

Empowering Dance and Technology Education: 10 Vital Steps for Implementation in Underfunded Spaces within Predominantly Black Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides resources for Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) to develop new Dance Technology courses without initial funding or dance studio spaces. The goal is to help educators build transformative Dance Technology pedagogy and advocate for opportunities for students. The paper draws from the 10 Success Principles created by the Wallace Foundation, Research in Action, and Mcclanahan Associates and adapts and improves upon them to support the needs of Medgar Evers College, an under-resourced Predominantly Black Institution. This work provides a framework for other underfunded PBIs who are interested in building new Dance Technology curriculums. The paper concludes with 10 essential steps and strategies for acquiring technology to develop equitable and accessible Dance Technology curriculums.

Keywords: Dance Technology; Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs); Underfunded Spaces; Educational Implementation; Digital Choreography; Cultural Identity in Dance; Community Partnerships; Faith-Based Pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

I define my role as an educator to be an intercessor connecting students to higher consciousness despite their current circumstances. My humanity, Black womanhood, artistry, education, work, pedagogy, research, and practice are byproducts of being a vessel through which faith can work—my ministry. In 2020, I was hired as a tenure-track Assistant Professor in Dance and Media Technology at Medgar Evers College, CUNY — a predominately Black college in central Brooklyn. We are severely underfunded. Therefore, when the Department of Mass Communications, Creative and Performing Arts & Speech launched its first Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Media and the Performing Arts, there was a new spark of hope. This interdisciplinary B.F.A. degree at Medgar Evers College, is an avant garde and post-modernist approach to a professional degree combining media and

performing arts. A profound uniqueness of this degree is that it required all students to take a new course titled Digital Choreography. This course provided all students to explore Dance and Technology.

My job was to implement the first Digital Choreography Course, a course that explores computer software as a choreographic tool. The problem was there was no funding or dance studio space. How could I solve this problem? How could I build new dance and technology courses during the pandemic without funding? How do I make dance accessible and equitable for Black and brown students who do not believe that they are the true agents of digital innovation? How do I develop pedagogy that centers students' voices? This paper addresses these questions by explaining the formation of the Ten Essential Steps to Building New and Technology Course with no initial funding or studio space.

I also would like to explain a few key terms, I use the term *faith* in this paper to define belief and hope in something to come with no evidence to support it. In my vast background in education and art practice in low-income Black communities, faith has been the only driving force to do this work. Please do not limit faith to solely religious terminology but consider the weight of believing in a hope that statistically should not come to pass. Therefore, building a dance and technology program with no starting funding was an act of faith. *Ministry*, according to Webster's dictionary, is defined as a person or thing through which something is accomplished. Ministry can take on many different forms depending on the people who are being served and by whom a body of people is being served. Ministry is service. Throughout this paper, the evidence of servitude is abundant. Lastly, an *intercessor* is a person who intercedes on behalf of someone to help them. The work described in this paper is an act of intercession—I am acting on behalf of my students to connect them with resources that were not initially present. This act goes beyond the role of an initial job description yet considers the dreams and vision of the department and the students.

2. INITIAL METHOD: THE TEN SUCCESS PRINCIPLES BY THE WALLACE FOUNDATION

In 2013, I was hired as a Youth Artist Dance Mentor by the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Milwaukee. The Wallace Foundation awarded The Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee 5.6 million dollars in research funding to start implementing high-quality arts programming in non-specific arts organizations for tweens (youth ages 9-13). I was the first dance teaching artist hired at the Milwaukee Davis Boys & Girls Club and the dance program still exists today. To build our programs from scratch, we were required to implement the Ten Success Principles developed by the Wallace Foundation, Research in Action, and McClanahan Associates which were shaped by a multi-year study of teen arts engagement called "Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs from Urban Youth and Other Experts." Their ten principles are:

1. Professional Practicing Artists
2. Executive Commitment
3. Dedicated Spaces
4. High Expectations
5. Culminating Events
6. Positive Adult-Youth and Peer Relationships
7. Youth Input
8. Hands-on Skill Building
9. Community Engagement
10. Physical and Emotional Safety

These ten success principles were a paradigm shift in how I saw dance education. Contrary to my Western Dance Upbringing, where the teacher was "all-knowing", our youth and their families had a voice in the program design. The most beautiful aspect was the funding support by the Wallace Foundation through which we were able to build a wonderful new spacious and beautiful studio for the youth. I learned the true meaning of financial support.

