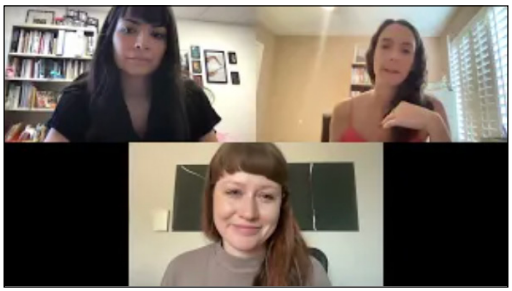
Psychological Safety in the Western Concert Dance Technique Class

Nicole Perry, Halie Bahr and Cat Kamrath-Monson

Abstract

Psychological Safety in the Western Concert Dance Technique Class focuses on dance educators in higher education, redefining, modeling, and cultivating leadership through Timothy Clark's Four Stages of Psychological Safety (2020). Western concert dance technique classes do not, traditionally, leave much room for contributions or challenges from students. Rather, "One Right Way" and Perfectionism (Okun, 2022) are emphasized, as students conform to expectations and aesthetics, or attempt to mold themselves into conformity with the example of the teacher. In this session, we articulate the values held in our classrooms and how they shift our meaning of leadership. Using Clark's structure, we provide examples to build a classroom that encourages risk taking, creativity, and growth over perfectionism, to build future leaders who use their power to listen, respond, and transform the field of dance.

Keywords: dance pedagogy, perfectionism, psychological safety, dance technique



A video of Bahr, Kamrath-Monson, and Perry, in conversation in November 2023. Note: Transcripts were edited for clarity of ideas. For the full video, visit the online journal at https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/conversations/.

Nicole Perry (she/her—unceded Seminole land): 0:09–0:53
Here we go. Okay. So we're having a conversation. About how the three of us create psychological safety in our classroom.

And we do that because we feel like it is a way of also addressing supremacy culture as it shows up in the dance classroom, particularly through perfectionism and One Right Way thinking.

If we're looking at Tema Okun's supremacy culture document. And yeah, I think we should introduce people to who we are. So they know—Who are these humans having this conversation? before we dive in. And since I'm already talking, I'll just keep talking.

0:54–1:26
Hi, I'm Nicole Perry. She/her pronouns. I am in South Florida. I'm a visiting assistant professor of dance at Florida Atlantic University. This semester I'm teaching Ballet 2 to a group of nine students. Most of them are dance minors.

I'm teaching dance appreciation to 158 students, most of whom don't know anything or necessarily care about dance.

I am also a certified intimacy director and intimacy coordinator, and work regularly in theater and film.

Halie Bahr (she/her): 1:27–2:21
Awesome. I'll go. My name is Halie Bahr. My pronouns are she/her. I am an assistant professor at Southern Utah University, teaching dance, primarily composition, creative process, contemporary modern dance technique.

I teach beginning as well as advanced classes in all of those things. I have a special interest in teaching in environments that are not related to academia, as well. I [also] teach in prisons of higher education. So that is a little bit about me.

I research a lot of systemic trauma through questioning choreography or structures of choreography, and I am also a certified Laban/Bartenieff movement analyst, so that information about developmental theory I carry with me.

Cat Kamrath-Monson (she/her): 2:23–4:06
And I am Cat Kamrath-Monson. She/her pronouns. I'm an assistant professor and Dance Area Coordinator at the University of Wyoming's Department of Theatre and Dance.

And in that, I lead courses in many dance techniques, as well as composition, pedagogy, and history, among other things.

A lot of the students that I work with are dance majors, but I also interface a lot with theater majors and nonmajors, as well—depending on the level of coursework I'm teaching.

I am also a certified Laban/Bartenieff movement analyst, and within that, I am also on the certification faculty for Integrated Movement Studies, which is how the three of us met originally.

My first year on faculty was when Nicole and Halie were certifying, and it was really from there that we started to continue discussions outside of the certification process with another group.

We developed an anti-racist collaborative of recently certified CLMAs to discuss the system and how it can be applied to a 21st-century student and human, and questioning some of the ways it had been established or how it could induce harm in different ways, and how we can make sure that those were not practices that we were maintaining.

Bahr: 4:08–5:07
Yeah, I think that's great. Do we want to talk about who might also be in the room with us when we're talking about ideas?

We'll talk about Tema Okun and the White Supremacy Culture document. We can talk about [the document] more specifically, but I think we got that information from Erin C. Law—is that true? From her presentation. So, she's very much in the room with us or they are very much in the room with us; bell hooks is in the room with us. Anyone else that you want to shout out?—and Cadence Whittier is in the room with us, who was a teacher at Integrated Movement Studies who was looking at a lot of this information [in her pedagogy]. Do you want to shout out anyone else? I mean, I'm sure there's like hundreds of people in the room with us.

