

De-Orientalizing Kuchipudi Hindu Dance Through Dialogue in a Theatrical Space

I employ Kuchipudi¹ Indian Classical Hindu dance as a stimulus within a community of inquiry² in a variety of pedagogical spaces. Particularly, I encounter a dilemma when I dance in a theatrical space that does not engage in verbal dialogue with the viewers of the dance. This lack of verbal dialogue may block my purpose as a Kuchipudi dancer, which is to educate non-Hindus about Hinduism to confront the legacy of colonization that causes misrepresentations and misconceptions of Hinduism to develop. Yet, I hope to engage in a community of inquiry in a theatrical space despite the lack of verbal dialogue in an effort to educate with postcolonialism in mind.

Edward Said,³ essentially the founding father of postcolonialism, develops a theory as he coins the term “Orientalism”.⁴ Said points to the way the West often creates fabricated knowledge of the East based on false assumptions that develop due to a lack of understanding of Eastern religion and culture. Based on Orientalism, the East becomes what the West wishes the East to be as opposed to what the East really is. As I dance with Said’s theoretical framework in mind, I aim to de-Orientalize⁵ Hinduism through Kuchipudi dance as a stimulus for inquiry. The Philosophy for Children⁶ literature provides me with a framework to think about how to engage viewers of the dance in inquiry, despite the lack of verbal dialogue in a theatrical space. The concepts of external dialogue and internal dialogue provide me with a starting point to think about how to engage in a de-Orientalized pedagogy in a theatrical space that does not maintain the opportunity for verbal dialogue.

Self-Study

The self-study⁷ methodology is crucial to this project because self-study grants me the opportunity to learn through experience as I improve my pedagogy in a theatrical space. The American Education of Research Association (AERA) devotes a Special Interest Group (SIG) to research on self-study.⁸ The goal of self-study is to provide the tools for individual educators to rethink the way they educate in a variety of educational settings with improvement-aimed pedagogy in mind.

My main source of data involves a correspondence with my Peer Scholars⁹ who carefully read and provide me with feedback on my dance journals. I write in my dance journal after I teach in a theatrical space. I am brutally honest with myself as I focus on a careful analysis of my phenomenological experiences. My Peer Scholars help me to challenge my assumptions, confirm my beliefs, and look for the overall themes that arise in my journals. This dialogue helps to prevent me from self-delusion that leaves me with unexamined assumptions.

After deliberation with my Peer Scholars, I can now make some initial conclusions about how to de-Orientalize Hinduism through Kuchipudi dance in a community of inquiry while in a theatrical space. To start with, I need to build the prior knowledge of the viewers of the dance with a lecture that de-Orientalizes Hinduism. This lecture is not just a talk that provides explanatory information about a de-Orientalized version of Hinduism. On the contrary, this lecture serves as a stimulus for dialogical inquiry that aims to create an internal dialogue for the viewers of the dance. Here, Socratic Questioning is most important because I pose philosophical questions to the viewers to ponder as they view the dance. The development of these questions requires intense deliberation beforehand for me within a community of inquiry that helps to form

these questions. My main question for this project arises here. How do I as an educator engage the viewers of the dance in a theatrical space in a community of inquiry that focuses on internal dialogue during the performance but external dialogue before and after despite the limitations of the theatre? How do I create the space for external dialogue while I maintain fidelity to the sacred space of Hindu dance while engaging in a community of inquiry with viewers of the dance in a theatrical space?

Postcolonial Scholars

Said and Bhabha, among other postcolonial scholars, move in the direction of dealing with the messiness of global politics with the goal of social transformation. To continue, intellectuals such as Ashis Nandy¹⁰ employ a postcolonial theoretical framework that places Said's work, Bhabha's work, and the work of those who follow into perspective. Nandy's method¹¹ is tricky because he admits that he will write about a concept without mentioning the name of the concept about which he is talking. For instance, he may write about poverty without even mentioning poverty for example.

