

# Psychology and Latin Dance:

## Creating an Integrated Context for Multiculturalism in Action

By Ronald H. Evans and Verónica Zander Darer



### Background

In addition to increasing their enrollment of students from diverse backgrounds, many colleges and universities are actively encouraging interaction among those students (Altbach, 1991; Marin, 2000). In many institutions of higher education the phenomenon of re-segregation is hindering social interaction between students of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Bennett, 1995). College students tend to seek “safe spaces,” places where they are able to interact with others very similar to themselves (Allen, 1984; Bennett, 1995; Tatum, 1997). Even though students share academic spaces, consciously or unconsciously they self-segregate socially. The segregation can occur according to ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, age, and other cultural factors.

Overall, we have been moving from “separate but equal” (*de jure*) to “equal but separate” (*de facto*), and separation and some antagonism are still the harsh facts of American life, including life on campus. (Kerr, 1991, p. viii)

We agree with scholars who consider it essential for students to have time and space to interact with peers who hold

prepare students to live in a pluralistic society. Therefore, as multicultural educators, we all attempt to create viable contexts in which integrated pluralism (Sagar & Schofield, 1984) and multiculturalism are not merely buzzwords describing theoretical frameworks but are part of the real-life experiences of college students.

In this article we share one option created for students of various backgrounds and ages to engage in an authentic multicultural activity. The multicultural experience was achieved by linking the disciplines of psychology and dance. One of the goals of combining a psychology and a Latin dance course is to put into practice theoretical concepts presented in the academic classroom. The marriage of the two courses also encourages students to interact on a regular basis outside the traditional classrooms, giving them the opportunity to work together in a more social setting toward a common goal.

PS132, titled “Issues and Investigation in Psychology: Human Development,” is an elective introductory-level

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similar experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives (Allen, 1984). Nevertheless, we also believe that a crucial element of the college experience is for students to understand and to learn from the various perspectives within a culturally diverse community. These opportunities are necessary to

psychology class at Bentley College, a private Northeastern college with a liberal arts focus. In the class, students explore issues pertaining to adolescence and young adulthood. For one semester, they meet twice a week for an hour and fifteen minutes. As one assessment option, students in the psychol-

ogy course can take the ART100 elective, Latin Dance for Beginners. The introductory Latin Dance course meets once a week for two hours during the same semester. The goal of the dance class is for students to learn the history and cultural background of four specific dances (guaracha, merengue, mambo, and cha cha) at the same time that they learn the dance movements and become skilled at performing them.

The professor teaching PS132, Ron Evans, had taken this particular Latin dance class several times before making it an integral part of the course. During the first three years of participating in the dance class, its instructor, Guillermo Rivera Pagán, and Evans shared ideas and experiences. Through his interaction with diversity in the relaxed environment of the dance class, Evans gained a deeper understanding of cultural values and enhanced his cross-cultural communication skills. By making this class a part of his course, he hoped students would gain similar positive outcomes and insights.

On the first day of class, as Evans introduces his course, he also presents the Latin dance class option. He shares with students the reasoning behind this option. He describes his own growth and additional benefits students may realize. For example, for business majors, it is crucial to have exposure to and interactions with different cultures. He notes that the Latin dance class will allow students to learn a new skill that may enhance their personal enjoyment and self-awareness.

Usually, 75 percent of all students enrolled in the three

sections of PS132 pursue the dance class option. In order to evaluate their progress, Evans asks students to keep a journal and to write a final paper in which they describe their personal journey and growth through Latin dance and how it relates to the psychology class.

Along with Verónica Zander Darer, a professor of Spanish and education at nearby Wellesley College, Evans sought to analyze students' responses from journals and essays. The purpose of the analysis was to understand how students constructed their thoughts on diversity through participating in the multicultural experience created by the union of psychology and dance.

## Research approach and methodology

In general, the perspective of the study can be categorized as interpretive. Interpretive studies are a form of qualitative research that involves analysis, interpretation, and explanation of event(s) under investigation (Erickson, 1986). In this study, the data came from interviews with the psychology and dance instructors, students' journals, feedback, and final essays.

