Disobedience-Based Arts Education

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In this essay, Alison Kotin, Stella Aguirre McGregor, DeAnna Pellecchia, Ingrid Schatz, and Shaw Pong Liu reflect on their experiences working with public high school students to create Speak Out. Act Up. Move Forward., a performative response to current and historical acts of civil disobedience. The authors—a group of instructors from the Urbano Project with specialties in contemporary dance, musical composition, and interactive digital media—discuss their collaboration with students to draw connections between nonviolent protest and the challenges, pressures, and choices teens are faced with in everyday life. Through the use of student voices and powerful images, this reflective piece illustrates the potential of contemporary art to empower youth with a platform to work collaboratively, engage in critical reflection, and provoke and intrigue their audiences in open-ended consideration of urban young people’s lived experiences and views of the world.

Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.
—Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1993)

When the 2011 academic year began, the Occupy movement and Arab Spring protests dominated the headlines. Occupy Boston took over and transformed downtown neighborhoods. As practicing artists and performers on staff at the Urbano Project—a Boston-area, afterschool, contemporary art education organization with a commitment to collaboration between teens and adult teaching artists to create social change—we were curious to explore the intersection of civil disobedience and artistic production. We were also interested

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in exploring the role of the artist in civil and political disobedience. That year we focused Urbano’s arts programming for teens around the themes of disobedience, protest, and personal, political, and social responses to authority.

In seeking parallels between the processes of studio experimentation and political engagement, Urbano’s staff and instructors wondered how young people could use art as a tool to enter public conversations about authority, social control, and personal freedom. The lens of “disobedience” for the year’s work was inspired in part by Occupy Boston and in part by Urbano’s collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Department of Arts, Culture, and Technology centered on The Disobedience Archive, a video collection curated by Marco Scotini with Gediminas and Nomeda Urbonas.

Urbano students are young people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one who, in 2011–2012, were drawn from thirty-one Boston public high schools. The fifty-three teens who participated in our programming that year were admitted to Urbano’s classes based on written applications and an entrance interview. Interviews determined which students were most interested in the specific opportunities each class presented, who was truly excited about the possibility of creating work collaboratively, and who would be committed to seeing a project through to its conclusion. Many young people enter Urbano’s classes with great enthusiasm and little or no previous studio experience, necessitating the creation of curricula that do not depend initially on skill alone to give students a sense of belonging and accomplishment. According to the Boston Public Schools’ Arts Expansion Initiative progress report, in 2011 only 47 percent of Boston public high school students had access to arts education in school (Rousmaniere et al., 2011). In addition, a majority of our students are immigrants or children of immigrants, many of whom grapple with questions of identity, assimilation, and communication. Students in entry interviews often explain that school is not a place where they are comfortable “being me” or fully expressing all facets of their personality. For many of our students, Urbano represents a community separate from school, neighborhood, and family, where students have the opportunity to experiment, question assumptions, and make mistakes without social repercussions.

To foster and strengthen this community, we felt it important that our instruction go beyond technical skill and personal expression and attempt to create a situation that would support young people in addressing experiences of disempowerment or the lack of access to the current political discourse and to resources for their own development. We entered the school year with the hypothesis that if open-ended artistic exploration could replace traditional, hierarchical instruction in the studio, students would be able to work in true partnership with mentoring artists to initiate critical dialogue with adult authority figures around issues important to them.

A first engagement with these ideas, by way of a lecture on The Disobedience Archive project, proved frustrating for the students. The Disobedience Archive is an ongoing video project documenting civil disobedience actions
worldwide to develop “an atlas of the plurality of resistance tactics . . . brought together by artists, activists, film producers, philosophers and political groups” (Scotini, n.d., para 2). While students were intrigued by videos of political dissent gathered from around the world (from protest marches to nude sit-ins), they had trouble making the connection between international protest movements and their own practice of artistic creation. Similarly, while Occupy Boston generated powerful visuals, headlines, and arguments that instructors expected would resonate with our students’ everyday concerns and experiences, students struggled to find connections between contemporary protest and their lived experiences or artistic expression in the studio. We were wary of pushing students to create didactic works dependent on a specific political context or agenda, knowing that not all students would feel a personal connection to the issues at hand. This approach had a potential to alienate the students who felt themselves to be outside the political conversation. Students and instructors alike felt that to create social change, artists must act as intermediaries or provocateurs, creating situations that would spark conversations among previously alienated groups without imposing a specific agenda. Going forward, this idea determined our approach to disobedience: rather than requiring students to address a specific, narrow social or political issue, instructors wanted to equip teens with tools that would allow them to enter and shape political discourse as artists and critical thinkers.