3. NEW METHOD

Contrary to my previous research experience with the Wallace Foundation, I did not have access to a million-dollar budget, a designated space, or a million dollars for professional development opportunities. Instead, I had to adapt the principles to develop a new set of methodologies for program design. As a result, we have the first Multimedia Dance Studio, new media technologies, and an award-winning film, *Gold Sphere*, which has been accepted in the *Cannes World Film Festival*, *Vancouver Black Independent Film Festival*, *Knowbox Dance Film Festival*, and *The Outlet Dance Project*. I desire to help other institutions and organizations build and design their programs despite not having initial funding or designated space. Therefore, I created ten essential steps to building new dance and technology courses with no funding or studio space in Predominately Black Institutions. An adapted design The steps consist of:

1. *Professors as Intercessors*
2. *Smart Mobile Technology, and Free Apps*
3. *Dance Composition Techniques*
4. *Highlighting Students' Cultural Identities within Dance and Technology*
5. *Community Partners*
6. *Visibility*
7. *Culminating Performances*
8. *Donations*
9. *Faith, Vision, and High Expectations*
10. *Professors as Advocates*

3.1. Professors as Intercessors

Students can see and reap the benefits of having a Practicing Artist and Scholar as their Professor because they model the work ethic needed to enter the field and stay relevant. Even more with the emergence of AI technology and new software, students need professors who help guide them to building careers in the new climate. Linberg (2019) states professors with industry experience have been exposed to a variety of situations and challenges in their work, they can communicate these experiences and how they specifically overcame them. (p.1) Students not only need to respect their professors

as experts but also feel inspired by the Professor's tangible success, including their creativity with innovative pedagogy. Technology is vastly changing and rapidly evolving and we have to find new authentic forms of assessments and evaluations.

Education as intercession considers technology, trends in the field, career readiness, and incorporating these tools in the classroom to make sure students have the upmost chance to succeed. Professors who act as intercessors are actively seeking to build a bridge between the classroom and the real world in order for students to become successful post-graduation. At my Predominantly Black Institution, Faculty have to overcome challenges of the lack of funding and find ways to fundraise and write grants to improve instructional technology and improve the students experience. When I became an Assistant Professor at my institution our departmental budget had been significantly impacted by the Pandemic, and writing grants and receiving research funds were necessary to enhance the students' learning experience and to make our program attractive to students.

Having said this, to build a new Dance Technology course with no designated space and funding at a Predominantly Black Institution takes extreme dedication because the stakes are high. Particularly smaller Predominantly Black Institutions and Historically Black Colleges where funding and spacing is limited, it is vital to have a professor in the role of an intercessor practicing and researching in the field of expertise while advocating for your department. These professors will be your department and college's representation and recruitment model that bridges the professional field and the campus. They are the mission realized for new audiences, supporters, and believers. We need the eagerness and willingness of professors to be on the frontline in the spirit of advocacy, and relevancy in the field.

3.2. Smart Mobile Technology and Free Apps

In the Fall of 2020, during the quarantine, I instructed the first Digital Choreography course at Medgar Evers College. Teaching a Digital Choreography course to students who did not have access to technology besides their cell phones and, in some cases, laptops was challenging. I began to lean into all cellular technologies. Cellular technology demystifies technology as being seen as intangible to Black and brown people due to the cost. The college provided free iPads for students which allowed students to interface with mobile technology. During quarantine, young people were the leaders of social media apps such as TikTok and Instagram through the development of viral dance choreographies, challenges, skits, and reporters of popular news. As a professor

my best strategy to enhance student engagement and complete student learning outcomes, and introduce dance and technology, while teaching asynchronously was through smart mobile technology and devices media apps. The important factor was to make sure the smart mobile technology could work on both IOS and Android software.

While teaching online, and later, hybrid teaching, I wanted students to have an opportunity to explore Augmented Reality, Rotoscope Animation, motion capture, and interfacing with digital movement design software. Therefore, I used apps such as *Jerky Motion*, *Choreo AR*, and *Glyacon*, *Flip-a-Clip* to introduce students to these concepts. cellular apps kept students curious and engaged during online and hybrid learning. These apps have a quick output, which does not discourage students from experimenting with technology. These apps also have online tutorials which can help professors with learning curves and provide additional assistance towards students in need. In the culmination of the semester students created Augmented Reality duets, Rotoscoping animations, and Mixed Reality dance films from home.

