

Twitter Thread of Teachers

By Faith Wood '22

Some teachers during the Covid pandemic stuck to their ways of teaching. Some joined a Twitter thread to communicate with fellow educators to learn how they could make the transition smoother for their students.

One of these teachers was none other than my professor, Jessica Zeller, Ph.D., M.F.A., Associate Professor of Dance in the Texas Christian University School for Classical & Contemporary Dance. Being a ballet professor made her perspective in these Twitter threads unique. Especially, when her students were confined to 10-by-10 boxes made out of tape on the floor.

After a while, this band of educators moved from Twitter to weekly Zoom meetings to have conversations on pedagogy. Their mission was to question their strategies and take a step back to see what was working and what wasn't. For six months this continued, and "it was the best hour of my week," said Zeller.

Teaching on Zoom, "really reduces you down to what is most important to you in teaching. It makes you ask, what am I doing and why? What are my values?" Zeller said.

In these conversations, Zeller was the only studio-based art form educator in a Zoom room full of English and STEM teachers. These vastly different teaching situations brought to light many perspectives and ideas.

Adam McKinney's modern III class, spring, 2021. Photo by Grace O'Gara.



But there was little of this conversation in the ballet world pushing Zeller to experiment in the classroom.

"I started asking myself questions because I realized I was not in the room, and you were still learning things. You all did the leg work interpreting the little bits I could get out during those classes because I could not speak while you were dancing. I could not come over to you in the corner and have a little tete-a-tete. I figured out what was most important to say in those moments. It made me ask, how important am I?" said Zeller.

Dance Professors had to relearn when and what to say when giving corrections. Accompanists were on Zoom playing piano from the comfort of their homes, students were spaced out in the studio, and professors had to squint and hope they could tell the difference between their students. If the professor wanted to speak, he or she had to wait or else the music would disappear and all audio would go to them. This took a lot of experimenting and work from everyone involved, including the dancers.

Ballet students thrive off community and their ability to take up space, making the

transition to online difficult. They also could not rely on teachers motivating them day to day despite all the challenges they had thrown their way. This unfamiliar environment forced students to question their abilities in motivation and self-assessment. Some were shocked to find that their individual critical thinking skills were not as sharp as they thought them to be.

“When we were in the little boxes, I tried to do my favorite things in dance like traveling and waltz steps, but they all felt less than. Being confined to a space as a mover was literal hell. But, although I was struggling to find the joy in dance again through that time, our teachers worked hard to continue to evaluate us and give positive reviews. I felt stuck as a dancer, because I would get positive reviews, but it felt so wrong. It was such a process to figure out what worked best for me in that time where there was such a mistrust in the physical feeling of dance,” said Alice Ann Mosiniak, a TCU ballet and writing double major.

All people involved were forced to take a step back and learn something about themselves during this challenging time. Students found more self-awareness and ability to self-correct. Teachers figured out their purpose and values, and how they wanted to implement them into their classrooms.

Zeller tried to make the transition back to in-person classes as smooth as possible, by implementing what she learned about her students over Zoom. “Students began to tell me that they enjoyed when I came back into the studio, how far away I was from them but still watching everybody,” said Zeller.

Interest sparks

Zeller knew she wanted to be a teacher as soon as she knew she wanted to dance; which was around the age of three. Coming from a family of teachers, ranging from special ed to textile design, she was raised on the ethos of teaching.

In high school, Zeller studied with teacher Maggie Black to learn and shadow her ways. Zeller began to fall in love with the intellectual way that Black taught and made everything anatomically sound.

After dancing and teaching her way through high school, Zeller attended Butler University to receive her undergraduate degree in arts administration, with a conservatory dance schedule. Zeller remembers this era as her company experience, as she did not join any big companies after. Unfortunately, the harsh dance world branded her as “too short” and would not hire her as a corps member, the newest members in a company who dance as a group.