In the spring of 2012, the choreographic team of DeAnna Pellecchia and Ingrid Schatz of Boston’s KAIROS Dance Theater proposed Speak Out. Act Up. Move Forward. DeAnna and Ingrid designed the project based on ideas developed for an ongoing dance piece, That Girl and the Other One, in which adult dancers explore the dynamics of friendship, bullying, and aggression. DeAnna and Ingrid developed a contemporary dance curriculum for Urbano’s teen performers around young people’s struggles to stand up for their beliefs, express themselves, and defy social and family expectations in the face of bullying and peer pressure. Rather than seeking to confront bullying or repressive authority head on, the project focused on helping Urbano students discover ways in which they could use their bodies in performance to foster relationships, communicate, and tell stories. Whether development of this new physical vocabulary would have an impact on students’ thinking beyond the classroom was an open question.

At the suggestion of Urbano’s director, Stella Aguirre McGregor, DeAnna and Ingrid expanded their course design to include collaboration with violinist and composer Shaw Pong Liu and digital media artist and designer Alison Kotin. Brought into the project shortly before classes began, Alison and Shaw Pong were invited to work with participating teens to develop an original score.
and an interactive soundstage and digital projections based on dancers’ movements for the final dance performance. Ten students worked intensively with the four instructors, spending an average of 110 hours each in Urbano’s studio classroom from January through May 2012. All but two of the participating students had no previous dance or music experience.

Development of choreographic material began during the first class meeting. Students and instructors participated in an initial “getting to know you” exercise in which each of us was asked to create a simple movement to represent ourselves—our “name phrase”—which was then echoed and elaborated by the group. From that first day of work in the studio onward, each student (and each instructor) was identified by his or her name phrase. The group of name phrases taken together then formed the basis of the first section of the choreography of *Speak Out. Act Up. Move Forward*. “The Sterling,” a rhythmic one-two stomp created by teen artist Sterling became a recurring motion that punctuated the whole piece, initiating a call-and-response between dancers and live music performers. This process of developing material collaboratively through open-ended play required the group to create its own language to describe the motions and ideas that emerged.

Once the traditional vocabulary of dance was introduced, students simply added new terms to existing descriptive words of their own invention. In this way, students were introduced to the process of collaborative dance composition without lectures or extensive discussion, and they developed a sense of ownership of the material they created. At the same time, students began to think abstractly, translating familiar ideas and words into movements with many possible interpretations. This groundwork was necessary to establish a sense of community among students and instructors, facilitating risk taking and experimentation and providing a concrete basis on which to develop more complex, conceptual ideas.

Discussions of disobedience led by DeAnna and Ingrid initially focused on “being a teenager” and encouraged young artists to think about their own experiences of authority, obedience, and disobedience. Students listed, then recorded, all the phrases associated with authority that they heard on a daily basis from parents, teachers, or more assertive peers—“Don’t do that,” “Stay in school,” “Be quiet!” “Be a gentleman,” among others. Alison and Shaw Pong worked with students to create a motion-activated sound stage where movements triggered an audio barrage of these phrases. Students practiced moving inside the dynamic soundscape, experimenting with fast and slow motions, reactions to specific commands (“Don’t stand there!”), and strategic periods of silence and stillness. In performance, students controlled the voices of authority with their movements, but at the same time they were seemingly overwhelmed by the torrent of conflicting advice, commands, and instructions. As students and instructors discussed together what they would have liked to say in response to hearing a parent say, “That’s what white people do”
or “That’s not what girls do,” a sense of shared experience emerged across cultural, linguistic, and age barriers.

From discussion of experiences of authority, obedience, and disobedience in their own lives, students were then guided to broaden their perspective to encompass the examples of civil and personal disobedience that had inspired Urbano’s project theme. Using dance as a lens through which to analyze historical images and footage, students considered antiviolence tactics used during Occupy Boston protests as well as historic uses of passive resistance during the civil rights movement. Students analyzed the body language of both protestors and police officers to find examples of tension, flow, strain, and force. From this research and discussion, “Limp/Drag” emerged, a choreographic sequence in which students moved in pairs with linked arms, one dancer dragging the other across the stage. Images and footage of the Tiananmen Square protests, particularly the iconic image of a lone man facing down a tank, inspired sections of the final dance performance. “The Sterling” evolved into “Tiananmen Square,” a sequence in which nine students formed a dense group, stomping rhythmically toward an individual student, Sterling, who in turn retreated. “I was the man and they were the tank . . . but they didn’t necessarily have to be the tank, and I didn’t necessarily have to be a person,” Sterling explained. Teens and their adult instructors intentionally created material
that did not literally illustrate specific clashes with authority but instead evoked a more visceral and general experience of oppression and resistance through movement.

