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SPEAKERS

Heather Woods, Carolyn



Heather Woods 00:01

You're listening to the SEL in Action podcast where we look at how social and emotional competencies are enacted in various professions and educational settings. On today's episode, we're speaking with Carolyn Hebert, about dance and social emotional competencies. And so Carolyn is a PhD candidate and sometimes part time professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, and her research explores experiences and professional tap dancers in improvisation, and is funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and she completed her Masters of Arts and dance studies from York and published her thesis as a chapter in the dance and gender anthology. And she's presented in conferences in Norway, Los Angeles and Greece, and has guest authored articles for Dance International and the Dance Current and in addition to her academic work Carolyn teaches and choreographs tap ballet creative dance in competitive dance studios in Ottawa, and is a member of the Ottawa Rhythm Initiative ensemble, which performed at the 2017 TD Ottawa Jazz Festival. So, thank you so much, Carolyn, for being with us today and sharing your expertise and experiences with us. I'm really looking forward to our chat.



Carolyn 01:24

Well, thank you so much for having me, Heather. I'm so excited to be here.



Heather Woods 01:28

So, Carolyn, um, you have been involved in dance for I believe your whole life from our discussions?



Carolyn 01:36

Yeah. Yeah.



Heather Woods 01:37

So you're coming at this from, you know, a dancer, a lifetime dancer and as a dance teacher. And so I'm wondering kind of what or how you see dance relate to kind of the social emotional competencies so whether it's self awareness, self management or social awareness and As well as you know, building relationships or even decision making and wondering what kind of connections you see between these competencies and being involved or learning dance or teaching dance.



Carolyn 02:11

Yeah, I think that dance and dance education really open up different pathways through which you might explore all these different social emotional competencies to the same extent that many physical education activities would do that. So you know, in any in any form where you're developing your physicality and working in a team setting with others, you're going to be working on a lot of these different competencies and developing yourself and your social skills. But I think with dance that like added aspect is the creative aspect and the the ability to tap into your emotions and connect into them but also express them through your body. So I think that you know, our students In, in dance education, we're teaching them not only to develop their themselves in what it maybe we would call, like a physical technique, right? So we're teaching them you know, they're, they're learning to recognize what it is that their body needs to do in their movements in order to, to achieve a certain goal or to, to convey a certain, you know, movement or expression. And then they're, they're doing that with an intention to, to express some sort of emotion or story to tell a story through their body. And so, but also they're working with other dancers all the time. So they're, they're working maybe with in a group settings so that they're learning to communicate with one another and to tell each other what they need, and to recognize, okay, I think you know, you need this and I need this and so how can we meet in the middle and then they're taking direction from they're like a teacher or a choreographer. And so they're they're learning how to listen and respond in a way that can meet the needs of you know, this person who's who has a particular intention with

with the piece or with their development, right. And that that really relates to both like the teacher helping the student develop technically. And also the teacher or as a choreographer, helping the student to convey a certain intention through their, their a given piece. So I think that there's a lot of different elements in in terms of, we've got dance education, but then also like dance expression, or I guess, in the actual performance side of it. That really helped and I think as a teacher, so then there's that other realm, myself as a dance teacher. Something that I've thought a lot about is about how you know, primarily I'm working with teenage girls, right? And and you're working with these with with Girls young girls at a time in their life when they're trying to figure out who they are and to develop a sense of self and and really self confidence. And I think that dance education allows them to like being in a in a setting with a mature adult who is able to help guide them through these different you know hurdles in their life. Sometimes I see these kids more than they see their parents really because I see them you know, multiple times a week and and we're working through a lot of body image issues that they're staring at themselves in a mirror for you know, hours on end. So there there could be a lot of scary, it can be difficult I think for for some for some people to imagine themselves in that setting but I think in the right stance education spaces you and with the right teachers, right teachers, but with with certain teachers you can overcome those insecurities and you can see yourself and feel beautiful regardless of whatever societal, you know stigma, norms might be placed on on there might change that perception I guess outside of the studio, but in the studio, you can feel really beautiful in the way that you're moving and expressing. And also these students tell me things that they're not going to tell their parent or their or even their school teacher, they develop a relationship with me that they can't have with with the other adults in their lives. And I mean that in like a, it's a trusting. Yeah, it's really a relationship of trust. And it's like, almost like a big sister to like, 65-60 you know, teenage girls. And I take that as a big responsibility. I think so. Yeah, there's a lot there. But I hope that



