



Audience Engagement: Working Toward a Definition **Summary of Interviews**

Introduction

In the fall of 2008, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation provided funding for Dance/USA interview some of its member dance companies and presenters in order to develop an understanding of the field's perception of the phrase "audience engagement." A total of 25 interviews were conducted by phone and in person in November 2008 by four Dance/USA staff members: Andrea Snyder, executive director; Vicki Kimble, development director; John Munger, director of research; and Victoria Smith, research associate. Interviewers then discussed their findings, perceptions, and new insights with Suzanne Callahan of Callahan Consulting for the Arts and Alan Brown and Jennifer Novak of WolfBrown who offered their observations and helped draw conclusions.

Dance/USA sought insight in four main areas when speaking with interviewees which would illuminate both the ways in which the dance field is currently using audience engagement activities and themes that would contribute to a definition of "audience engagement."

- the **kinds of activities** currently taking place that fall into the realm of audience engagement,
- how the interviewee **classifies** these activities,
- what **purpose** these activities hold,
- and the interviewees own **definition** of "audience engagement."

The responses in these areas varied greatly among organizations and could even differ inside an organization when individuals from the artistic and management sides were interviewed. The majority of respondents had heard the phrase "audience engagement" prior to being interviewed by Dance/USA. All respondents expressed interest in learning more about other presenters' and companies' audience engagement activities.

This document compiles key words, phrases, and ideas from the notes made by the interviewers during conversations (rather than verbatim responses). Dance/USA's working definition of "audience engagement" that was generated based on interviews can be found at the conclusion of this report. In addition, there is a copy of the survey protocol and a list of the organizations that were interviewed. This document will be shared with all individuals who participated in an interview.

Engagement Activities¹

In nearly all cases, interviewees reported having some kind of programming that was designed to encourage and allow an audience member to interact with dance beyond a singular performance.

The kinds of activities ranged from pre- and post- performance talks to school demonstrations to productions where audience members joined the dancers in the performance space to using digital technology. The following list is representative of this wide variety of activities. Some activities are very specific in nature while others reach broadly. Many were mentioned by more than one company or presenter. While similar activities are grouped together, the list is not in any priority order.

Technology & Media

Web-based

- filming dance and putting it on YouTube
- interactive items on the website (e.g. slide show presentation)
- podcasts
- behind the scenes blog for each show
- blogging in advance of a performance about rehearsals
- monthly e-newsletter
- online interviews with choreographers

General

- inclusion of technology in marketing
- PBS interview
- photo exhibits
- toll-free phone number with recorded messages from different members of the company sharing different aspects of a performance
- integrating technology

Youth and Youth Education

Performance/Event

- giving every child the chance to see an opera, play, and ballet
- junior patron's event
- children's matinees

School-based

- build curriculum for schools to teach students about individual works
- using schools to generate a new generation of theater goers
- dance in schools programs

General

- youth education in underserved communities
- lecture/demonstrations
- adapt school programs to create family workshops (parents plus kids)

¹ Interviewee responses to protocol questions A-2, A-5, and B-2. In some cases, interviewees described their activities when responding to question A-1. Descriptions of those activities are included in this section.

Community & Interest Groups

Performance-based

- community events before performance
- create ambassadors for the company in audience members
- host community events and shared performances

Community Event/Venue

- onsite work in a hospital to insert the performing arts into the medical environment
- “dance days” in parks
- go to community events where there are tables for organizations and be present

Families

- making family connections in libraries and community centers with lecture/demonstrations
- targeting young families

Target Groups

- work with senior communities
- participating in disability access month
- LGBT community
- young professionals

Conversation

Performance-based

- pre-/post- performance question and answer with dancers
- curtain speech
- pre-/post- performance talks
- allowing participants to share memories and give anecdotal feedback on their experience

General

- artist talks
- question and answer sessions
- small group discussions
- focus groups/mini-focus groups (e.g. 10 patrons to find out how they want to approach dance)

Social

Performance-based

- all night open stage event
- awards ceremony performance

General

- block party
- donor reception
- party, event attendance, or feel-good things
- create opportunity for social networking
- activities that ensure audience members will become loyal participants in the company by being informed and knowledgeable and included

Educational or Physical

Literature, Materials, Offers

- education about different cultures
- sending program notes prior to the performance
- free class offers for ticket buyers

Participatory

- “conceptual art” performances that actively involve the audience member in the performance
- bringing artists and audiences together
- pieces that allow the audience member to make a choice about his/her level of involvement
- allow audience to engage the artist