I do acknowledge that some professors may be hesitant to use mobile technology; however, mobile technology allows for equity and accessibility for students who may not be able to afford expensive technology and colleges who are underfunded. Although cellular technology is a solution for accessibility problem, this is a small piece of the world of dance and technology and is not meant to replace other traditional technology taught in academia. Mobile technology is an avenue for students to create to despite funding circumstances and provides opportunities of innovation.

3.3. Dance Composition Techniques

Due to this B.F.A. program being an interdisciplinary degree in Media and Performance our students are not considered dance majors; therefore, most of the students are novices to dance and choreography. Focusing on developing basic skill-level techniques in composition with the physical body is important and will give them more tools for creating in the digital and virtual realms. Lessons that include the following choreographic devices are suggested: The Five Elements of Choreography, Body, Action, Energy, Time, and Space, Motif, Phrasing, and Repetition. Introducing students to creating solo work with their physical bodies, group work, and integrating the two deemed vital to the Digital Choreography course.

Dealing with the high stakes of choreography and technology, instructors should handle each thing with care and caution. Making choreography accessible to

beginners allowed for less insecurity with making digital dances. Starting with simple choreographic studies like creating walking dances will aid in students being able to learn and implement choreographic devices before adding dance vocabulary. For example, a technique I learned by Dr. Susan Foster, is to make “Walking Dances”. Students walk from one side of the room to the other side of the room implementing one of the choreographic devices, discussed in class, like Reptition mentioned above. Then, continue adding more choreographic devices until students began to understand the endless potential they have to create and organize dance. The hope is that students will begin seeing the process of choreographic composition as an exploration of organizing of movements and expand their knowledge of dance. This method of teaching composition may look different than compositions and dance conservatories. Yet, I have found through my research this method served as a great introduction to new students taking a choreography. Course.

3.4. Highlighting Students’ Cultural Identities within Dance and Technology

Implementing the first Dance and Technology program at a PBI needs to have a strong connection to the students’ diverse cultural identities. Especially at Medgar Evers College where there is a large diverse population of Black people from the Caribbean, Africa, and the United States of America, instructors must make sure that students see themselves inside of dance and technology. Catherine Steele Knight (2021), argues Black women’s historical and persistent relationship with technology provides the most generative means of studying the possibilities and constraints of our ever-changing digital world (p.1). Instructors should include diverse technologists including Black women when introducing technology to students. Teaching students about Eurocentric performers and technologists alone will not retain students, especially as introductory concepts that traditionally can exclude them. Instructors must implement assignments that position students as experts through the implementation of their cultures and origins inside assignments and final products. Asking students to bring in their social dances from their neighborhoods and cultures inside of the classroom and digital realm transforms the assignment into a celebratory event.

Showing students representations of Black Technologists helps improve students’ connection with technology. Catherine Knight Steeles, book *Black Feminist Technologists* has become a staple in my Dance Technology classrooms. Her intention of highlighting Black women as technologists helps empower students

to see themselves as technologists. As McCarthy-Brown (2017) suggests, diversifying curriculum is essential for all students and demographics. (p. 11) Showing students other Black Digital creators like Khalil Joseph, Black filmmaker and Music Director, and Arthur Jafa, a Black Visual Artist and Filmmaker. also helps students understand the power of bringing their culture inside of performance and technology.

3.5. Community Partners

Community partners are highly essential to new programs as they are developing, especially partners who are willing to lend resources. In 2018, I was awarded the Chuck Davis Emerging Choreographer Fellowship from the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). When accepting the position at Medgar Evers College I knew that I needed resources to help launch our program. Boothroyd, et al, (2017) believe that with an active and involved community, local leadership demonstrated organizational commitment, and system capacity and support for implementation, all parts of the organization and system can work in concert to address systemic barriers, and support quality practice. (p, 4) Having said this Ava Kinsely, Mecca Madyun, and I created a dance residency at Medgar Evers College. BAM paid for a teaching artist to come to Medgar Evers College and teach dance for a week and then students took classes at BAM to experience dancing in a studio. Dancers were also offered an opportunity to join BAM’s Dance in Focus program. This partnership allowed students to experience dancing in a studio while I worked on creating a dance studio space on campus.

Secondly, I developed a technology partnership with the Integrated Design & Media | Tandon School of Engineering at New York University. We worked with two of their graduate students on a mixed-reality project titled, *Gold Sphere*. We were able to use their Motion Capture Studios and the students designed the virtual environment. This film went on to win Best Futurist Filmmaker at *Cannes World Film Festival* and was an official selection of *KnowBox Dance Festival* shown in Seoul, South Korea, Oaxaca, Mexico, and Dallas, Texas. We were able to accomplish this without any technology, dance studio, or equipment.