Heather Woods 06:51

Yeah, so one of the like, big streams that kind of is coming out through what you're talking about here is I think, really the Self Awareness piece and understanding, you know, what your body can do and how you can make it do things. So a little bit of self management is really, really interesting. So I think that even as a teacher, you know, building that self awareness and building that self esteem and body concept like self concept and body concept, and yeah, so I mean, what are some of the ways that maybe you consciously or maybe unconsciously, if you can reflect on that very quickly, try to create that space where, you know, they're able to reflect themselves and build that awareness of what they're capable of what they can do and maybe create, like, even like a bit of a growth mindset, right? Like, okay, I don't have it yet. But like, I'm gonna keep practicing and like

create that space where they have the self confidence to keep going. And then yeah, just creating that space where they do see you kind of like as that big sister or that, like you said, it's a very different space than maybe at home or in the classroom. Or they're able to kind of express themselves a little bit differently and have that self awareness?



Carolyn 08:13

I think, yeah. Oh, definitely. I think that there's a big connection to language as a teacher. So even though we're working in a space, where, you know, we're moving our bodies, and we're really focusing on the physicality and the movement, I think the the words that I use in the directions that I give to my students are really important. And it can be as simple as so people, you might say, Don't bend your knees, but instead, I would say stretch your legs. So it's like the the negative versus the positive. Right? So it's like thinking if I'm giving a direction about the way that they're doing some, some sort of movement, for example, I tried to think in the positive affirmation that they would strive towards, rather than focusing on what they're doing. That's not what I'm trying to have them like what they're doing that's wrong. I do I think I'm using air quotes. That's wrong, because I don't like that term. But yeah, so I think like, that's one really big thing. And also we try at least I try to work with a somatic approach in my education. So what that means is that you're, you're helping your students to move in a way that allows them to tap into their inner feelings that are driving that movement. So if I'm working with them, and I say, Okay, I need you to feel I need you to feel lighter in this expression, like when you're doing this, we want to be light and, and airy and flying. And I say, you know, what, what do you need to do? And I'll ask them to think like, or to, like, reflect on what do you need to do to to make me feel like when I watch you, and you can see their body, like completely change in how they dig inside, you know, and really, like consciously reflect on Well, maybe I'm too, you know, my stomach is in knots and I'm feeling like really tense and so that tension is going to create a heavy, like emotion and a heavy feeling. And so when I'm dancing, my teacher or my audience can see that right? And so it's like, well, what do I need to do, I need to release that, that tension and like, kind of open up my muscles a little bit, and then I'm all of a sudden gonna feel this, like lightness myself, and then my, my audience is going to feel that way too. So I think that is really key in, in, like, that self awareness piece is is helping them to reflect on on what it is that they're feeling, you know, physically and emotionally. I don't believe that they're disconnected. Right? I think that that's all connected. And so if they're, they're reflecting on that in that moment, when I'm giving them kind of some sort of direction or, you know, or typical, you know, like, maybe we need to work on it this way. And then they're able to go to maybe take that outside of the dance studio and say, oh, okay, I'm feeling this tension right now. What is it connected to and how can I you know, maybe how is that tension that feeling being conveyed to the other person in this interaction to right? So I think that it's getting beyond, it's just really tapping into that

inner those inner sensations. I think dance really allows can allow us to do that. And and I think there's another aspect of it where, like, I create this, I try to strive to create a space where my students know that they can tell me anything. So I have a space of no judgment. And I know that's easier to say than to do but I think that's something I've really worked towards as a teacher. And I think that most dance teachers do try to create this kind of no judgement zone where a student can come in, and like I said, they're coming in maybe four or five times a week. So they might, they're not going to always be on their best feeling their best. They have a lot of drama that happened at home or at school or they bring all of that outside kind of baggage into that dance studio space and a lot of people will say, you know, leave it at the door, but I would welcome it Because for me, it's who they are, you can't, you can't like just get rid of that, and pretend it doesn't exist and be this like robot student in my, in my space. So I hope that my students know that when they're welcome to bring that into the studio and to unpack it by moving through it, you know, like, if they take that with them and like I said, you know, look, dig deeper. Okay, what, what is causing this tension internally? Or what is what's, you know, making me feel weighted or, you know, or maybe I'm feeling really elated today and like really energized and where's that coming from? And how can I use that energy to help me dance, in what I'm trying to achieve right now in this dance space, but, yeah, so I hope that that makes some sense.