General

- workshops
- master classes
- adult education
- guest artist residencies

Behind-the-Scenes

Creative Process

- build anticipation of a completed artwork through involving the audience in the entire creative process
- things that develop interest in dance and what’s going to be presented
- a two-way experience that cares about what the audience member says – both critical and popular response
- informal showings that give people the opportunity to see works in progress and comment on them
- open rehearsals
- give people a way to understand the process of creation and the role of the choreographer
- informal previews of works in progress to teach how the choreographic process happens
- improvisational showings for patrons

General

- building tour
- break down the barriers of the studio
- meet a dancer
- have people come back to support the organization
- tour of the set
- things that remind us that not everyone has to love everything, but they have to keep coming

Classification of Engagement Activities²

When interviewees were asked to classify engagement activities—to describe where they fall in the workings of an organization—the response was much less varied. **On the whole, the most frequently mentioned types of engagement activities were those related to either education or outreach.** There were three additional classification areas that came up in the interviews.

Education

When the activities were narrowed to education, some indicated a need to make artistic decisions to change the repertoire for younger audiences or described the activities by stating that everything—including the performance—has an educational tone.

Marketing

A few respondents described their relationship to engagement activities as outreach and educational activities that influence marketing or have marketing repercussions.

Dependent on the Art

Some interviewees offer a holistic approach to participation building and interaction or classify audience engagement as something that is true to the form of the performance.

Community Related

A few indicated the importance of building involvement in the community and enriching the community through engagement activities. One company that tours observed that different presenters may have their own definitions and activity preferences to which the touring company must adapt, depending on the presenters relationship to their community.

Purpose of Engagement Activities³

Discussing the purpose of engagement activities revealed insight into these activities and expanded the dialogue to consider ramifications beyond retaining ticket sales or marketing ploys to attract new audience members. Interviewees spoke of the following when describing the purpose engagement activities played in their own organizations:

Reflect Organizational Mission and Purpose

- be a vital contributing factor in the community's cultural life, hold the organization to a higher standard of accountability
- socio-political commentary that art and entertainment is not a commodity to be bought and sold
- desire to break down barriers that hold dance up as an elite art form

² Interviewee responses to protocol question A-3.

³ Interviewee responses to protocol question A-6 and B-3.

Educate and Enlighten Audiences

- educate the audience about the work (dancers too)
- the experience is what the audience members want and educating them
- adding context to the performance, but not necessarily increasing awareness
- focus is to generate an audience for the work, a more intelligent audience
- give the audience context for the performance
- enlighten audiences' experience
- build knowledgeable audiences

Enhance the Experience for the Audience

- affect them and retrace passions
- in the short term a richer experience for the audience member
- ask people to bring their whole selves to the performance and be less passive in their dance watching
- to take advantage of artistic impulses, varying interests, and inspirations
- want the audience to be interested in and understand the performance
- for the audience member to be more active

Build Community and Connection

- use dance to connect people to people and not just the art form
- get people involved and making connections in the organization and in the building

Connect People to the Organization

- build better relationships with patrons
- expand the audience and expose new people to a product
- share the artistic process and blend it with marketing activities
- friend raising through deepening relationships and being missionaries for dance
- provide ways for people to feel closer to the work and the organization
- improve customer service and enhance the audience member's experience

An additional line of questioning in this section addressed **whether or not engagement activities deepen current ties to audiences or broaden audiences to include new patrons. On the whole, there was no consensus as to whether activities served solely one purpose or the other.** Some respondents felt that both deepening and broadening the audiences were results of engagement activities, while others indicated that a deeper audience can help broaden the audience, and still others suggested that broader audiences can become more deeply connected.

Define “Audience Engagement”⁴

Interviewees often defined the phrase “audience engagement” in philosophical terms, offering a range of impressions of its purpose and end goals.

When interviewees were asked to define the phrase “audience engagement,” conversation shifted from activities to a bigger picture. What emerged were their passions and hopes for what audiences can gain from being engaged with dance. In their view, “audience engagement” is

- Being successful in programming so the audience is reflected in it and looks forward to it.
- Listening to your audience and connecting them with your brand and what you put on stage in a meaningful way.
- Interaction or any sort, either physical or intellectual, with the audience and the art form that happens at a few different levels – getting to the performance, having pre-post show Q&A, education and outreach.
- Talking to the people who are there or going to be there—spending time in the community and bring them in.
- Looking at the performance as an audience member and answering the question, “did the performance have an impact on me in a way that was significant?”
- About the richness of the experience of the person in the seat, the press, the people in the school and at camps.
- Something that requires participation from the audience, more information sharing/upfront education with the audience, and involved different age levels. It also includes technology and new media. It requires a constant review of the quality and kind of programming that reflects our artistic vision.
- A new way of thinking about the audience/performer relationship that doesn’t assume anything. It is implied that the audience participates or is involved in the performance and can even use props.
- A way of getting people to know who we are, what we do, and why we do what we do.
- The experience a person has while engaged in a show and the promotional information that gets the person to show up and follow up for a total experience.
- An umbrella concept in that it means everything from building, deepening, and listening to audiences to determining what audiences are interested in and serving, informing, and opening communications with them.
- Something that goes beyond a question and answer session to get the audience actively involved.
- The effort to successfully prepare the audience for their experience in the theater.
- Not just about getting the audience members in the door but getting them to stay.