The collection of data has been ongoing for eight years. Most of the specific data for this study was taken from approximately 100 final papers by students enrolled in the psychology course and the Latin dance class during two consecutive semesters, fall 2002 and spring 2003. Sixty percent of those students were whites of European-American descent. The rest of the group came from varied ethnic backgrounds, including African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and international students from India, Japan, China, Korea, and other countries.

Using Spradley's system of domain analysis (1980), the researchers found common themes within and throughout the student essays. All the written and oral information given by the participants was categorized by topics and then by subtopics. After key domains (categories) surfaced, links were found among categories that created a synthesis of students' perceptions about their experiences interacting with ethnic and culturally diverse individuals. The synthesis revealed a picture of a viable and integrated pluralistic learning community created through the opportunities for social interaction in the psychology and dance courses.

## Findings

Students participating in the psychology and Latin dance courses had the opportunity to examine, through their final essays, several of the cross-cultural issues they had encountered during the semester and that had contributed to their unique multicultural learning experience. There were common impressions throughout the essays, which the researchers categorized. The main domains or categories were: changing/breaking stereotypes, meeting/working with diverse people, and willingness to seek out diversity in the future. By combining these, a picture emerged of a practice of pluralism that can be described as "*an integrated context for multiculturalism in action.*"

According to Gordon Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954), people of diverse cultural backgrounds can develop positive



interracial interactions if certain conditions are present. The conditions he mentions are: (1) all members in the group have equal status; (2) there is an environment of cooperation and not of competition; (3) the contact is approved by administrators and others in charge; and (4) the interactions allow participants to get to know each other as individuals and not only as members of the group. Students' comments confirmed that they developed the kind of positive inter-ethnic relationships that led to prejudice reduction. Students' essays reinforced Allport's theory and brought up the need to continue searching for similar opportunities.

The authors of the study selected a few among the many statements in students' essays to illustrate how the dance and psychology classes worked together to create a place where close contact among students of diverse ethnicities led to positive interactions. The first quote taken from a student's essay underlines the need for frequent, lengthy, and prolonged interactions for better cross-cultural understanding.

The first day I attended class, I was the only Asian. I felt that everyone would be prejudiced against me by the color of my skin or the accent I have. However, when time passed I realized the more exposure I had with my classmates, the more we knew each other, the more we liked each other.

Even in college campuses where diversity is a priority, students tend to segregate by ethnicity and other cultural values (Bennett, 1995; Tatum, 1997). However, these students were able to experience a rare context in which campus integration actually took place. They were able to contrast their experience in the psychology and dance classes to the generally segregated atmosphere of the campus, as these two quotes illustrate:

Although the school is putting forth a major effort to change the diversity situation on campus, you can still notice the segregation in the cafeteria. If you went into the upper cafeteria at dinnertime, you will notice that the Asians are sitting with the Asians, the athletes with the athletes, international students with other internationals, there is very little intertwining of "groups" of people. This didn't apply on Wednesday at our Latin dance classes....The class gives the students an opportunity to meet other students, learn about another culture and socialize with anyone and everyone despite the learned segregating habits at our college.

One of the best things about meeting people in Latin dance in particular was that the class was filled with a great diversity of people. I was able to meet people that were not all like me, and it felt good! We were all mixed into the big group instead of each ethnic group sticking together. I think that in this school, even though there is a lot of diversity, people tend to migrate into groups of people that are like them, but not in Latin dance. Asian

people danced with white people, African people danced with Indian people, and so on. It was really nice to be in that kind of environment.

We offer each one of the domains found in the students' essays to illustrate the process of examining deeper cultural values, communicating cross-culturally, and interacting positively in a pluralistic environment.

### Changing/breaking stereotypes

Students wrote about their enhanced awareness of the complex, rich, and varied dimensions of Latin music and dance. They understood that Latin music was much more than the one or two songs and dances of a few well-known Latin performers that are part of mainstream North American culture.