Heather Woods 12:49

Yeah, of course. I think it's really interesting. Like, um, you know, I'm not always a fan of labeling, but like, it almost creates this like Mindfulness for your students. Right? Yeah. And that they're able to, and then their ability to transfer that outside of the studio, I think is it's huge, particularly in a time when, you know, mindfulness maybe is a little more difficult for the younger generations, you know, they're surrounded by this technology. And it's, you know, like constantly just like stimuli, right?



Carolyn 13:24

They don't need to reflect on themselves because they're constantly looking at something else. Right?



Heather Woods 13:29

Yeah, exactly. So that's, it's really, really fascinating to see that and like, would you say that this is something that maybe dance enhances perhaps a little bit more than say, like playing soccer or doing another physical activity?



Carolyn 13:29

Um, I don't want to say that it does it more than another activity mainly because I don't have as much experience in those other activities like that. You know, I'm sure someone who has worked or studied a particular form for as long as I have in dance would maybe be able to, to counter what I'm saying I think I think there is this element of expression that I think is what's missing in, in sports where they're not aiming to express for an audience, at least I don't think they are aiming to express something like, you know, tell something to an audience through their do a performance right there, they have a goal of like scoring a goal or like winning the game. And so there would be lots of elements there where they need to communicate with each other. But I think in dance, you're you're not just communicating with each other in your dance. You're also this that there's that element of the audience member. And and what's really come out of my research with professional tap dancers is that how that relationship is not just one way like the dancer performing for the audience, that there really is This, you know, give and take between the audience members and the performers that influences like, they are acutely aware of what the audience is feeling. And, you know, it's hard to describe in words, how they are this aware, it's not something they can just see or hear. It's, it's really a feeling of energy that is kind of transferred between the audience and the, and the dancer and that performance. And I think as a teacher, it's the same thing. Like I think I am very aware of how my students are feeling in a given class and that like, I think, my I am a very empathetic person, and that really drives me and I've, I found that with zoom because we've been teaching online. This since the pandemic, it's so hard for me because I really feed off of the energy of my kids and, and I need that energy to, like, reassure me that what we're doing is what they need to today, right? Yeah, and so without that feedback it like, I mean, I can see them and I can hear them sometimes, but it's not the same as and I think they don't feel the same either. I don't think they can feel my energy. Like I think I bring to the studio and I think as most dance teachers strive to bring to the studio, this into that dance space this energy that will encourage their students and, you know, uplift them to to strive, like you're saying, you know, to strive to be better, or to achieve, you know, what all they can achieve in that five minutes, or whatever. Right. And so, I'm sure it's really hard for them to feel that energy to on the other side.



Heather Woods 16:42

Yeah. Obviously, yeah, I think that is like for dance and even teaching like in a classroom setting, right like a lot of that piece and that energy and kind of being able to like you can't focus on, You know, in a classroom you can scan, right. And like, there's a sense. Yeah. Or in the studio, whereas online, like it's very, like one on one almost even though you're with a bunch of people. It's very different. Yeah. And it's, it's interesting, I think how

we're going to learn to maybe try to build that connection a little bit more over the coming months and maybe years at this point.



Carolyn 17:27

And we're gonna have to Yeah,



Heather Woods 17:28

I think it's gonna be really interesting to see what we come up with to kind of compensate a little bit.



Carolyn 17:36

It'll definitely challenge us. Yeah, I think so.