Nevertheless, Nandy indicates in the introduction of *Time Warps*¹² that his method deals with mirroring. Nandy states,

“Many living communities are ‘dead’ in academic texts and in public documents in the Southern world; policy-makers and scholars talk about them in the past tense even when they are a few feet away, perhaps just on the other side of the road. We exile these communities to history, so that we can safely bemoan their death, and thus dismiss all who remain concerned with them as incurable romantics.”¹³

Nandy points out that there is a separation between the past and the present. Those who have power “exile” cultures into history in a manner that exerts an authority, which aims to “civilize” these very same cultures as part of current day society. Particularly though, Nandy's underlying implication is that the West and the East mirror each other, which is

essentially Nandy's critical problem. First, there is the West that exists in a mirror of the "colonizer" and then there is the East that exists in a mirror of the "colonized". As the West and the East mirror each other, perceptions develop based on illusionary images or images of what the "Other" should be.

As a psychologist of colonialism, Nandy acknowledges that the West and the East develop national images of Western-ness and Eastern-ness as well as respective Western and Eastern self-images. Thus, Western and Eastern identities develop based on how respective perceptions develop as the West and the East mirror each other. Here, more critical problems develop because of the assumptions made as the West and the East perceive each other as an "Other." These critical problems include Said's crisis of Orientalism, which easily develops when the West and the East separate themselves. Also, Bhabha's critical problem becomes evident as the West and the East set illusionary boundaries despite the fact that Western and Eastern culture intertwine. Nevertheless, it is crucial to think of the solution Nandy presents for his critical problem that occurs as the "colonized" and the "colonized" mirror each other. Nandy writes,

"When another faith provides such a counterpoint or balancing principle, it no longer remains an alien faith or someone else's faith. You do not have to open inter-faith or inter-cultural dialogue with such a faith, to conform to contemporary sensitivities. The dialogue already exists, waiting to be joined."¹⁴

For Nandy, the solution is to acknowledge the humanitarian existence that binds all religions and cultures together. There is no "alien faith" or "someone else's faith". Thus, for Nandy, there is no need for an "inter-faith" or "inter-cultural" dialogue because there is already a common humanitarian faith that connects humanity. With this humanitarian existence in mind, Nandy's solution is to move from the micro to the macro in an attempt to connect the local to the global through the personal and the collective.

This means that Nandy acknowledges that the histories of the “colonized” and the “colonizer” intertwine on a variety of levels. Nandy urges individuals to think about how a humanitarian existence transcends illusionary boundaries. To press this point further, Nandy indicates that even if we think religion and culture is compartmentalized into neat spheres, the messiness of global politics is always present not just *within* each separate sphere but *among and between* these spheres. Nandy states,

“Many communities see themselves as simultaneously Hindu and Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim, and Hindu and Christian. This is neither an instance of multiculturalism nor of, as properly educated Indians like to call it, syncretism. It seems to be the case of a society where identities are cross-cutting and the ‘others’ are telescoped into one’s own self, and where none of the identities can be adequately depicted or defined without the presence of the others.”¹⁵

Nandy indicates that communities do not simply come together in a unified manner. Individuals’ personal narrative will determine how they view others. We can sometimes relate to the identities of others, but other times we cannot.

Mirrored Reflections of Educators

The self-study methodology causes me to pay close attention to the way educators could use mirrored reflections. Jerry Allender provides an example of this.

“Jerry Allender (2001) notes in his own self-study that he used his students as a “mirror that encourages reflection on [his] teaching.” As he wrote, he invited his students to incorporate their reflections. This collaborative design provides the reader with a double-lens camera: one that sees the course of study through the eye of the instructor, and the other through the eyes of the students. The collaboration with students is textual. Allender’s self-reflections on his teaching come to life and gain meaning and relevance in light of the reflections of his students who, themselves, reflect on their learning experiences and how it affects (or will affect) their teaching practices.”¹⁶

Allender indicates that he uses his students as a mirror to improve his own pedagogical practice. Allender must have had some preconceptions of his pedagogical style. The reflections from the students provided Allender with the opportunity to

challenge his assumptions and confirm his beliefs. This is the collaborative process to which Allender refers, which is different from the third space of hybridity mentioned in the previous section. Here, the educator reflects from one mirror while the students reflect from another mirror. Essentially, each reflection develops based on what the other mirror suggests. The students help Allender to reflect just as Allender's teaching style causes the students to reflect. This is one way to use a mirrored reflection in the self-study methodology.

Savin-Baden points to the academic nomad as an individual who reflects on epistemology in the hope of self-emancipation.