Before Latin dance class, I was pretty stereotypical in my thinking. When I thought about Latin music and dancing, I usually thought of pop stars such as Shakira and Ricky Martin. Latin dance taught me there is more to the culture than pop music. I learned about the history and the background behind timeless dances such as merengue, cha cha and mambo.

Students also reexamined their stereotypes concerning Latin dance and dancers.

Many people think of Latin dance as a sexual or vulgar dance. This misconception made me hesitant to join the class....It was quite intimate, but I did not feel like it was vulgar anymore. I realized it was all about the moment and the dance...and also that Latin dancing has become universal.

During the interview, the dance instructor stated that one of the goals of his class was for students to notice that being a good dancer was a matter of practice, not of ethnicity.

...when some students see some kids of color get into the music and dance and really work at it and practice, then they might tie it into the stereotypes. On the other hand, I have also seen a lot of Anglos, Asians, people from many parts of the world, who have also gotten into the music and practiced. With practice they look just as good dancing.

Students commented how they had come into the Latin dance class with certain expectations. These expectations included stereotypes they had about Latinos. Some students commented that at the beginning of the Latin dance class they thought that Latin American students would learn more quickly, as they were "born dancers."

I thought there would be a lot more people like me in the class, but I was wrong. The majority of the

class was of some foreign descent. It was most definitely a little intimidating at first. Especially the ones who appeared to be Latin, because I figured they would already know what they're doing and I would look stupid because I have never danced like this in my life. But it turned out that for the most part, everyone was a beginner and there were only a select few who stood out to know what they were doing right away.

As part of the psychology and dance courses, there was a field trip to a dance club. During this visit, many students realized the falsity of the stereotypes they held.

When I was at the club I noticed that there were many different ethnic groups who were dancing, this is a great look into culture and to learn that dances are not just classified to one race.

These kinds of insights transferred to deeper cultural awareness. By having had the opportunity of examining how they tended to stereotype groups in Latin dance class, some students became cognizant of how they also might be stereotyping individuals outside the class. They recognized the need to get to know each person before making judgments.

Some of these first impressions that I had of these people [regarding Latino student "show-offs"] soon wore off as I got to know them better than just their names. It was then that I realized how often we tend to stereotype people and not only in Latin dance class. I notice it throughout the college campuses, but it is very unfair to not give someone a chance based on first impressions. Personally, I feel that at times like at the start of Latin dance, I made poor judgments about people without getting to know them first. Since then I have changed and I am more willing to meet and understand exactly where people are coming from before I formulate an opinion of them because after all, we all have different and unique personalities.

For the Latino students the opportunity to take Latin dance led to a rediscovery of their culture and a regained pride in their roots. According to Banks (1991), individuals go through several stages of ethnic awareness in order to become multicultural in theory and practice. The stages range from "Ethnic Psychological Captivity," in which the individual holds a negative self-image of his/her cultural background, to "Globalism and Global Competency," in which an individual holds the awareness and the skills to be a citizen of the world. An important stage on the way to becoming a multicultural person is what Banks calls "Ethnic Identity Clarification" (Banks, 1991). At this stage, the individual becomes aware of and appreciates his/her own cultural background, a necessary step in becoming a bi-ethnic/multiethnic person able to travel from one cultural milieu to another. In their essays, several students highlighted the

pride they felt in their Latino roots due to the dance class and how they were able to develop and share this pride in their culture. They also wrote about how the class affected the way they interacted with their families, enabling them to find common ground through music and dancing. A student of Argentine background wrote:

At first I did not like taking Latin dance classes at all. Although my father is from Argentina, it seemed clear that I did not possess the natural flair for the Latin beat that he did....Instead of fantasizing a way out of class, my mind wandered to visions of me visiting my family and surprising them as I moved gracefully across the floor.... At least this year when I go to Vincent's [a dance club] for my aunt's birthday party I will get out on the floor and dance.