⁴ Interviewee responses to protocol question A-1

Additional Insight⁵

Dance/USA also learned about how the field currently relates to audience engagement by asking interviewees to respond to two additional questions. **Responses painted a picture of where dance companies and presenters would like to go with engagement activities and how much tracking has currently been done.** While these responses may not have directly defined “audience engagement” in practical terms, they **illustrated the clear need for the funding for and assessment of engagement activities.**

When asked if they currently **survey those who participate in activities that happen outside of a performance, the majority of respondents indicated that no surveying was taking place.** Some indicated that surveys were conducted for educational programming or individual performances, but generally, respondents have not been able to successfully survey those who are participating in engagement activities.

Interviewees were also asked what they would do if they were given more resources. **Responses highlighted the dreams companies and presenters have for their organizations and audiences.** The following lists offer a sampling of ideas for what respondents might do if they were given additional resources.

Partnerships

- partner with others in the creative industries and get a group to look at creativity in new ways
- work with groups of different sizes to develop an audience across the board
- develop partnerships with immigrant populations

Research

- find out what appeals directly to the audience member
- education/programming outside the stage
- marketing the availability of accessible seating
- focus groups to bring people in and ask them what they know about the company and what the company could do to benefit them
- survey audiences

Off-site Events

- go into some of the community’s work places
- offer a free night of dance
- sponsor choreographic workshops and educate the next generation of artists
- when on tour do an open house or dinner and meet the artist beforehand

⁵ Interviewee responses to protocol questions A-7, A-8, B-4, B-5, and C-2.

Technology

- embrace technology to customize and personalize the experience of the audience member
- invest in technology and media plan to expand use of internet TV and simulcast
- integrate technology into a full-length production
- become comfortable with new media
- use 3-D technology to record and show dance, because dance does not register on a flat screen
- tune into pop culture to bring people into dance and make it fun and accessible

Increase in Activity or Capacity

- give the audience a longer time with the artists
- capacity-building for the organization
- organizational support
- perform more

Conclusion

These interviews offered a glimpse into the ways that organizations are currently reaching out to audiences and connecting them to the organization's work and mission. Notably, the range of successful activities hosted by organization demonstrates a commitment to engaging audiences, despite the daily challenges of managing organizations and producing seasons. With this in mind, once interviewees began to respond to prompts about how they would define "audience engagement" and what kinds of activities they would take on given additional time and resources, they began to think bigger and express some of their greatest ambitions. These ideas and goals have not yet been realized, not due to a lack of ambition or desire, but more likely due to a shortage of time and resources.

It is hoped that the EDA project will help the field bridge this gap by enabling it to pursue dreams and new ideas. The dance field's use and knowledge of audience engagement is evolving before our eyes, and we are still at an early stage of learning about how these activities help an organization connect with its constituents and its mission. Dance/USA encourages all who are interested in audience engagement to build connections with both us, colleagues in the field, coworkers, and to participate in Engaging Dance Audiences.

Dance/USA thanks those who participated in these interviews and looks forward to sharing the knowledge that will continue to come from Engaging Dance Audiences.

Audience Engagement: Working Toward a Definition **Definition from Interviews**

The phrase, “*audience engagement*,” is now recognized by a wide variety of dance professionals as a term to indicate emerging practices and new attitudes about the inter-relationships between artists, presenters, and audiences. As evidence, many artists, presenters, and managers have undertaken innovative efforts to deepen the relationship between “audiences” -- however they may be defined – and the art form, going well beyond accustomed practices of marketing, outreach, and audience development.

Dance/USA has interviewed over 25 practitioners in the field, has examined various publications and projects relating to audience engagement, and has held discussions with consultants and funders to delve into this emerging topic. A firm definition of *audience engagement* is still evolving on many fronts, but several themes recur in discussions.

Audience engagement is both educational and participatory. It is about creating opportunities for audiences to interact physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually with the form beyond the role of being an observer. It is about empowering audiences to better appreciate and connect with the meaning and impact of the art experience. *Audience engagement* practices may be tied to specific performances, but also may occur independently. Some practitioners in the field see *audience engagement* as blurring the line with the art-making itself.