Heather Woods 17:39

Particularly, I think for, like dance, I think, or that type of thing online where I think that relationality is it's a little bit different, I think, than in like a classroom setting. Maybe it shouldn't be, but I think as



Carolyn 18:00

Like, how can we make it? How can we make it mirror what it is in the classroom or not near but at least equivalent? Yeah. Right. Like, it's never going to be the same. But how can we still have that that relational give and take? Yeah. Yeah. And I think it's like helping your students to be able to express what they need. And so like to recognize that there is not that maybe implicit, like, give and take of energy that you might have in person. And so them recognizing, you know, feeling their frustrations, right. They know that they're frustrated, they don't know why. And it's like, allowing them to reflect on what's going on what's causing that frustration, what's causing them to feel like they can't do it, or they can't, it's not working, you know, and then empowering them to put that into words and to express it, I think is like a really important piece. Because, I mean, I'm working on expressing what I need, you know, like, we're all really I hope striving to be more expressive of our own needs and to be then more open to the needs of others. But yeah, I think that that, Dance, that that this will be a good challenge for us having that.



Heather Woods 19:11

So I think one of the things that I'm hearing through all of your reflections, even from like talking about the self awareness and mindfulness and you know, you touched on it a little bit before. And then I think now coming back to talking about like, this almost communication through being online now, right, and that relationality is the types of communication that is available or created or fostered I think, maybe is a better word through dance. Do you have any thoughts about like, you know, what does that look like and the types maybe elaborating a little bit more on what you were mentioning before on, you know, being able to communicate with your body being able to communicate your emotions, what you're trying to say, but then also as a team, as a teacher even.



Carolyn 20:03

Yeah, I just wonder what your thoughts are about, you know more about the communication side of things. Yeah. So I'm really glad that you asked me about that question because my entire thesis is about communication communication between the dancers and the musicians and the community. Yeah, that communication with the audience. And so one of the things that's really come up is that and you know, through a development of this self awareness and being able to communicate with yourself and to tap into what it what your needs are, emotionally and and then to be able to convey those those needs or to express what you're, you know, what you're feeling, from, you know, the sensations to your emotions, and then express that to others that that aspect of communication but also being open and willing to take in the what what others are putting out to you. And so that openness has been conveyed to me really as a sense of listening and if we think of it, not as listening with your ears only, right? But listening is like a full bodied experience down to like, what does it visually look like when someone's listening to you, you can read body language very well to know if somebody has still tapping into what you're saying. But then also, you know, being open yourself to receiving what another person is giving you either, you know, verbally or physically in their movements or in sound when it comes to tap dance, you know, they're, they're playing music in some way, either with their feet or with an instrument. And so you have to be, you can't just close off and, and, and be, you put up a wall, if you close yourself off to hearing what another person is saying. Then then you're not going to be able to really respond in a meaningful way. And that, you know, we've all been in those situations where we're in a conversation where So you're, you know, having a discussion and the other person says something, and then you say something to respond to that and, and it wasn't as if they weren't really listening to you, they were just thinking about what they were going to say, in order to respond, right. And that happens a lot. in conversations, I've been in tons of them. And the same thing can happen in dance where if we're working,

particularly in the realm I'm talking about, which is improvisation, we're working in an improvisatory way where a dancer is going to put out either you know, sounds and movements through her body that she's hoping will entice the other dancer or maybe the musician or maybe the audience members to feel or to respond in a given way. And if and if you're too busy focused on yourself and what you're going to respond with. You're not going to be open to receiving what that dancer is giving you and, and and, and so it's like give and take, have an open on openness to the other person in that exchange or interaction so that you can then meaningfully respond. And you know, take allowing ourselves a minute, like, not a literal minute, like not a literal stopping and waiting, but like a you know, giving ourselves a breath to, to take in what is being given to us and then to respond back in in some way that can only help the foster conversation rather than really, rather than trying to just work through our own perspective and I guess that like, to me that can really be extrapolated out into greater if we if we look at what's going on in society. Now I think that we can learn a lot from from the way that improvisation you know, improvising dancers and musicians or improvising dancers work together to create something really beautiful is is you know, this this way of listening to each other and being a to meaningfully respond,



Heather Woods 24:01

Mm hmm. Yeah. I'm glad that we were able to connect that back to like your dissertation and your research. You know, I think it's really like like you're saying it's it's a different application of that active listening almost right. And it's, yes, that active listening with your body and responding and I think yeah, that's, it's so fascinating. I'm really looking forward to seeing what what you publish, I may not read your whole thesis, but



Carolyn 24:33
that's okay.