Another student from Puerto Rico stated:

In my family everyone can dance, being a Latin family from Puerto Rico and everything, but I never danced, seeing that I was more interested in football and basketball. A couple of years ago I tried to learn how to dance but could not get it. So after that I hated it a little, but now my frame of mind has turned around completely and I'm getting pretty good.

Furthermore, students of non-Latino backgrounds had the opportunity to compare and contrast some of the cultural values and assumptions they held, helping them to clarify how their sense of culture affected their world view.

I come from a culture that I had never listened to music like that. My culture and society taught us that those moves in Latin dance are considered as impolite. Moreover, dancing is not for men, it is for women; a man should never move their body that way....[But for Latinos] music was very important and was something ritual and traditional, therefore, they had the mood of music and dance that their ancestors left them even through the evolution.

The psychology and the Latin dance classes offered students the conditions to examine and clarify stereotypes about their own as well as other cultures. Moreover, they learned to identify and embrace features that defined their personal cultural identity.

### **Meeting and working with diverse people**

Students are uncomfortable interacting with others from differing ethnic backgrounds, and as a result they avoid contact (Crim, 1998). By taking part in both the psychology and the dance courses, students were able to overcome their hesitation to socialize with others of differing backgrounds. This

is a primary goal of both courses. According to the observations of the dance instructor, most students achieved a level of social closeness with individuals of diverse ethnic groups.

I think you have people who are placed in a new situation, from another country, race or religion and are expected to embrace them physically, expected to create a dance together. They get giggly, they are uptight and stiff and you can see after a few weeks how they begin to relax and put everything they are learning into practice. Dancing with someone from another culture can be a first for many of the students. People come from countries that are at war with each other and at the particular moment they are dancing together.... I'm asking students to hold each other's hand, to embrace each other and to create movement together, that's called dance. It's everyone together and all working for a common cause.

In their essays, students mentioned that the opportunity to meet individuals of various backgrounds was one of the most important lessons of the courses.

I was brought up in a predominantly white suburban town, not far from here. For the most part my friends are white Caucasian....I have not, to a large degree, interacted with a lot of people of different races or ethnic backgrounds....This was a great opportunity to do just that....Most of the people there were not of the same race or ethnicity as me, a lot were Hispanic.

One of the greatest aspects of this class that you never think about while you are in it is that no one thinks about the diversity as a major issue. There are African Americans, whites, Asians, and many other ethnicities represented in class. Throughout the semester race has never been an issue and we all interacted well together. I found myself to have my best dances with an Asian girl in class when before I went to college there never was one Asian person in my hometown.

The integration of the dance/psychology group went beyond issues of ethnicity, helping to integrate students of different ages.

Meeting new people was also a part of my experience (in dance class). I had the opportunity to meet lots of other Bentley students from freshmen like myself, to sophomores, juniors, and even seniors.

Part of the reason for the successful integration of individuals of differing ages, ethnicities, and interests is that in the two classes students had regular and close contact with

each other. Every participant was forced to get to know each other in order to perform the dances.

Basically the class made it easy to meet people because you can't avoid contact with them. When you are dancing with someone, it is only natural that you get to know them at least at some level.

In addition, the Latin dance class offered students clear and specific ways of interacting. Instructors gave specific directions to perform the dance steps, choose partners, and complete practice exercises outside class. They also were provided with clear outcome goals. In this way the contact between diverse groups was not hindered as can happen when the social behavior is unclear or unstated (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). For example, the instructors made sure that there would be opportunities for everyone to meet and dance with each other.

It was easy to meet people at Latin dance class because we were continually switching partners and dancing with a new girl every couple of minutes....I found that dancing created a very relaxed activity that promoted chatting and a good time....I found that within a month I knew the names of the vast majority of the people in my class.

Students mentioned in their papers that lasting friendships between culturally and ethnically diverse individuals were forged during the semester. They believed these friendships would not have occurred without the experience of the two combined courses.

I would say that my favorite part of the class...was the fact that I got to know people of different cultures that I probably would not have communicated with if they were not in my class. I found it to be a very diverse group...and I think I benefited from that aspect the most. I think that even once this class is over, some of us will still get together because of the great friendships we made during our experience.