3.6. Visibility

Departments must create social media pages, websites, and platforms that showcase student’s work and faculty plans. Audiences, colleagues, administrations, and the community must know what it is that your program is working on. It is imperative to find opportunities to highlight students’ work and allow people to be on the

journey with you. Create an Instagram page highlighting your students, faculty, and staff to showcase your department. Especially, during the pandemic, students could come to the Instagram page to see what their peers were up to. This also shows the administration your impact on the students and department which will increase the buy-in for leadership support.

3.7. *Culminating Performances*

There must always be a performance, event, or showcase highlighting the work students learned in the dance and technology class. Even when the performances are entry-level and less sophisticated in the beginning. Keeping the end in mind, the journey builds the credibility of the program. We know that as time progresses students will be able to have adequate dedicated space and technology but we still need evidence-based performances. Culminating performances also allow for family engagement in the program. Inviting friends, families, supporters, and the community helps strengthen the college and department's relationship with the students. Lastly, culminating events are a measurement of growth.

3.8. *Funding and Donations*

In an ideal world, funding will be unlimited, and you will be able to teach your students with the latest technology inside your designated studios. You will have colleagues within your department and around the college with sufficient technology to support you and your student's endeavors. You have to fundraise yourself when working at an under resourced college.

When we transitioned to a hybrid model, I brought my technology equipment to jump-start our student's experience. The Oculus Quest allowed students to experience virtual reality and motion capture through the Gyacon app. I also applied and was the recipient of grants within CUNY to donate to the dance studio.

3.9. *Faith, Vision, and High Expectations*

Professors must be able to see past the current circumstances and have vision. To successfully implement a new program, one must believe they can achieve what one needs. Life is uncertain, but faith does not have to be. When I became a full-time professor, I did not become discouraged by what we did not have as an institution. I focused on the vision. What is your college's mission? What is your mission? These questions are important because they help develop strategy. Do not become discouraged by the lack of funding, yet be inspired to keep going.

It is vital to ensure we have high expectations for our students. We should expect students to have rigorous assignments and find ways of cultivating their voices. We should not expect less but push students to their full potential. In our Predominately Black Institution, we have to accept that we are not like the other colleges in CUNY or the United States of America. We have our own identity, culture, and values in which social justice is in our D.N.A. When I started at Medgar Evers College, we had no technology for dance besides an Adobe Suite, no dance studio, and no motion capture suits. Now we have a Multimedia Dance Studio, award-winning film, and digital dance performances that students were able to create to beat the odds against them. These essential steps will help you create your first dance and technology course without a studio or funding.

3.10. *Professors as Advocates*

When I began my tenure track at Medgar Evers College in 2020, all of the classes were held asynchronously online. This online modality lasted one and a half years. Historically, dance classes were held at Medgar Evers College on the auditorium stage –a space that is shared amongst the college. There was no dedicated space for dance alone. After returning to a Hybrid model in Spring 2022, the shared auditorium space in which the dance classes were historically held at was now under construction which left the dance classes to be held in traditional classrooms with desks and carpeted floors which is not suitable for dance. This is when I began to advocate for a new dance studio for our students. "Transformations often begin, and begin well, when an organization has a new head who is a good leader and who sees the need for major change." (Kotter, 1995, p. 60) Medgar Evers College's first female President Patricia Ramsey, supported the endeavor of creating a dance studio at the College and saw the need for change. One of our first conversations as a new faculty was the need for better flooring to support dance. With the Chair's support, I wrote letters to President Ramsey, Senior Vice President of Finance, and The Provost and Vice President of Medgar Evers College to support the dance studio. After a year, the studio was granted, and I was able to implement the first Multimedia Dance Studio created at Medgar Evers College.

I would be remised to not mention the challenges I faced as a nontenured faculty advocating for institutional change. I was met with resistance and unbelief by some leadership and administration. Despite the attempts of blockages through hierarchical systems, I took advantage of all open forums in the college which allowed faculty to speak directly with President in public talks. As a true

advocate and believer in the power of Dance Education the reward was worth the risk.

4. CONCLUSION

When we think of the future of dance education, we must consider new media technologies that will impact the dance field. Although these Dance Technology courses are still developing as we speak, the steps written in this article not only helped the students in advance in the field of dance and new media, but it allowed for the transformation of pedagogy. My hope is that these steps can help other Minority Serving Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities develop Dance and Technology programs.

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Her research interest explores dance, film, and new media technologies through an African-American

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