Audience engagement transcends and interconnects the conventional activities of marketing, programming, education and outreach in new ways. It deepens relationships with existing audiences and also builds connections among prospective audiences. It is actively two-way rather than presentational, and plans in good faith that a more knowledgeable and involved audience will lead to better sales or donations and will attract new faces. The outcomes of engagement practices, however, are not attendance or ticket sales alone, but impacts.

Audience engagement inevitably involves innovation, risk, and investment. It is a profound and responsible re-definition of the role of arts in a community. It invites audiences to be participatory rather than passive, and values their involvement. It appreciates that everyone will react differently to the art, and celebrates the diversity of response.

A clear definition of *audience engagement* is still evolving, and Dance/USA hopes that this project will encourage and empower participants to contribute their own wisdom and experience to this new and hopeful way of relating to audiences and communities as a whole.

Audience Engagement: Working Toward a Definition Protocol for Interviews, November 2008

Hello {name of Respondent}. Thank you for taking the time (*or comparable words*).

(This social intro can be ad-libbed if the interviewer and the respondent already know each other.)

Recently we have been hearing the phrase, “audience engagement” quite a lot. This phrase surfaced significantly in the three national dance forums funded by The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation that Dance/USA convened in 2006-07. We’re trying to get a sense now of what people mean by the phrase, “audience engagement.”

Optional, depending on circumstances: We are working with the arts consulting firm of Wolf/Brown on this project. We hope you don’t mind that Jennifer Novak of Wolf/Brown will be listening on this call.

Optional, depending on circumstances: May we have your permission to record this call?

All interviews will include the First Question, either Part A OR Part B, and all will include Part C

FIRST QUESTION

First, before I called today, had you heard the phrase, "audience engagement?"

If YES, proceed with Part A

If NO, proceed with Part B

In any case, end with Part C

PART A (For “YES” answers to first question)

A-1) How would you define "audience engagement?"

A-2) What kinds of activities come to mind when you think of “audience engagement?”

A-3) How would you classify those activities? For example, education, outreach, marketing, something else?

A-4) Do you do "audience engagement" activities yourself?

If YES ask questions A-5, A-6 and A-7 then finish with question A-8

If NO proceed directly to question A-8

A-5) Please describe a few of your recent “audience engagement” efforts.

A-6) Why do you undertake these activities? What do you hope to achieve?

Does “audience engagement” include developing new audiences, or is that something different?

Have you seen impact on performance-attendance numbers as a result of these activities?

Do you have goals other than simple audience-growth?

A-7) Have you ever surveyed people who participated in your “audience engagement” activities to evaluate their effectiveness?

A-8) If you had more resources, what are some examples of “audience engagement” practices that you would like to try?

PART B (For “NO” answers to first question)

Let’s approach the topic from a different angle.

B-1) Do you offer activities that interact with your audiences in addition to and beyond the performances themselves?

If YES proceed to questions B-2, B-3 and B-4, ending with B-5

If NO proceed directly to question B-5

B-2) Briefly, please describe some examples of what you do.

B-3) Why do you undertake these activities? What do you hope to achieve?

Have you seen impact on performance-attendance numbers as a result of these activities?

Do you have goals other than simple audience-growth?

B-4) Have you ever surveyed people who participated in these activities to evaluate their effectiveness?

B-5) If you had more resources, what are some examples of activities in addition to and beyond performances themselves that you would like to try?

PART C (Wrap-up for all Respondents)

C-1) Would you be interested in learning more about what other presenters and companies are doing with these kinds of activities?

C-2) Is there anything you would like to add?

C-3) Thank you for your time. We will provide you with a summary of what we have learned from these interviews, as well as further information about future directions on this topic.

Audience Engagement: Working Toward a Definition

Entities Participating in Interviews

Large-budget Ballet Companies

Houston Ballet (TX)
Pacific Northwest Ballet (WA)
San Francisco Ballet (CA)

Large-budget Modern/Contemporary Companies

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (NY)
Garth Fagan Dance (NY)
Hubbard Street Dance Chicago (IL)
Mark Morris Dance Group (NY)
ODC (CA)
Philadanco (PA)

Medium-budget Ballet Companies

Ballet Arizona (AZ)
Ballet Austin (TX)
Tulsa Ballet (OK)

Companies with budgets under one million dollars

Axis Dance Company (CA)
Ballet Nouveau Colorado (CO)
Flamenco Vivo Carlota Santana (NY)
GroundWorks Dance Theater (OH)
Headlong Dance Theater (PA)
Malashock Dance (CA)
Ragamala Music and Dance Theater (MN)

Presenters

American Dance Festival (NC)
Brooklyn Academy of Music (NY)
Chicago Human Rhythm Project (IL)
Hancher Auditorium Dance Series (IA)
Pittsburgh Dance Council (PA)
White Bird (OR)