisphere Christianity is often forgotten or unknown even though the greatest number of the world's Christians live in the southern hemisphere and these are the areas where Christianity is growing the most. In southern hemisphere Christianity dancing is commonly a central activity of worshippers.

Consistent with cultures the world over, I am showing in these presentations that dancing can be highly valuable to teens in our culture serving them in many practical ways. In other presentations I provide evidence, studies, and examples

- that dancing may provide a healthy and appropriate form of touching which is essential to human life
- that dancing may offer an experience of team complementing the sport-based experience of team. SalsAmigos team experience is characterized as inclusive, non-hierarchical, non-competitive, and having intrinsic motivations.
- that SalsAmigos dancing works well to provide the creative challenge to encourage the fullest growth during the documented periods of rapid brain development among teens. The dancing demands whole-body highly complex movement responses while interacting physically with others on command coordinated to music and that these movement patterns are done in four ambidextrous planes.
- That dancing encourages tolerance of differences and serves to minimize disabilities of many varieties
- That dancing serves personal and social development and creates a sense of confidence in many youth
- That dancing promotes physical fitness, produces weight loss, creates faster motor response, and supports healthy self image

Despite these many ways that dancing, in this case SalsAmigos dancing, has the potential to contribute to human development, health, and happiness, there is a sense in which dancing is important beyond any of these contributions. To help me articulate this aspect of dancing I want to look to the late French philosopher Jean Baudrillard for inspiration. Baudrillard developed nuances of meaning to the term “seduction,” understanding it as the “simple play of the strategy of appearances.” Seduction plays with appearances that seem to promise more, but never deliver on those promises. Now, while we may have a negative opinion of seduction, aligning it with deception, Baudrillard shows us its strength by contrasting it with what he understands as “production.” Whereas seduction as a never ending play of signs always in some sense hides and alludes or suggests, but never renders visible; production seeks to part the veil and show everything. In production, as Baudrillard writes, “everything is to be produced, everything is to be legible, everything is to become real, visible, accountable; everything is to be transcribed in relations of systems of concepts or force, measurable energy, everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded.”³ As social theorist and critic, Baudrillard recognizes that modern cultures are obsessed with production, with making everything visible. Yet, what we don’t recognize that Baudrillard shows us is that production is dependent on and follows seduction. All things that fascinate, that seem rich in depth, that have mystery, that persist are those that are suggestive, but at the same time hide or obscure, or complicate, or ambiguous. And when we think about it, we do understand Baudrillard’s notion of seduction and its value.

Fiction and poetry and art and music and dreams all are the play of signs. Their strategy is seduction, to hide as well as reveal. We are seduced by these forms because, in Baudrillard’s terms, they “no not consist of a simple appearance, nor a pure absence, but the eclipse of a presence. [Their] sole strategy

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990, first published 1979), p. 34.

is to be there/not there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, a hypnotic mechanism that crystallizes attention outside all concern with meaning. Absence seduces presence.”⁴

I think it highly insightful, yet a shock to our most secure understandings, to attempt to understand dancing in terms of seduction. Here I am not referring to any specific dances, but to that quality of dancing that exists and persists across everything we refer to as dance. Dancing seen as seduction allows us to appreciate that dancing need make nothing, say anything, hold any meaning; but rather that its strength is in being seductive rather than productive. What could this mean? What are the implications?

To understand dancing as seduction we might begin to catch a glimmer of the possibility that our world, our culture, so bent on production, has seduced us into seeing and understanding dancing, no matter how contrary to our experience of it, largely in terms of production. Remember that the popular implications of the phrase, “it’s just a dance,” are that dancing does not really produce anything and is thus useless. If this is so we have come to appreciate dancing only to the extent that we deny it as seduction, that we deny it as dancing. This explains why dancers organize in companies and put on productions.

To grasp dancing as seduction goes a long way to allow us to understand its allure. Dancing is provocative in its seeming to be full of meaning, yet actually absorbing and obscuring meaning rather than giving it full expression. Dance may be understood as absorbing meaning in that it gracefully receives most interpretations or analyses offered to it. Dancing bewitches by seeming to be making work, yet it produces nothing real, nothing but the play of signs, the play of appearances. Dancing beguiles in suggesting that the dancer, by dancing, is achieving something like the fullest realization of self (and, of course, it does so but in ways we had not anticipated), yet in dancing the dancer becomes something other. Dancing seduces us, fascinates us; dancing reveals through what it hides. In important senses then, in meaning nothing, in producing nothing, dancing is stronger than production which ultimately depends on it.

Given this insight we can understand the wisdom of the ancient Hindus who recognized that Nataraja, the Lord of Dance, frames and is foundational to even creation and destruction, to time and meaning. We can appreciate the wisdom of the Afro-Brazilian capoeiristas whose dancing grounded their very being.

Now I understand that to view dancing as seduction is complex and provocative. To do so however is important for us to understand why dancing holds such importance in culture and human history, why we are so fascinated and beguiled by dancing. It helps us understand why, although we feel dance to be so meaningful, we cannot seem to say much about its meaning. It help us understand why, although we feel that dance is so deeply powerful, we cannot seem to find what it produces or does. Its hiding meaning and effect, its promise but failure to deliver, is key to its strength. We feel it; we actually

⁴ Ibid.

already know it. We may not have fully appreciate the profundity of our dismissive phrase, “it’s just a dance.”⁵

Were we to grasp this idea that dancing is seduction fully, we would need none of the justifications, the arguments I provide in these presentations for the productive powers of dancing. We would fully grasp that strength of dancing as dancing. However, in these presentations I nonetheless want to address these productive values realizing that, in our society, they are necessary. And I am concerned with a particular form of dancing and with the way we teach it.

The principal concern of this presentation is pedagogical principle and psychological process rather than specific outcomes. In my exploration of teen programs a great many of these focus on identified teen needs and problems: risky behavior, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, truancy, physical and learning disabilities, poor academic performance, and so on. Such programs necessarily identify teens in terms of their needs or problems. Such programs and activities cannot help but carry a certain stigma simply because they are so identified. While I am sure that many of these programs are very important and contribute a great deal to the teens they serve, there is possibly a significant alternative to be found in SalsAmigos dancing and other activities that foster a similar approach.

A fundamental principle of SalsAmigos pedagogy is to never refer to the dancing in pragmatic terms of anticipated outcomes. To do so would be to identify students in terms of populations of needs. There is a sense in which we get what we are looking for. To identify students in terms of needs, in some sense creates those students in the negative terms of what they need, but do not now have. The motivation for the activity is not longer intrinsic to it. The activity then must produce results measurable in terms unrelated to the activity. The autotelic quality of the activity is sabotaged. It no longer produces an identity between action and awareness that is experienced as pleasure, as fun. The result would then be to fail to produce results for the primary reason that it is these results that are the primary concern. The secret weapon of SalsAmigos dancing is that we avoid production and depend on the seduction experienced by student participants who participate simply because they enjoy it; it is “just a dance.” It is our experience that the outcomes actually achieved in meeting needs are much higher when this aspect of the dancing is transparent to the participants. Understood in these terms then we enjoy a hidden confidence by encouraging young people to do SalsAmigos dancing just for the fun of it.

⁵ For a much fuller development of these ideas of dancing as seduction see the final chapter of my *Dancing the Rhythms of Life*, an e-book publication available on www.Sam-Gill.com.