Kamrath-Monson: 5:07
So many.

Perry: 5:08–5:51
So many. But I think— And Timothy Clark, with his stages of psychological safety. Because that's how we have found the structure for practicing these things is in these four stages of psychological safety and [about] incorporating those four stages—from Timothy Clark.

We have provided some ways to disrupt, at least—if not dismantle—a supremacy culture, particularly in perfectionism and One Right Way thinking. Because students are safe—or at least safer—to explore what they are bringing to the dance process.

Bahr: 5:52–6:08
I just remembered one more: Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is also in the space with us. He's forging a path to calling out some of these systemic issues.

Kamrath-Monson: 6:11–6:42
We're all interested in transforming what this traditional educational structure is but also how that informs what the traditional Western concert dance classroom and method of teaching look like.

And so I think we all came together with this core question of how we craft more space for inquiry, creativity, and risk taking, within the dance technique classroom.

Bahr: 6:43–7:55
I think that's great. Should we dive in and talk about the different stages, and maybe give some examples?

So we're pulling from—just to clarify—we're pulling from Timothy Clark's [*The Four*] *Stages of Psychological Safety*.

There are four [stages] total, and they don't necessarily happen in a linear fashion, although Timothy Clark does theorize that they do. We noticed in our own teaching and in our own way of thinking about developmental theory that oftentimes these things are bouncing back and forth between one another in the classroom, and they inform one another. I'm sure that will come up as we talk about our examples, but the first one is Inclusion Safety.

Does someone have an eloquent way to describe Inclusion Safety? I have this slide in front of me, so: "Inclusion Safety is provided by genuinely inviting others into your society based on the sole qualification that they possess flesh and blood." That is a quote from Timothy Clark.

Kamrath-Monson: 7:56–9:17
And we find that Inclusion Safety is often something that most of us in the field are already applying, especially when you look at new K-12 practices in terms of how welcome rituals and procedures start in K-12 teaching; there is more emphasis on connecting with individual students as soon as they walk through the doors.

So this is something that I think comes up in a lot of spaces already, but is not the space that I necessarily engaged in when I was a student in undergrad or even in grad school.

And so, [one] of the ways that we really like to do that are establishing community agreements as a collective on the first day. And we find that community agreements that are created from the group, not imposed by the teacher, are the most successful way to approach this, because then, it's really about the humans in the room—and how they expect each other to show up, and hold themselves accountable—but also creates that community from the very first day.

Perry: 9:24–11:02
I think something that I currently just—I guess we're talking transparently about this—I struggle with [is] Inclusion Safety is like the idea of levels in dance class? And how to meet people where they are in service of the work and also create a space where they feel included and able to do the work.

And held to high standards and with, particularly, levels. And that's why I think the place where I am right now, we're really working on making transparent leveling structure, so students know what they're being adjudicated on and what is expected. And that there's a whole team of people doing the adjudication so that it's not one person's perception of them on one day but it's rather a curriculum that the whole team has agreed upon—and that their teacher has agreed upon—that they should be working towards every day and that the whole team agrees is that [curriculum].

So that they can feel like the everyone's got the same standards, everyone's in agreement on this. And it's not a "one person is out to get me" kind of thing that I think sometimes leveling in dance class can feel like.

Especially if it's just one instructor who makes the decision on who gets moved to what level.

Bahr: 11:03–12:52
I think that's great. Another thing that I'm thinking of in terms of Inclusion Safety is: I think of the beginning of the semester in a lot of my classes. I'm thinking, specifically, when I was teaching ballet at Davidson College last year, that the Challenger Safety—which I know we haven't gotten to yet—the idea that Challenger Safety and Inclusion Safety, for me, they happen in the beginning [of the semester] at every class.

It's like we're reading the syllabus together or reading the very first article together—and I'm really intentional about allowing questions that challenge the structure right off the bat. I'm asking questions that are a different way of thinking about things, or I'm always like, "Okay, the dress code is this in this way, but this is a way that we can challenge that," or I'm already setting up ideas to think about that, as we're going through the syllabus and the beginning of the semester.

And I think it's a helpful way for me to at least start to plant the seed of this is the structure that dance has existed within, and a lot of students that come into classes, who don't identify as dancers, have this really rigid idea of how their body should be in a dancing space. So I find that right off the bat, sticking in little tiny bits of challenges oftentimes feels like they do belong then. "Oh, okay, this is something that I can fit into," or "Okay, they have the same questions I do"—or it's almost like calling out the things that they're feeling in the space. (I know that took us off a different direction.)