Each public presentation of *Speak Out. Act Up. Move Forward.* presented different challenges and opportunities and required students and teaching artists to adjust and respond to very different venues and audiences. At an early in-process performance for a large group of young people, the students were nonplussed when audience members clapped in the middle of choreographic segments, mistaking a pause in the action for the end of the piece. This experience led our group to rethink pacing and lighting decisions, and also started a conversation about the challenges of presenting contemporary art or performance to audiences whose expectations for the work might not match reality. At a performance in the Massachusetts State House, in a busy public area with significant foot traffic, audience members included National Parks Service employees, police officers, and State House staff. Students were intrigued by the opportunity to safely confront law enforcement in a context where adults would applaud dissent and celebrate disobedience.

During culminating performances at Urbano, for audiences made up of students’ families and community members, students planned and led Q&A
sessions after the show, inviting the audience to ask about the development of choreography and the conceptual choices students made to convey their ideas via movement. Students were excited to discover that audience members found meaning in the movements even without knowing the full story of the historical moments on which they were based. During the Q&A session, Tucker, a student athlete and visual artist, explained the group’s visual choices:

We wanted the piece to be really abstract. We thought [that approach] for you the audience would tell a bigger story. If we all put on the same “mask,” you’ll look at the performance and that will explain what we’re trying to say. It’s a challenge to you.
Contemporary Art, Disobedience, and Social Change

Contemporary art is distinguished by its eclectic use of media (including performance, the visual arts, and digital media), collaboration among artists with diverse skill sets, studio practice based in research and response to popular culture, and ongoing dialogue between artist and audience. Live performance (including contemporary dance and performance art) is often a vital component of this dialogue, as artists explore ways in which to integrate the physical reality of the body into audiences’ experience of a work. As described by performance artist Alan Kaprow (1994), contemporary art projects blur “borders between the arts and the rest of life . . . and . . . they have to be acknowledged and discussed within the arts institutional frameworks” (p. 153). By developing an environment in which Urbano teen students could engage their audience members in discussion “within the arts institutional framework” in equal partnership with their adult mentors, Speak Out. Act Up. Move Forward, provided a forum in which connections between art and lived experience became clear. Through their dance performances and in subsequent Q&A sessions, students were able to “talk back” to authority figures in the audience, who in turn were forced to interact on equal terms with their teen interlocutors.

Students who are disempowered owing to circumstances of their own life experience, family history, or lack of access to resources and educational support often struggle initially in contemporary arts curricula that require improvisation, experimentation, and collaboration based in trust. Some students’ experiences of disempowerment—socially, academically, or politically—directly affect their ability to work creatively in the art studio. University of London professor of art and education Dennis Atkinson (2011) points to the importance of teaching with “open-ended” outcomes to establish a relationship of trust and mutual exploration between instructor and student: “encouraging learners to take risks in their practice, by implication, suggests that teachers themselves are also taking risks in that they have to be able to ‘let things happen’” (p. 6). According to Atkinson, this approach, in which instructors and students participate equally in the development and discussion of collaborative choreography, fosters community among teens and supports them in questioning or dismantling familiar power dynamics in the classroom.

Speaking Out

As a result of participating in Speak Out. Act Up. Move Forward., students began to develop sensitivity to the role of art in the world and became aware of contemporary artists’ ability to interact directly with audiences and society at large. This awareness in turn sparked in students a playful urge toward confrontation as they realized that on stage they could speak from a position of power and authority. Tucker reflected after a performance, “My body, and personal opinion itself, [can be] art in my everyday world . . . I could make you
mad if I wanted to, or I could make you smile if I wanted to, [so] I understand that I’m an artist.”