### **Willingness to seek diversity in the future**

In their final papers, students expressed a commitment to continue actively searching for encounters with diverse people and experiences. They wrote about their interest in exploring integrated spaces on campus and beyond. They stated that the friendships made with individuals of diverse backgrounds during these two classes would continue throughout their college years. Moreover, many commented that the experience of integrated pluralism was the springboard to continue seeking and creating interactions with diverse students on campus.

This [dance class] made me realize that from now on I would like to attend more events on campus where I can interact with other cultures because it is really very interesting to me and I learn a lot from it.

The mix of cultures found at every class was extremely refreshing. I found it very interesting to observe and interact with so many different types of people....This class gave me time to talk and socialize with all of them....Certainly there is a lot more to learn, but the class is a good start down a road that I otherwise wouldn't have traveled.

Cultural diversity is a subject that I would like to learn about each day. I like to learn about new cultures and finding out ways in which I can become more diverse....Latin dance has provided me with the opportunity to step outside of my comfort zone and take on new challenges head-on.

For many of the students, the classes seemed to solidify their willingness to continue close contact beyond the confines of the university setting. Some students cited the field trip to the dance club as a key moment in this process.

Another thing that kind of surprised me about the club is the different culture of people there. There were people from all different races and ages that were really good at dancing. This showed me that if I went to another nightclub I wouldn't be out of place there at all.

Latin dance class, along with my English class from this semester, have both introduced me to different cultures. After taking classes such as these, I have decided to study abroad next year. I have realized there is a whole lot more to see outside the country.

One of the goals of multicultural education is to offer students the knowledge and the skills to live in and appreciate our pluralistic society beyond the confines of higher education. The common categories relating to deeper cultural values that appeared in students' writing demonstrate that they were able to gain some of the awareness and skills to continue exploring and contributing to the greater multicultural society.

## Conclusion

Our findings parallel research indicating that regular, intensive, face-to-face interaction is crucial to improving racial tensions and attitudes on college campuses (Hurtado et. al., 1999). In addition, the psychology and dance classes bring together students of diverse ethnic background and ages to build a learning community inside and outside the

classroom. This type of interaction is critical for students to learn how to create positive, accepting, and integrative environments (Tinto, 1997).

Even though the classes got harder, they were a lot more fun because everyone got to know each other, and there was no longer any tension or nerves in the air....I have become good friends with people in the class, people that I probably would not have known otherwise.

Comments in students' essays confirmed Allport's Contact Hypothesis. By opening up a context in which students of diverse backgrounds are encouraged to engage in activities that require close cooperation to reach a common goal, they are able to learn from and about each other. Students were able to form close and lasting friendships with individuals of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, due to the interdisciplinary nature of the psychology and dance classes, students articulated their willingness to continue to integrate socially in and out of the college environment.

"The potential outcomes of a multiracial-multiethnic classroom do not just happen; rather, they need to be 'activated.'" (Marin, 2000, p. 63) The union of psychology and dance "activated" such a pluralistic learning space.

## Limitations and Recommendations

The link between psychology and Latin dance classes is unique to the PS132, Issues and Investigation in Psychology: Human Development and ARTS 100, the Latin Dance for Beginners courses at Bentley College and may not be identically replicated or even extrapolated to other institutions of higher learning. Nevertheless, we believe that the creation of similar interdisciplinary spaces in which positive intercultural practice can flourish is possible. Options for comparable interdisciplinary cooperation are limitless. Asking students to participate in campus-wide activities such as theatre, dance, and volunteer activities as part of academic courses can offer all students, no matter what their cultural background, the experience of working toward enhancing campus integration. Specific suggestions include linking sociology class participants with community volunteer and/or service learning efforts, art history students with work at museums, and members of English classes with theater projects. In these environments, students of diverse backgrounds meet outside of the traditional confines of the classroom and have the opportunity to work in regular and close contact toward a common goal. The challenge is to find and create these spaces of integrated contexts for multiculturalism in action.

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