Perry: 12:52–13:50
No, I think that's super. In my last institution, I was teaching stretching and conditioning, but I really focus on the somatic side of that.

And I also talked about Kemetic Yoga and how it comes from Egypt, and yoga that we have in the Western world comes from India, and [I] try to refer back to the origins of these practices and regularly got feedback from students of "I thought I wasn't gonna be able to do this class because every picture you see of people, you know, stretching is always, like, skinny white ladies. But you let me know that this method came from my ancestors." and that "this is about how my body moves and what I'm learning through my body moving, not about trying to look like you or look like an athleisure ad."

Bahr: 13:54
Okay. That's great.

Kamrath-Monson: 13:55–15:45
Yeah. Yeah, and I think one of the things that I found the most beneficial in continuing to reinvest in these inclusion-based practices from the first day is that then, the students, when they continue into another course with me, have that expectation of "Cat's classes begin this way. And in this class, because Cat's leading it, I know that I will be able to have the space to challenge, the space to state honestly what's happening on that day, that I'll be able to determine my level of investment in class based on my own needs." And that continuity of the approach starts to then shift what their expectations of the class are away from maybe how they had originally thought of what a class would be or how they interface with that class.

It's one of the benefits. It feels like Inclusion Safety feels so simple in a lot of ways. But [it] really does feel like the most important—that if I'm not establishing that baseline of really seeing them and being with them, honoring their lived experiences, that then I can't get them to go into all these other places. They'd be resistant to going into these

other places. Because it's about them really sensing, in honesty, that they belonged there.

Bahr: 15:47–16:49
Yeah. Yeah, and I'm thinking, even when I was teaching inside of the prison, I was asking students from just the very first day, why are you here? Why are you taking this class? [note: while acknowledging the complexity of incarcerated educational settings, this was a voluntary class that students opted into] And one of the students—he was really honest with me—he was like, "I don't wanna be here, and the only reason I'm here is to get years off of my sentencing." And I replied, "That's a perfectly adequate reason to be here. You don't have to love it." You don't have to—you know, it's okay. I'm always giving options out [of class activities]. If at any point you don't feel like you want to observe versus participate by all means go ahead. And by the end of the semester— I mean, by just acknowledging the fact of, like, "That's fine, that's okay [to not want to be here]. We feel like we don't wanna be here sometimes—we all feel that way." Just by not challenging that but going with it, by the end of the semester, he was the one that was participating the most. And so I feel like, yeah, you can feel resistance, that's allowed here, too.

Perry: 16:49–17:43
And I think that's really important. What you bring up is that inclusion doesn't look the same on everybody.

Offering choices of how people are included, it can be valid to observe. It can be valid to find a modification to a movement experience because of an injury or because of boundaries.

In dance, we're so great about modifying things for injuries. But we aren't always as accepting of doing that for people's boundaries, like around touch and partnering and things like that. But we could be, because inclusion just means that we're working towards that same learning objective, not that we're all necessarily doing the same thing in the same way.

There's no One Right Way to do this thing. Unless it's not.

Bahr: 17:43–20:22
Yeah, well, and then that made me think… Do you think we should go back to Tema Okun and then identify Perfectionism and One Right Way? I feel like we could talk about that just a little bit more before moving on to stages of psychological safety.

So Tema Okun created this document in 1999 that was really for nonprofits, in their work online. (I'm trying to find the URL of their website; I'll have to maybe plug it in a little bit [https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/].) They write on their website that it's an ever-evolving document now, and they are finding ways to credit a lot of different people that have made up this work. They list several different characteristics of White Supremacy Culture.

The original intention was to show how it started to show up in nonprofit organizations, but we're really using it in this context for how it shows up in our classrooms. A lot of times, these different characteristics that show up in White Supremacy Culture are things that have shown up in dance training and have been questioned for a long time. But wrapping language around it in this way, I think, is a new way that at least I'm trying to figure out: how this [can be] unpacked.

So we're looking specifically at Perfectionism, which I'm sure everyone has an idea about when I say the word *perfectionism*. I feel like—I don't know, lately or always—[perfectionism] feels rampant in dance in some ways.

But Tema [Okun] quotes that "mistakes are seen as personal, i.e., they reflect badly on the person making them, as opposed to being seen for what they are—mistakes. . . . Perfectionism is the belief that we can be perfect or perform perfectly. The question has to be asked: according to who?"

I think that when we talk about One Right Way, it really interlocks with Perfectionism in a certain way, which is why we chose these two to start off with. One Right Way is just "the belief there is one right way to do things, and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it"—which is just a colonist way of thinking of things. We can have multiple different ways of seeing something, and they can exist in the same space and contradict each other in really beautiful ways.