“The notion of being an academic nomad reflects the sense that being an academic in higher education is about the development of one's identity through knowledge reconstruction, creation and understanding, it is about self-emancipation.”¹⁷

The academic nomad aims to develop an identity by constantly rethinking knowledge with constant reflection. The identity of the academic nomad reflects the individual's ability to rethink what counts as knowledge. The academic nomad hopes to gain self-emancipation, which entails a state of freedom from restraints that chain an individual to supremacist ideologies.

Mirroring

As I return back to Nandy who presents his philosophical method of mirroring as one that acknowledges the “colonizer” and the “colonized”, I will move beyond this type of mirroring and onto a pedagogical space of mirroring. I do not aim to separate the West and the East into false dichotomies in a space of mirroring. On the contrary, I acknowledge a false illusionary separation of the West and the East that has the potential to help de-Orientalize false interpretations of the East and the West. I do not wish to

break the mirror of the colonizer and the colonized, but rather I hope to transform the reflection seen in the mirror. In a pedagogical space of mirroring, my goal is to provide a space for a de-Orientalized interpretation of Hinduism that fosters a de-Orientalized development of knowledge. There is a strong emphasis on self-interpretation in this pedagogical space of mirroring. For this purpose, I employ a self-study methodology as I rely on my own phenomenology as I dance to educate non-Hindus. Even during a theatrical performance, it is imperative to provide non-Hindus with a de-Orientalized relation of Hinduism. In other words, non-Hindus need to first understand the danger of Orientalism and then they need to build a de-Orientalized knowledge base to understand Hinduism from a de-Orientalized perspective. This will help non-Hindus understand and hopefully appreciate the dance.

The pedagogical space of mirroring does not include a dialogical space of inquiry. Here, non-Hindus witness a Kuchipudi dance where there is no discussion. Thus, there is a separation of me, in one mirror, as the performer who aims to educate and a separation non-Hindus, in another mirror. Non-Hindus view the performance, in one mirror, in a manner that attempts to witness and/or learn. The illusionary mirrors exist because there is no dialogue to connect me as the performer with those who witness the performance or wish to learn about the performance. Therefore, I must simply trust my phenomenological experiences to educate and also trust that those who witness the performance or learn about Hinduism through the performance will have a de-Orientalized interpretation of Hinduism. Westerners and Easterners mirror one another when there is a space for internal dialogue based on self-interpretation. There is no room

for dialogical inquiry with a group of participants but rather only a space for self-interpretation.

DIAGRAM – This diagram depicts the West and the East as separate entities that mirror each other.



Theatrical performances provide an example of mirroring. The Westerner who views an Eastern performance is left to self-interpret the performance based on the West's own knowledge of the East, which may or may not be de-Orientalized. The same applies to the Easterner who views a Western performance.

In this self-internalized pedagogical space, the mirror has the potential to serve as an Orientalist mirror that creates an illusory image because the West or the East may see what is not there. The interpretation relates to who we are individually as Westerners and/or Easterners. The mirror has the potential to create Orientalist knowledge, which leads to false truth. It seems that an Orientalist mirror starts with the assumption that either the West or the East dominates the other. Westerners may feel superior to Easterners whereas Easterners may feel superior to Westerners. Regardless of whether or

not dominance is present, the *belief* of dominance is likely present in an Orientalist mirror.

The mirror also has the potential to act as a de-Orientalized mirror that unveils Orientalism, albeit the mirror is only a reflection of what we think reality is. Nevertheless, this type of mirror creates de-Orientalized knowledge that helps to reveal concealed Orientalism. Interpretations of reality are reflected off or through the mirror that has the potential to disrupt Orientalism. A de-Orientalized mirror does not assume that the West dominates the East or vice versa. There is no belief of superiority in a de-Orientalized mirror, even though in reality, there is some dominance that occurs. In this de-Orientalized pedagogical space of mirroring, the *belief* of equality is present, even though in reality, the West and the East are not equal. Although this equality is always a struggle due to the postcolonial space that I teach in, this *belief* of equality, allows the West and the East to maintain an open-mind to learn about each respective sphere without imposing Western or Eastern standards.

As I plan theatrical performances that do not provide a space for dialogical inquiry, I think carefully about what I would like non-Hindus to view in the mirror. I hope to use my authority as a performer to educate non-Hindus about Hinduism in a theatrical, de-Orientalized manner that acknowledges postcolonial realities. To accomplish this goal, I employ a self-study methodology that causes me to remain self-aware of my own phenomenology while developing appropriate pedagogy for a theatrical space.