Tucker’s friend Joy discussed her initial skepticism of the process of developing her name phrase at the beginning of the project: “I thought this was all weird, like what are we doing? What does this have to do with anything?” Observing audience reactions to the performance, Joy experienced an aha moment—“[our show] forces them to think in a different way.” Joy, who was initially less outgoing than her peers but whose engagement increased steadily throughout the semester, experienced a process of discovery and initial uncertainty in her conceptions of her own work that broadened to an understanding of audience reactions. Experimentation and research taught Urbano students to think critically about the effects and impact of their work. By provoking audience reactions and leading Q&A sessions, students took control of the discourse around authority and obedience and felt comfortable confronting parents and authority figures with their concerns and defiance. Adult audience members in turn responded seriously to teens’ ideas and engaged with them in a dialogue of equals.

During reflections at the end of the project, students frequently commented that the process of developing Speak Out. Act Up. Move Forward. sharpened their powers of observation and made them more aware of others’ experiences and emotions. Tayler, who sang on stage for the first time while performing with Shaw Pong, explained: “I’m more understanding [after this project]. Everyone’s human, everyone makes mistakes. I’m more rebellious now, but also more understanding.” Max, a self-described visual artist who “doesn’t dance,” agreed: “[This project] definitely makes you appreciate more. I’m more observant, and I want to incorporate that into what it means to be an artist for myself.” Students’ increasing sensitivity to their peers and their ability to observe others had a direct impact on their conceptions of themselves as individuals and their role as artists in the world.

After a performance, Sterling reflected on dancing “Tiananmen Square” and his consciousness of the audience’s reactions to the choreography he created:

Every time there was a single moment with one person on stage, I wanted the audience to . . . remember a time when they were in a situation where they saw someone doing something wrong or made someone feel uncomfortable and they sat there and did nothing.

Tayler agreed: “I had a kind of revelation . . . isn’t it fascinating how one person can change the way another person acts, whether it’s hurting them or making them happy?” Students were keenly aware of the reactions of their audiences and intrigued by the possibility that their work could have an impact on others. “The one thing about being disobedient that people should know,” Tucker summed up, “is that even if you’re doing it for a righteous reason, you should be prepared for the consequences afterwards.” Tucker was particularly amused by the reflection that in order to make work about disobedience, the
students had taught themselves to be “obedient” to their peers’ wishes and goals to make collaboration successful. Over the course of the semester, students participating in *Speak Out. Act Up. Move Forward.* learned to consider the strategic value of disobedience and began to think of themselves as agents for change.

**Conclusions: Blurring Boundaries**

In focusing on disobedience as a strategy for arts education, *Speak Out. Act Up. Move Forward.* made explicit connections between students’ growing awareness of contemporary protest movements, clashes with authority figures, and artistic expression. Rather than constraining our diverse group of students by requiring them to focus on a single, narrowly defined social justice issue, our open-ended approach equipped young people to strategically and thoughtfully enter into the ongoing dynamics of authority, control, obedience, and resistance in their own lives. The result was an evocative, changeable performance work that invited audience members to propose their own interpretations and see themselves as actors in the struggles Urbano dancers portrayed.
Students came to view their finished work as a bridge to dialogue with audience members and a deliberate attempt to provoke and intrigue adults who, in other contexts, might not take them seriously.

Contemporary art’s propensity for blurring boundaries between art and lived experience provided a vital context for our work. Traditional skills-based instruction in the studio without a “big picture” idea to unite a community of students would not have supported the complex work Urbano students developed. The open-ended process DeAnna and Ingrid led creates a space in which students become comfortable expressing themselves and taking artistic risks. As students are empowered to try new media or embark on a process without a clear end point, they also become more self-aware, more willing to communicate openly with their peers, and more engaged in the responses from audience members. While we know that not all students are affected to the same degree, we maintain that often students’ self-directed process of fostering artistic community within the studio leads to a greater willingness to foster community beyond Urbano’s walls. This evolution is social change as Paul Clements (2004) conceives it: a process of empowering individuals to improvise and create spontaneously and to use these newly discovered tools to better communicate ideas across boundaries of class, age, race, and geography.

Disobedience-based arts education may be galvanized by specific political events, such as the Occupy Boston movement or the Tiananmen Square protests, or grounded in students’ personal experiences of repression or disempowerment. For future projects to succeed with this approach, teaching artists must build curricula that allow for open-ended exploration that takes into account the nuances of individuals’ experiences. Creating collaborative works that invite audience participation and feedback gives young students a safe platform from which to test their own ideas, engage in critical discourse, and “speak up” to authority figures.

Note
1. Students’ names are printed with permission.

References