Kamrath-Monson: 20:22–21:25
Yeah, and one of the other things that Tema Okun really emphasizes in perfectionism is this tendency to identify what's wrong, instead of being able to identify what's right or appreciate what's right—even if there's other things that might still need work or to be returned to.

And I think that that's one of the key components of what we're trying to really change in our classrooms is, How do students become more active in recognizing their strengths?—the areas of growth, the areas of change—and not just staying locked into "Well, that wasn't good," or "That wasn't good enough," or "I'm doing this really badly."

So, really changing how students are talking about their experience and trying to move it away from that perfectionistic viewpoint of it's either all right or it's all wrong.

Bahr: 21:27–22:07
Hmm, yeah. And I feel like I'm trying to remember our initial conversations around why we chose these two, but I feel like it's still pretty clear that this is a current issue with a lot of the students that I have. I'm hearing a lot about perfectionism, and part of me wonders if that was always the case—you know, for decades and decades and decades—or if there's something about this particular time that feels like it's really turned up.

But both at Davidson College last year and Southern Utah University this year, that felt like Perfectionism and One Right Way was the thing that was showing up in the classroom most for me.

Kamrath-Monson: 22:11–22:48
Yeah, and I think it was—I agree. I think I see it in the students I teach now, but I also am reflecting on my own experiences as a student, and it was also in my viewpoint and my training. And how I saw myself in the classroom was never being good enough because [of] that perfectionism component of it: perfectionism as a key value of what everybody should be striving for.

Bahr: 22:51–23:05
I'm just reflecting on hearing that statement of not being good enough, and I feel like that's just, anecdotally, something that I hear between dance educators or dance professionals all the time.

Maybe that's a different research project.

Perry: 23:07–25:10
I feel like One Right Way, it gives them an illusory sense of control, right?

You know, that I'm working to this one thing. If this is the right way, then I'm either doing it or I'm not doing it. Or I can keep working towards this thing, and that's all I have to worry about so I can do this.

And in some ways, it's like this lovely security blanket for students to be like, "I just need to do it like this," but also, it absolves them of creative thinking and paying attention to their body. And we're trying to teach them to value those things just as much as "And there is an aesthetic standard or historical standard."

That is or is not what we're after in this moment.

Which is where it comes to learning, which is the next one. You know, Learner Safety means we have to feel free to feel safe and able to take a risk, because learning is risky. Because, if I'm going to learn, I might get it wrong. I might even fail. I might make a mistake. And so, I have to know that this is a place where I can get it wrong or make a mistake and still belong: that that level of belonging and inclusion is not going to go away.

Because learning does mean there's stuff we don't know—or stuff we might get wrong along the way—and we have to be okay with that as educators and students.

I know [it's] something that I struggle with—not in class, but when there's a show, when there's a deadline coming up, and [it] has to look "show ready," right?

Still leaning into that learner side of things, or learning—we're learning—and that maybe isn't perfect.

Bahr: 25:14–26:35
And that— I mean, I think I'm thinking about Learner Safety and how much Learner Safety—(this is a new thought), so—how much Learner Safety actually conflicts with the idea of giving grades in the first place. That's always the antidote. I hear myself saying, "Oh my gosh, like just take a risk. It's okay to get it wrong. It's okay to fail." But then I have to be really careful, because I'm saying two different things then. When my syllabus says one thing, and then I'm not actually building the structure, then to say, "This system is built on the structure, because if you get it wrong, you won't get an A, you know, you'll get a C, or you'll get a B"—and then how do we actually continue? I've crafted the syllabus in this way to include Learner Safety to be just as valued, so that's the thing that's modeled. But it's really challenging when students are walking into a room and in the back of their minds there's grades, and there's consequences, and there's real financial burdens that come with those things. It's really challenging. I think Learner Safety is really challenging for me to get students to believe.

Perry: 26:36–28:57
Oh, so much of the education system is not about learning. It's about being able to sit still for long periods of time or being able to memorize what someone else says is important and that was important to you. Like in the dance appreciation class, something that I'm really trying to emphasize with them is that learning to appreciate dance is not learning to appreciate what's important to me, as your teacher. It's finding what's interesting to you in dance.

And so, I'm doing much more of a survey course than "this is how you interpret dance" kind of thing. So they get to see a lot of dance from around the world and look at it and be like, "This is the culture that it comes from. This is the history that it comes from. This is the technique that each involves."

We talked last week about how hip-hop has a technique. And it's not the same as ballet technique, but that doesn't mean it's not technical; that doesn't mean that there aren't skills and standards that people are always working towards.

I see this also as: why I have an easier time with Learner Safety in classrooms is because I do "ungrading," where students have a rubric that they contribute to their categories that I put in within their categories that they put in.