Contemplative Kuchipudi Dance

During a solo featured dance recital, *Contemplative Kuchipudi Dance*, at Montclair State University in Memorial Auditorium on Sunday, April 21, 2013,¹⁸ I served as an educator in a theatrical space as I aimed to educate non-Hindus about Hinduism with postcolonial realities in mind. When I stood in the theatre with Dr. Esmida Abreu-Hornbostel, Gene Lotito, and Michael Aquino at our home school, Montclair State University, I realized that I had to develop the appropriate pedagogy to teach about Hinduism in a theatrical space. I also remained mindful of my own contemplative practices as a faith-based Hindu dancer that required my full attention for the event. As I stood on the stage during the initial visit to the auditorium, I realized that I was in the mirroring space that Nandy writes about. Therefore, I had to develop visual teaching clips to position myself as a faith-based Hindu dancer to teach about Hinduism with Nandy's concerns in mind.

For months, my loyal friends Sean O'Connor, Arielle Rodriguez, Hank Fandel, Jaime Sommer, and Jocelyn Choi met me on the Montclair State University campus on the weekends to film all of the visual teaching clips. Sometimes we would film from noon to seven o'clock p.m. all weekend. There were many challenges such as finding a quiet location without construction noise, sports noise, people passing through, and also weather conditions. In addition, we had to carry the camcorder, camcorder stand, the easel with the filming outline, and other miscellaneous items. Sometimes, we would have to stop filming to recharge the camcorder battery.

I desired to film outdoors in different parts of the campus to bring the outside into the auditorium on the day of the event. It was my attempt to share the beautiful Montclair State University campus with the viewers of the dance. Yet, I had the

opportunity to share a great deal of contemplative time with my reliable friends who helped me to successfully put together visual teaching clips. Hank and I sat for a while outdoors on the grass in the quad in front of the Student Center as we discussed how we came to this particular point in our lives. Arielle and I talked a lot about graduate school as we walked the path behind the Village dormitory near the stream. Sean O'Connor and I talked in depth, as we walked the campus to find appropriate filming locations, about his upcoming venture to Japan, which he was scheduled to leave for in Summer 2013. Jocelyn and I discussed humanitarian events that she worked for in the past as we shared a meal after many of the filming sessions. I am very grateful to have such wonderful peers who stand by me regardless of what their busy lives entail. They took turns to make sure that I had someone with me as I planned to film the teaching clips. I sincerely feel they assisted me out of the kindness of their hearts without any expectations, except perhaps the anticipation of my success and our continued friendship.

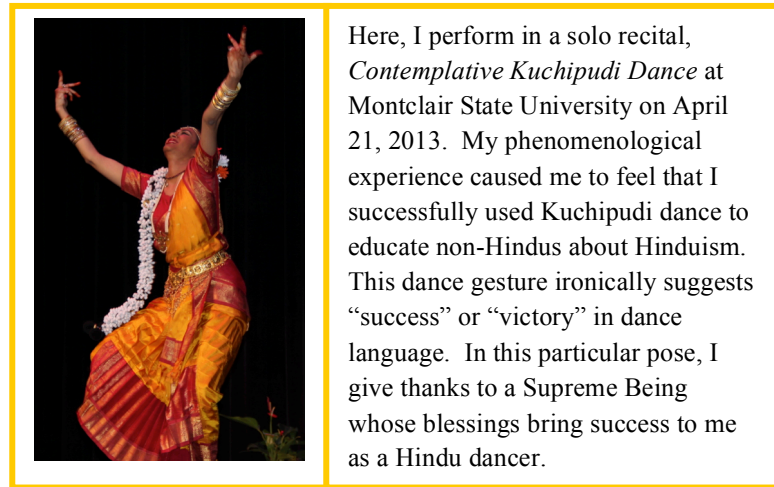
To return to the day of the event, in this pedagogical space of mirroring, I informed the viewers, mostly non-Hindus, of my contemplative practices that occur before, during, and after the performance. This helped non-Hindus to acknowledge that Kuchipudi Indian classical dance is more than a mere performance. I did this by using a visual clip to introduce myself as a Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer. I briefly discussed Orientalism and the postcolonial realities that surround Hindu dance. Second, I used visual clips in between dances to introduce each dance. The purpose of the visual clip, which non-Hindus viewed on a projector screen, was to provide a pedagogical space for non-Hindus to develop a de-Orientalized knowledge base of Hinduism. As I

explained each Hindu dance, I also introduced my contemplative practices as a faith-based Hindu dancer.

