

Creating Spaces for Healing: A Conversation with Rodney Lopez

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*As a follow-up to Dr. Shawn Ginwright's popular keynote address ([available here](#)) at the Guild's 2015 Conference, the Guild hosted a virtual book club with members this January to discuss Ginwright's book *Hope and Healing in Urban Education*. Facilitated by the Guild's director of membership development and engagement, Robyne Walker Murphy, and featuring Dr. Ginwright, the book club continued the conversation on structural violence in urban communities and the role of arts education in addressing trauma. Rodney Lopez, one of our *Hope and Healing* book club participants and the global program director of *Dancing Classrooms* (New York, NY), followed up on the discussion by sharing some concrete strategies that his organization is employing to achieve healing and progress amongst the *Dancing Classrooms* staff.*

For your organization, what does it mean to apply hope and healing strategies in arts education?

In many ways, our work at *Dancing Classrooms* is about creating an alternative space during the school day for children to relate to each other. Our in-school residencies teach essential life skills through the practice of social dance. We teach in circles - the ideal shape for healing and connection. Because our art form is ballroom dance, there is no escaping making direct contact with another human being - even if fifth graders are initially uncomfortable or think it's yucky! The act of touching, making eye contact, dancing together and saying words like "May I have this dance, please?" and "Thank you, partner" foster a sense of humanity and community that can, over time, positively impact the morale of an entire cohort of children.

Why did your organization feel it was important to start applying this lens to your work?

We particularly saw the importance of this lens when it came to our middle school residency program. For years, our middle school residency was very much like our elementary school program. However, with the advice of educators, we recognized the need to create a more welcoming space for older kids. As children grow into adolescence, they look for ways to express themselves and find their voices. They're still not adults, but they're not little kids either. While our focus is primarily on dance as a social and emotional learning tool, we also adjusted our residency to include discussion and reflection time. Time for students to read their peers' reflections, comment on them and role play what it means to be respectful in their own environments, use elegant body language and express how they feel about growing up. These kinds of discussions, with the *Dancing Classrooms* teaching artist as an outside facilitator, give the young people a chance to discuss these things in a safe space and we hope that gives them a chance to experience healing on some level.

You've mentioned that Dancing Classrooms has taken concrete steps to foster healing and open conversation amongst internal staff. What has that process looked like?

The Dancing Classrooms program in New York City is the oldest and largest site in our global network. It was started by our founder, Pierre Dulaine, in just a couple of schools in 1994. It now serves over 200 public schools a year with a team of about 40 teaching artists and educational liaison staff. Quite a few have been with us for a long time, while others are relatively new. As our program grew in New York and around the country, we began to wrestle with the questions and challenges of replication, quality control, who "owns" the program and so on. After experiencing the economic downturn of 2008 and changes in leadership, an understandable restlessness began to emerge. Two years ago, we engaged the New York staff in the reading of a wonderful book by Peter Block called *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. His book is a call to organizations to redefine how they do "community." To redefine leadership, engage people on the margins of your community, ask powerful questions (not just interesting ones) and tell new stories. When you do these things, you can create a new dynamic in which people in your organization take ownership for the direction it goes in and perhaps create new possibilities.

What have been the difficulties in carrying out this work?

Many of Block's ideas are simple, yet nonetheless challenging. When we started this process, we just wanted to find out what the persistent stories about the organization were. While some were positive, others weren't. We heard things like "teaching artists are undervalued," "decisions are arbitrary," "we feel like we're being watched," and "we were better when we were smaller." It was important to intentionally create spaces for staff to say these things without fear of reprisal, so we empowered our senior teaching artists to facilitate these conversations and record the results.

Management then made the commitment to change the things we could and explain with transparency the things we couldn't and why. Some of the powerful questions Block encourages you to ask deal with the ability of an organization to not just allow, but encourage dissent. Other questions challenge individuals to speak their commitments and share their gifts and contributions. When you're trying to deliver a high-quality program and have all of your teaching artist staff rowing in the same direction, inviting dissent isn't necessarily the most efficient way to do business. But if people can't speak what's true for them, they may comply based on authority or collecting a paycheck, but they'll never truly "own" the mission. We've tried our best to strike the right balance between open and accountable communication. In terms of our national network, we still have the challenges other organizations like ours have. Where does decision-making power rest? Whose voices are included in those decisions? Many members of our network came together twice last year to chart what I hope is a new course in how we work together. We adopted a Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal (BHAG), came up with new ways to share information via webinar and more. Our future as an organization looks bright.

What advice would you give to other organizations who are hoping to begin this process?

First of all, have your entire staff read books like *Community: The Structure of Belonging* and *Hope and Healing in Urban Education* and find ways to engage in discussion about their contents. Realize that the work you do in your communities is noble and impactful, but only if the people who do the work have the time and space to do their own

healing and give their greatest gifts and talents to the organization. However, for this to really be successful, leadership has to be on board. Whenever I talk about this stuff, people ask me: "What if management isn't interested in having these types of discussions?" My response is: "Then they've probably already lost their credibility with their teams." Conversations happen at the water cooler and over lunch. People mentally check out of staff meetings that go over the same old stuff. When you can nurture a culture of bold expression, people's batteries are recharged and you'll find new and creative ways to serve your communities.