And then the majority of our assignments are just their weekly responses. And if they're done, they're done, right? They have to meet specifications, which is usually like a hundred words and turned in on time, and includes the vocabulary from the week. It's not a challenging way to get a good grade, right? But the goal for me is not for them to necessarily get a good grade. The goal for me [is] to have them spend time in reflection on "This is my response to the material from the week. These are the things that we think about. These are the things that I found interesting in it." And that to me is what we're after in that dance appreciation class.

Not an A. But to them that is also bonkers because I spent the whole second day of class explaining "ungrading" to them and how this is going to work. And I still, to this day—like three weeks before class ends—have people being like, "So, so you're not grading me."

No.

Bahr: 28:59–29:56
Right. Well, and then that actually speaks when that actually challenges, too. So it's like these small moments that actually sneak into the other kind of realm of Timothy Clark's theories. It also bleeds into Contributor, too. I think about the rubric that I give [in class]. And lately I'm trying to give more opportunities for Learner Safety to be more valued, and for [students] to start to understand why I'm doing the things that I'm doing. That there's real intention behind it—it's not because I'm not interested in grading you. Actually, I'm interested in cultivating a different way of learning or a different way of understanding. I'll talk about my rubric example, but I think that that leads us into Contributor in a certain way.

Kamrath-Monson: 29:58–31:32
Yeah, I think that the link between Learner and Contributor [Safety] is this conversation that's constantly going back and forth, that the Contributor moments in class give the students more opportunity to invest in their learning. Like, just having this conversation, I'm thinking of this lemniscate of Learner and Contributor Safety that, because I'm giving— I do a lot of intention setting, where students get to decide, either for the day or the semester or the phrase like "This is what I'm tuning into. These are areas that I want to grow in or that I want to play in or discover today." And so they're saying that for themselves—which is very much Contributor—but then it's allowing them to invest in their learning in a different way, because it's what's important to them, like to go back to what Nicole was just talking about.

It's a thing that's interesting to them, that's about them and where they're at that day.

It's not about where anybody else is at or what I'm dictating as the teacher or what they should be exploring. They're in charge of what they discover or what they play with or what they take risks on, if that's where they want to be that day.

So, yeah, this constant conversation and flow between contributor and learner—the more I think about the experiences in my classroom, the more I realize "Oh, these things are always in partnership; they're always holding hands in what I'm doing."

Bahr: 31:33–32:19
I totally agree. And that articulates what I was trying to say, too. I think that's great. I'll define Contributor Safety for us for the video. So Contributor Safety is exactly what Cat said, where students actively shape what they're learning and make choices within the structure that currently exists. So we're not throwing out the structure. We're not dismantling the structure [in this stage], but we kind of are (in some ways) by allowing specific choices to take place.

So students can ask questions or craft assignments in a way that requires them to change parts of the structure or include their experience within the structure.

I don't know. This can be really simple.

Perry: 32:20—34:11
It's like a— It's a practice of there's not One Right Way to do this. There are your ways, and they're just as valid and as interesting as a way that's mine. There's so many different ways, and I think students giving each other feedback falls into here, too. Being able to teach each other and respond to each other—like with the dance appreciation class, with their weekly responses.

I actually only ever grade like 20-ish at a time. And then, in their small groups, they're giving each other feedback, if they're not the group that I'm grading.

And when we started the semester, the feedback was very much like, "That was nice. I liked it." Right? And over the course of the semester we use Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, and over the course of reiterating it through activities and me modeling it in class, and me modeling it in the feedback that I give.

And really hitting on the Statements of Meaning, now their feedback tends to be like, "Oh, it's really interesting that you offered this. I didn't think about that before." Or "I totally agree with that. It lines up with what I said in my weekly response about this thing."

And the students that approach their weekly responses as an opportunity to see things from another student's perspective have found them really— In their midterm reflections, [they] wrote about how it was really fulfilling, and they felt like their class learning expanded so much, because they weren't just getting my perspective and their interpretation on it; they got someone else's perspective, too.

That little homework time, which their weekly responses are not big, but it takes a little bit of time. But that little bit of time exponentially grows what they understand about the concept.

Bahr: 34:13–34:39
Yeah, that's great. And then that also relates, for me, back to Inclusion [Safety] of just the simple idea of standing in a circle and saying, "Okay, what did we all think?" instead of me jumping in first right away. Allowing me to take a step back and for them to take a step forward is also just a small way that I model this a lot in class.