Heather Woods 24:34

Whatever you whatever you share from it. Um, but yes, so interesting. And I know that you, you mentioned there a little bit like applying it to, you know, what's going on in the world outside. And so that almost touches a little bit on like a social awareness. I know your masters looked at gender a little bit. So I'm wondering what your thoughts are Maybe about a social awareness that comes with dance.



Carolyn 25:03

Yes. Oh my gosh, so much. I think that through dance well first through dance education, right so like development as a dancer. Um, I think that we come to accept ourselves and who we are and we come like we strive to to better ourselves in very active like becoming dancers and learning how to dance. But we also in that striving we can accept that, like, who we are is good enough. I think this is like very altruistic thinking on my part, but that's kind of what I believed in education has the potential to do and because of that, we, because of that self acceptance, we're then able to go out into the world and be more accepting of all different types of people in all different bodies and all different belief systems. Hopefully, right i think that dance has a has a not excusing the very complex history. That that dance has of, of, you know, of, you know, it's a very white, the drama of dance that I'm working within has been very white has been very dangerous to bodies in terms of size and shape and, and gender. It's been very heteronormative in the past, but I think that with, you know, contemporary dance and the way that dance has expanded outside of these very restrictive boxes in the western concert realm of dance and speaking of I think that we're seeing an opening to this, and an acceptance to all different types of people within our studios. And for me with gender, it was really important because, you know, male dancers, although they they quite dominated in the upper levels of dance management, like in terms of choreographers and directors of companies. They're primarily men, actually. But in the dance studios that I work in, which are commercial dance studios, kids come in, they maybe are training recreationally few times a week, or once a week, or they're maybe competing. And that's a whole other world. Um, but but when we have boys come into the studios, they're often taught to perform it in a very heteronormative way, which, and it's very hyper masculine in the way that they're, they're taught to dance. And so it's because they identify at that time as a boy, we tell them that they should be moving in a certain way. And so what I looked at in my Masters was how can we open spaces for all types of dancers, regardless of their gender identity or gender presentation? Really? How can we just develop their bodies, encourage them to develop their bodies in a way that that meets, you know, that to the best of the abilities, and also fulfill is fulfilling for them in that movement practice. And so instead of just focusing on Well, you're a girl and so you should move this way and you're a boy. So you should move this way, which is still quite dominant in the dance world. In the general I think dance well, but I think in upper levels, it is it is changing. I hope and so, for me, I think that that like, yeah, I think that really comes back to the fostering of self acceptance and, and encouraging this sense of awareness that like it's okay to be who you are. And and it's okay to, to, to get that everyone is allowed in this space. I think that because we focus so much on our body in the dance realm it and allow it if there's an opportunity there. I'm not sure that that opportunity is always sees but I think there's an opportunity there for that acceptance.



Heather Woods 29:01

Yeah, that's really interesting to think about. Yeah, there's like so many levels of social awareness there, right and what we expect, particularly of how certain genders are supposed to move. And like you were saying, like, you know, within the the realm that you're in right now, it's predominantly white, but I know you've shared like on social media and stuff before like that tap is very heavily influenced by the black community and you know, there is a duty to pay homage to that and respect that, you know, the roots of where these dance forms are coming from. So, that's, it's really great to hear. Some of these things come out, right, and it's not necessarily something obvious. I think that a lot of people think about when they think about dance. Yeah, beyond you know, like, they're the that, you know, oh boy shouldn't be in dance right like, right when kids are little it's it's it's so female dominated.