After dancing in multiple states with smaller companies and freelance jobs, Zeller decided to go to graduate school at the age of 25. She attended Ohio State University for three years to receive her MFA. And then continued for four more years for her Ph.D.

During her time at Ohio State, Zeller worked on a dissertation to receive her Ph.D. which she later turned into her first novel, *Shapes of American Ballet: Teachers and Training before Balanchine* (Zeller, 2016).

While shifting through the stacks in the Ohio State basement library, Zeller found a book that sparked her curiosity. The man on the cover wore “knickers and a suit jacket,

something someone would have worn to teach class in the 20s and he was demonstrating ballet positions. But the things he was saying were really weird,” said Zeller.



Photo by Joyce Marshall.

Her curiosity had officially been sparked and she found that the man on the cover was a part of her teacher lineage, specifically her great grandfather of dance. Zeller chose to write her book on this man and six other teachers who immigrated to America, bringing ballet with them. She wanted to look at the American ballet history from 1900-1930, because thus far the information was not organized.

Zeller reorganized this dissertation into her first book and is currently in the process of writing her second book, to receive the title of full professor; which brings us to what she is doing today.

Chiseling Concrete

Jessica Zeller triangulates her work between serving as the president of CORPS

de Ballet International, Inc., writing her new book, and of course, teaching.

CORPS de Ballet International is a non-profit corporation “dedicated to the development, exploration, and advancement of ballet in higher education and to the service and promotion of the art of ballet (CORPS de Ballet International).” It is made up of around 150 people in higher dance education. It recently held its 24th annual conference with speakers from around the globe, all asking the same questions around identity in dance.

The goal of this organization is the same as Zeller’s: to ask, “where do we go from here?” Her upcoming work will also theorize the answers to this question with testimonials from other teachers and students.

The book’s purpose will be to dissect critical pedagogy. Zeller said, “it will give an opportunity for everyone to take a step back and look at the systems that we are in and what we are doing. And create strategies for, how do we teach now? And why are we doing the things that we are doing? Why are we saying that tradition is more important than the people who we are in the room with?”

Zeller, who received a TCU Dean’s Award for teaching in 2018, strives to constantly value student input and critical thinking. The traditional student-teacher relationship in ballet creates an environment where the student is silent, and listens to what the all-knowing professor has to say. In a 2017 *Journal of Dance Education* article, Zeller challenges this idea, suggesting that the ballet world give students a voice (Zeller, 2017).

“I have learned that students will share with you the knowledge that they have if you ask in a way that makes them feel that their answer will be valued,” said Zeller.

You may think it is common knowledge to stand by what you have to say or advocate for yourself, but dancers are taught from an early age that discipline equals smiling and nodding. You do not question the teacher, or you will be viewed as disrespectful. Zeller turns this approach around and pushes her students to have authority and advocate for themselves.

Zeller is not only teaching her students, but constantly learning from them. Every day, “I must learn each of your bodies. And not just your bodies, but how you think about them. I am always scratching my head wondering what you know that I can use to help you. I need to work with each student individually, otherwise I am just giving class,” said Zeller.

Her students can feel the difference and are grateful for her current work in and out of class, especially her new mission to dismantle grading. She wants her students to have the ability to self-assess and see themselves in the big picture, so that she is not only teaching dancers, but people who can excel in whatever they choose to do after college.

“Dr. Zeller carefully crafts each class to the needs of her students and continuously works to make a safe space no matter her students’ gender, sexual orientation, or physical and mental capabilities. She provides a safe space and has the ability to pull the best out of any student by taking the time to know them and the way her students learn best,” said student, Alice Ann Mosiniak.

Ballet is a centuries-old art form. Therefore, tradition lays the foundation, making it harder for dance researchers, like Jessica Zeller, to change the ways of the ballet world. Yet, Zeller strives to teach whatever she learns through her writings, podcasts, and ballet and pedagogy classes.

The pandemic taught everyone a lot about themselves as students and teachers; now it is time to implement that knowledge just as Jessica Zeller has been working to do.