Kamrath-Monson: 34:39–36:10
Yeah, I think that a big way that it shows up in my classroom, too, if Contributor lives in students being able to talk from their lived experience within moving a phrase—before I say anything—that it's what their physical experience was, what they discovered about themselves. Both like, "Well, that was way better today than I could

have imagined," or recognizing I can't find stability on one leg today. I'm now really considering how that lives in my body. Giving them the opportunity to hear from each other, because they are the ones that are physicalizing it, allows them to use that as the baseline of feedback, discussion, continued processing—and then, I follow up with additional thoughts for them to consider (or really specific feedback, if it warrants it). But it allows the students to take more ownership of what they are actually sensing in their bodies.

And to hear from peers. This is— These are other ways that I could discover, right? One Right Way thinking, that just because I'm embodying it this way doesn't mean it's the only way that I can do that. And sometimes, hearing that peer talk about their experiences allows them to find a new avenue into something.

Bahr: 36:11–37:19
Well, that makes me think how I give feedback to students, too, from a movement analyst perspective. It's always helpful to have more information from the person about how it feels in their body. And so I find that when I know more information from my students. For example, I had a student in my Advanced Modern class this semester who I was struggling to find the right thing that would connect—in the way that she was [truly] struggling with.

What we found out was [she was struggling to] actually see the space. The moment she said that, then all of a sudden, I could see, okay, now I know how to help you in relationship to your Head-Tail connection, or now I know how that kind of connects to her back. I didn't know that until she said, "I feel like I just check out all the time" and [I replied,] "I see you do that a lot." Then it became an ongoing conversation of feedback that felt most essential to her instead of me placing a bunch of corrections on top of her. To try to really figure out exactly what it is [in the student's movement]—that relationship feels really important to me in technique class, specifically.

Perry: 37:21–37:28
I think that idea of relationship is also what sets the groundwork for Challenger Safety.

Bahr: 37:28–37:30
Yes. Oh my gosh, yes.

Perry: 37:30–38:11
Because students have to know that it's a safe place to bring those challenges, that they're still going to belong. That they could learn from it if this challenge doesn't get met, doesn't get accepted, right? That they're going to learn from that, and that they're still going to belong there.

And there has to be this level of trust—in the structure that we've built as instructors and in the structure that the class has agreed to as a whole—that this will hold. The ensemble will still be here. I will still be a good person, even if I say. "What about this?"

Bahr: 38:13–39:43
Exactly. Well, and that for me—(again, a new thought), but—that for me feels more possible as a teacher in the moment when I'm able to say, "Yeah, I hadn't thought about that. That's a really good question. What do we all think about this new way of thinking about something?" When I'm able to take a step back.

Then, all of a sudden, it's not necessarily about getting the exact information right or it's not really about me having all of the information to cover all of the questions for my students. It actually eases the perfectionism and myself, too. And I can say, "Okay, the skill for me as a teacher is one, yes, having information to share, but two, it's mostly about connecting ideas and being able to respond in the moment and ask more questions—and entertain those questions, and then connect them back [to each other]. The skill [of teaching] feels more improvisational. "Yes to this idea, but what about this?" or "How does it relate to this thing that we looked at three weeks ago?"

So that skill feels more important than needing the perfect presentation, and the perfect answer, and having all the information. It just feels like it honors a different skill set in me that I really appreciate.

Kamrath-Monson: 39:46–42:04
Yeah. And students are watching us challenge the system at the same time. So we are modeling what it means to be a challenger while navigating also these other set structures—How do we live within the structure and also challenge at the same time? And they're watching us model that for them in the way that we are are choosing to lead our classrooms and give them the space to contribute, and make them at the forefront of what's happening in the content and where the content goes next. And Challenger [Safety] makes me think of— We got some feedback, from one of our presentations in September, about what happens when you're the only faculty member that's giving space for this Challenger Safety?

What if they walk into another classroom and that's not possible? And it makes me think about the fact that even if that space isn't permitting it, that student is still processing: "What are the other possibilities here? That the way this teacher is teaching or the structures that this teacher is abiding by doesn't have to be the way that I do it."

And so it's allowing the students that, even if we are the only spaces they inhabit that allow them the space to challenge—and that their challenge is responded to in a way of acceptance, and pause, and like, "Yeah, let's dive into that more. Or see where else that lives."

I think it's important for the students to be able to have that opportunity to invest in Challenger [Safety] even within their own consciousness. Because that's then what helps change where they go next. It allows them to be more of an advocate for themselves in whatever field they then enter into, because even if it's not an external processing of the challenge, they've internally processed "What are the other possibilities here?"

Bahr: 42:06–43:42
Right. I think that challenging doesn't always look the way that it feels. For example, I was trying to cultivate this in my Advanced Modern class the other day, and they are really externally motivated. They they want to do everything perfectly. I was trying out [material] about how to take care of yourself in class. We did an exercise while saying no to certain things in our bodies. I was also giving them feedback after that [particular] run, and they can decide if they wanted to take that on or say no to it.

