

Tango “Lessons” and Decision-Making in Teaching

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In the spring of 2003, Mayumi and I were on our way out of the station near our home when a young woman approached us with a flyer for a new dance school that had just opened a few minutes’ walk from the station. The school offered ballroom dancing, ballet stretching classes, and jazz dance for children. I mentioned to Mayumi that since junior high I had always wanted to learn to waltz and tango, just like Fred Astaire (my dream was to dance *with*, not *like*, Ginger Rogers). Mayumi’s eyes opened wide and a broad smile came over her face. She had always wanted to learn, too.

So the next Thursday evening we strolled over to the tiny, two-storey building with the hand-painted posters in the windows: “Sign up now for a discount—no joining fee!” Naturally, we were curious as to how they taught and just what we had to do. We walked in with no dance shoes, in jeans and T-shirts, and were put in a class with two other beginners. We started our first lesson in our socks. The teacher, a woman in her early 50s, started walking across the narrow dance floor, indicating that we should follow her and walk exactly as she did. I thought to myself, if this is ballroom dancing, I’m disappointed. I certainly don’t need to learn how to walk! Where are the waltz steps? The tango? The cha-cha? Little did I know how important that training in the “simple” art of walking would be.

Within the next few weeks, we had shoes to dance in, and became regular faces at the school. The frown I carried on my face that first night had faded into a smile as we progressed through the basic steps of the waltz, blues, and rumba. The teacher didn’t flinch at all when I told her I wanted to learn the man’s part. Actually, I think she was a bit relieved because there were all women in the class, which meant that she would be the only male lead. Another male part would increase the chances for everyone to have a partner to practice with. I also happened to be several centimeters taller than everyone else.

Over the next year and a half, we focused mainly on remembering the order of the steps, and gradually were introduced to the quick step, jive, paso doble, and my favorite, the tango. The dance instructor kept showing me how I needed to move in order to signal to my partner the next direction we would be moving in, or even the next step if we were not following a pattern. She said, “The tango needs a strong male lead. You must show the woman where to go.” My problem was that I could not think fast enough of all the possible steps to choose from and therefore could not give my partner the appropriate signal. In other words, I was having trouble leading.

It was into that second year that I started to reflect on my dancing and how it related to my teaching. I thought about leading in the classroom, since I do that every day for a living. Just what was my style in the classroom when it came to being the leader? I began to compare how I managed a 90-minute language class with how I approached my role as the lead in a two-partner dance. I observed myself as I moved through my conversation classes and found that I spent most of the time letting the students take over. I would set a task for them, and let them go at it. I was not leading the class; I was facilitating. I realized that I had a rather negative definition of “leading,” which, to me, meant that it took away options for the students. It meant imposing my teacher-talk on people who needed to make the most of the class time to develop their own speaking skills. So in order to provide them with that time, I did as little “leading” as possible. In the role of the teacher, I was much more apt to strive for consensus among the members of the class, thinking about how the learners might best achieve progress with as little

interference as possible on my part.

In the role in the dance, I had to make the decisions and they had to be, and would be, followed. I wondered if this was what people who identified with qualities that are often assumed to be male felt. Do such people find it easy to make decisions for others and assume they will be carried out without question? Had I ever experienced this myself or had I followed the decisions made by others? Was the role of decision-maker really a male role or was I assuming that it was? Was I seeing it now as a male role because of the dance, whereas before, I had thought it to be a human role?

I think I was also somewhat afraid of changing. Maybe somewhere within myself I was worried that if I were to find that part of me that took command in the dance, it would also have an impact on my personality and on my teaching style. I was confusing the power of being the person in charge with becoming autocratic. What models of decision-making did I have to draw on?

Looking inside, I thought about my past and the beliefs I held that came from my family. My mother was a working single parent, raising a daughter with the help of her parents. My mother worked most of her life as a secretary in companies where the men made the decisions. Most of the major decisions in our family were made by my grandparents—my strong-willed grandmother, in particular—until they died. After they died, and after I moved out of my mother’s house, my mother had trouble making important decisions and relied heavily on me for advice. In adulthood, I now approach decision-making in relationships by open discussion and agreement, or compromise, not by one partner’s domineering rule.

Looking outside, I asked: Who are the people making major decisions in the world today? What kinds of decisions are they making? What are some of the consequences of those decisions on the non-decision-makers around the world? Is top-down decision-making admirable in today’s globalized/globalizing world? Whose voices are not heard when decisions are made by those who have the power and the authority to make them? Are alternative decision-making methods available? Effective? Preferable?

Looking at examples of many political leaders around the world left me sad. But there are other kinds of leaders I would like to emulate: Arundhati Roy, Howard Zinn, Amy Goodman, Yuri Kochiyama, and so many others throughout history. Although they are not in positions of powerful decision-making, these leaders do have a considerable degree of influence on the thinking of millions around the globe, and are people who take action in bringing about needed changes in social policy that will benefit the voices drowned out by decision-makers of established “authority.” There are no gender roles in this kind of leadership.

Yet, assumptions about gender roles are all around us in dance class. The teacher often tells the other women that they should be 女らしく (onna rashiku) or lady-like with their steps, not opening their legs too wide in some turns, for example, and always following the male’s lead, reinforcing the stereotype of woman as coy and compliant. In reality, dance requires that both partners be equally strong, agile, quick, and alert. As far as I can see, the only real difference between the partners is that one, who happens to have the label “male,” makes the decisions.

In the classroom, there is no gender assigned to the leadership role.

Both dance and teaching are ongoing processes of refinement, exploration, and adjustment. As my dance and my teaching take the next step in the routine, I maintain my belief that the teacher can make some of the decisions and leave other decisions to the students. I can look to

leaders of progressive movements for inspiration and example in how to move forward while being aware of others' advancement as well, and I can hold that leadership does not necessarily mean authoritarian decision-making. In dance class, I can characterize the decision-maker as the person who points out a safe direction in which both partners move together as equals in the fluid movement of the dance.

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