Carolyn 30:12

That really is and those dance studios right like, yeah why we female dominant. And I'm glad you brought up Sorry, I know that. I don't know if they still want to keep talking but I like the aspect of tap because I mean when I'm speaking generally about about dance I want to make it clear I'm coming from a very like Western concert dance realm. So that's really like tap jazz ballet. It's very dominant in like Canada and North America and an indie UK really right? But tap dance itself is a black art form. It comes from black African, like African Americans that like it really we can trace it all the way back to slavery. And so it's really important and I and the majority of practitioners I'd argue don't really know that, I think because it's been so whitewashed through Hollywood. And, you know, there's a very complex history there. I think that a big duty as a tap teacher and as a white tap teacher, is I have a very important responsibility to ensure that my students know this history and and recognize the the privilege that they have as primarily are predominantly white, white students with white dancers, the privilege that they have at being able to do this art form because of the people who came before them and what they had to sacrifice in order for them to pass this art form along and for it to have developed and, and so there is a very deep responsibility or I take a big responsibility as a teacher there like I focus. I always teach about the history. I teach them about the dancers of, of the past that they're learning from, and that's something that I didn't get growing up as a teacher, or the dancer Sorry, I really was not familiar with any sort of dance history in this capacity. And so I feel that I would be doing a disservice to my students to reproduce that. And so yeah, and I think that that awareness, like, you know, has helped them to contextualize the current Black Lives Matter movement, for example, um, being, you know, coming from very privileged backgrounds, majority of these, these kids, it, I think that all of everything that's been going on in the world and has really been difficult for them to process and so I

think that allows, like, you know, pointing to a place where this could relate to them, in some way has helped them to empathize, and to feel a sort of connection and therefore, to kind of become they're more aware of what's going on to have, you know, deepened discussions amongst each other and these are like 14 year olds. Right. So to be able for that, for them to be able to take what's going on in the world and relate it to something in their own lives, I think is really powerful. And so dance can become that, that that anchor for them. I hope it is because you never know.



Heather Woods 33:19

No, it's it's so true. I mean, I was in dance for a very short period, my life, but I did tap and I don't remember ever hearing anything about it. Mind you, I was very young, like five to seven. I think I did tap. And my sister was in jazz and But yeah, I don't think we ever heard anything about you know, the origins of the form that we were dancing in. It's really interesting. That social awareness piece that dance could potentially and probably should bring into it, you know, just ultimately for an appreciation of the art form itself. And a respect for the culture that it's it's come.



Carolyn 34:04

100% and I think that there, there have been a lot more discussions recently in the dance community. So I think that, you know, maybe six or seven months ago, I would, I would suggest that most commercial dance studios didn't have someone there who was really aware of the history of tap dance and also jazz dance, right because jazz and they're from the same family. So, um, but I think now, given First of all, the pandemic, which opened up a lot of opportunities for people to do online learning, and then in a good way, and and then also with Black Lives Matter movement. There have been many discussions online about how we can reconnect, tap dance, to its black origins and how we can ensure that we're passing along that history as any teacher you don't have to have studied as long as I have studying to be able to share this right and, and so I'm really hopeful that that this will be part of a regular dance education that you know, every student will be like, Oh, yeah, I know who Bojangles is like, I know. And you know, he's one of our most important forefathers of tap dance. So my students do know that.



Heather Woods 35:24

No, that's it's really fantastic. Just the connections and the education piece, I think that can be achieved through dance. And there are so many connections, which is why I asked to speak with you because I know there's so much opportunity to really foster those

various social emotional skills, right. So I'm very grateful that you had some time to speak to me.



Carolyn 35:53

Thank you so much for letting me have this conversation with you and sharing all of the things because you know, I I could talk forever about dance and the opportunity to do so. Yeah, thank you.



Heather Woods 36:07

I mean, I can talk forever about social emotional competencies, so we're set. Excellent. Thank you so much, Carolyn



Carolyn 36:17

Thank you, Heather.



Heather Woods 36:18

So you've been listening to the SEL in Action podcast with Heather Woods. Today we spoke with Carolyn Hebert about the social and emotional skills that can be really fostered through dance and the social emotional skills that are acquired as a dance teacher. It's been a really great conversation, talking about you know, the mindfulness and self awareness that's created through dance, along with you know, the social awareness and communication skills that are required through dance. And we hope to hear your thoughts on some of the stuff that we've talked about. Feel free to reach out on social media. You can reach us at SEL in Action on Twitter and Facebook and Yeah, we'll talk to you soon.