I'm trying to build these small exercises in class to cultivate this idea of Challenger. But I found that I was giving feedback to one of the students and I was like, "Wow, it looks like it changed so much and you're moving more full-bodied," and she was saying no to some things in the exercise. It turns out, when she was saying no, she was actually doing it better. She was doing what I was asking for when she was saying no. And so that actually became a conversation of: when we challenge sometimes, that actually opens more doors than when we thought [we were doing] the correct way. [The correct way] was actually closing us off from transformation. So—I don't know—challenging is sometimes challenging, but it sometimes is like actually the thing that the teacher was asking for this whole time.

Perry: 11:06:17 43:43–43:52
I want to circle back to something that Cat said about, you know, What if you're the only teacher doing it?—and just recognize that that might be really true.

Bahr: 11:06:27 43:53
Yeah.

Perry: 43:54–45:04
You know, I used to teach middle school, and that was absolutely true in middle school. Every other teacher was like, "Sit down" — "Sit still" — "Don't don't do this" — "Follow this curriculum exactly" — "Answer these questions"—you know. And then they would come to

the dance studio, where you're embodied, and I'm asking them to contribute their ideas and telling them it's okay to ask questions, and that's not their experience in any other place.

And so just to [add] a note to ourselves and to the folks listening to this: If you never get to Challenger Safety—like no one ever challenges you in your class—it's not because they don't feel safe necessarily. It is because we're asking them to do what they have like literal decades of training in both academic and dance spaces of not doing.

They just— They don't necessarily believe us (or believe the system) that they can challenge, because that's not been their personal experience.

Bahr: 45:06–45:42
That feels really true. Yeah, what do we do with that?I don't know, because then, sometimes, I think some of my concerns are that news will get back to colleagues, and they'll think I'm being unsupportive—and that's not at all the intention. That's never the intention. And that's maybe a new thought for me, too. How do those worlds exist? I'm not sure.

Perry: 45:43–46:12
Yeah, I definitely got that all the time in middle school. Like, "You let your students run wild, and then they're supposed to come do math." I'm like, "I don't know—maybe you should try math standing up. Put their bodies like—I don't know. You should try it." I'm like, "They're not running wild, they're not running wild—they're doing very structured activities in their body. But yeah, sometimes get out of hand because they are 12. But we're learning in an embodied way."

Bahr: 46:12–46:29
What I would say to myself, even, is that's One Right Way. I'm answering my own question. It would just be as easy to say there's many different ways to do this successfully.

Perry: 46:20–46:39
Yeah, we are learning in an embodied way, and sometimes that means being a little wild.

Bahr: 46:40–47:56
Yes. Wow. I found that even just thinking about it in this way, and as a student myself, I found myself asking a lot of questions. That was something that was cultivated in my upbringing at a really young age. I was really lucky to be taught how to take class from a really inquisitive, challenging, questioning place.

I also found a riff when I met other teachers who didn't know what to do with those questions. It's not like they didn't like them—they just didn't know. [They] never had a student ask this many questions before.

And that has been a really helpful thing for me to experience, both as a teacher and a student, because it provides me different space to engage in a way that doesn't actually follow the quote/unquote "traditional Western dance model" in some ways, but has given me more access to ideas. I don't think I would understand in this way if I wasn't able to verbally process it.

Perry: 48:07–48:22
I think we can move to wrapping up our conversation. It's been like 50 minutes, so maybe just the last few minutes of final thoughts.

Kamrath-Monson: 48:26–50:11
Yeah, final thoughts. I feel like I'm witnessing a change in the students I teach, in terms of how they invest in the work we do.

I witnessed that, and then they are also really changing how they verbalize their experience, both in the classroom, in evaluative spaces, [and] in other discussions that I'm watching, how they discuss certain things also [has] developed in a way that I find really quite amazing to watch.

I see them take more ownership of the material quicker, because they're not waiting for me to tell them if they're doing something right or wrong. They're determining for themselves where their values are and how they're developing, so they're finding more confidence in how they move and in choice making, and making a mistake and how they get back with it.

And I'm seeing major changes in terms of how they talk about themselves—and their dancing. Moving away from "I'm a bad dancer" or "That was really bad" and leaving it at that but giving them the space to be like, "Damn, that wasn't working today" and they're still able to identify really clearly. This is why the identification process and the self-awareness, I feel, has grown in quite amazing ways.

Bahr: 50:12–50:32
Yeah, that's critical inquiry, right? That's cultivating a really difficult skill, because all of a sudden, then you're able to comment more. Rather than trying to build a student up and saying "That was good, that was good," you can actually get to more depth when they have space to do that within themselves, too.

Perry: 50:35–52:24
It's been interesting for me this year, this semester, to have a technique class, a mainly lecture class that has every other week at movement activity—not really dance, since they get up and move, and they do things. And then have my third class be choreographing the musical. (Right, so I have class released to choreograph a musical.)

And to just gauge my own applications of this work, and across those different settings. And, as I said here earlier, I'm finding it really natural in classes to be able to do this, and I, personally, am struggling more in the show settings, where there are those sorts of outside-imposed deadlines and outside expectations of perfection.

And it's been very humbling for me to be like, "Here I am, presenting on this, and still learning." Still learning—and thankfully feel like I'm in a place where I can be learning that and be like, "This is something that I'm recognizing: this tendency towards perfection." Because that's what people want from a show, and we're in a learning environment where I want to continue to build those ideas of Learner and Contributor Safety, and also help the students push back against that idea of perfection, even in the show environment. Like, "None of us are perfect, and none of us have perfect days at work." And to expect that from performers is also a little bit wild.

It's been— This material continues to just call me to be better, which I really appreciate.

Bahr: 52:24–54:44
For me, it's been really simple. I've seen changes in students, and I'm still kind of "feeling out"
this new institution [in terms of significant changes in students].

What I've noticed over the years is giving space and allowing myself room to challenge. Letting those different facets of my teaching and in my students to exist has done two things for me:

One, it's calmed me down as an educator. All of a sudden, the little voice that's [saying] "I'm not good enough" has calmed down, and there's possibilities for different ways of engaging with students from moment to moment. So when a student does challenge something, it doesn't set me off in a way that it used to. It's not like, "Oh my gosh, they're challenging everything that I know, and I'm not good enough." It doesn't resort to that. It actually is more like, "Oh yeah, that's an interesting question. I wonder if we can engage with that question a little longer and take my students really seriously." Then it shows them what Nicole was saying: "I'm human, and I'm not perfect either, and you're not perfect, either, and I think [that's] really beautiful."

And two, something that I'm thinking about long-term, is allowing these different ways of engaging. I'm always questioning who's "allowed" in the space. Are these ways of engaging—(and maybe this is a long-term question for me, too), but—[do they] open up possibilities for people who have been traditionally excluded from dance? Is there a way that this could open a door? If we're able to challenge and ask questions and then innovate the field of dance towards inclusion itself, I think that would be my goal. But I think that's still in process.

Perry: 54:45–54:46 That is good. That is good place to leave it.

Bahr: 54:47–54:54
Do we want to list our references somewhere? If people want to look at this information more?

Perry: 54:55–54:57
Hmm, that's really super. How about that?

Kamrath-Monson: 54:57–54:58
Put it at the end of transcript?

Perry: 55:01–55:04
Yeah, we put it at the end of the transcript, since that's the written portion.

Bahr: 55:05–55:11
That sounds great. I was just thinking how can we show what we're referencing a little bit?

Perry: 55:12
Yeah. Yeah.

Bahr: 55:13
Thanks, y'all.

Kamrath-Monson: 55:18
Okay, I'm gonna stop the recording.

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Author Biographies

Nicole Perry, MFA, CLMA, CID/C is an award-winning intimacy director, intimacy coordinator, and dance choreographer. She is currently the Miami Unit Intimacy Coordinator for two new series filming in South Florida, and is on the SAG pre-registry of Intimacy Coordinators.

Nicole has taught Movement and Dance for several South Florida institutions including the Palm Beach County School District, NYFA: Miami Beach, and the University of Miami. She teaches for Intimacy Professionals Education Collective. She is a founding member of Intimacy Direction in Dance and Florida Intimacy Professionals and Momentum Stage, a professional development company for arts educators.

Halie Bahr (she/hers) is an active choreographer, performer, educator, and scholar who researches the socio-political implications of trauma in the creative process. She creates both performances and educational communities that are playful, sincere, candy-colored-bright, visceral, over-the-top-spectacles that pull at your heartstrings and make us re-think our world. Halie holds her MFA from the University of Utah, and is an Assistant Professor of Dance at Southern Utah University. For more information, visit www.haliebahr.org.

Cat Kamrath Monson (MFA, CLMA, RSME, RSDE) is an Assistant Professor and Dance Area Coordinator at the University of Wyoming. She leads courses in multiple dance techniques, composition, pedagogy, history, and somatic practices. Cat choreographs annually for department productions. She is the Artistic Director of Cat + Fish Dances in Salt Lake City. Cat is on faculty for Integrated Movement

Studies' Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis certification program. She serves as the Higher Education Representative for the Utah Dance Education Organization. Her research investigates psychologically safer pedagogy practices for the dance classroom and the stage. For more information, visit www.catkamrath.com.

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