Hindu dance	Contemplative Practice Introduced Through Visual Teaching Clip
<i>Pushpanjali and Devi Kritti</i>	Interconnectedness
<i>Tillana</i>	Care for the Self and Letting Go of the Self
<i>Tarangam</i>	Bhakti (phenomenological state of divine bliss)
<i>Mangalam</i>	One and the Many
<i>Hari Sundara Nanda Mukunda (Hindu Chant with live musicians.)</i>	Experience

Throughout the entire event, my phenomenological experience indicated that I created a de-Orientalized mirror, albeit through a theatrical performance, that helped non-Hindus learn about Hinduism. The viewers of the dances, which included several of my family members, were very quiet during the event. My brother said that he had to pay close attention to hear the visual teaching clips due to the wind factor. Everyone seemed to listen closely with sensitivity to understand the dances as I intended. I felt as if I was in a heavenly-mirrored space where One Supreme Being manifested in several forms to fill perimeter of the stage and the entire auditorium. I sensed my father's soul seated in a lotus position with all white clothing and the sacred red thread on his hand that Hindus wear when they perform puja (Hindu worship). It was as if all around me, celestial beings showered me with sweet-scented colorful flowers as a sign of blessings. I was in a spiritual abode where I was fully loved by a Supreme Being who blessed me to fulfill

my purpose as a faith-based Hindu dancer. Several viewers of the event approached me after the event to thank me for the education that I provided in the theatrical space. I felt as if everyone learned a little about Hinduism through Kuchipudi dance. This phenomenological feeling caused me to feel that I successfully used pedagogy appropriately in a theatrical space of mirroring.



After the event, I received several text messages and voice messages from family and friends. I also had many emails from close friends as well as acquaintances. The many correspondences caused me to realize that I moved past the illusionary mirroring space. I felt as if the viewers and I met together through our inner spiritual eyes in a space of Oneness where we had a blissful experience. It was as if my entire being was filled with a balance of contentment. I was not overjoyed nor was I distressed but rather I had a sense of equanimity that calmed my soul.

Conclusion

Educators, regardless of the discipline, need to maintain an ongoing interest in the pedagogical space in which they teach. While I focus on the mirroring space of Nandy in

this paper, there are many more pedagogical spaces. Regardless, the awareness of de-Orientalized pedagogical spaces helps educators determine *how* to teach and what pedagogical tools to use to teach. Once educators are aware of the pedagogical space that they teach in, they can focus on *what* to teach in a learning space.

I specifically focus my attention on an abstract, postcolonial pedagogical space. Although concrete pedagogical spaces are not the focus of this paper, it is crucial to consider the link between the abstract, postcolonial pedagogical spaces and the concrete pedagogical spaces. Here, I use the term concrete pedagogical spaces to refer to the physical arrangement within the pedagogical environment. This may include the seating arrangements of the students, location of the educator's desk, furniture in the setting, décor elements, and so forth. While early childhood, elementary, and secondary teachers usually have their very own classroom, that allows them to create their own concrete pedagogical space¹⁹, higher education instructors do not. This does not mean that in higher education we do not have the opportunity to create our own concrete pedagogical space.²⁰ Professors should gain prior knowledge of the concrete pedagogical space that they will teach in. For instance, some university classrooms have tables and chairs while others have desks. Some classrooms have smartboards with technological equipment whereas others have chalkboards. Even though professors cannot change the skeleton of the concrete pedagogical space that they teach in, they should maintain awareness of this space.

When I use Kuchipudi dance pedagogically in higher education classrooms, I inquire about the space. I aim to gain prior knowledge of the space as I ask questions, which usually include the following. What kind of flooring is in the classroom? This is

important because I dance barefoot. Is there is smartboard or a chalkboard? Where is the professor's desk located? What is the seating arrangement for the students? For instance, do the students sit in rows, in a circle, at tables and chairs, or in a tiered lecture hall arrangement? These questions are especially important because the answers determine how I teach and dance in the space. I don't just inquire for pedagogical reasons but also for sacred reasons. Traditionally, directions play an important role in Hinduism. It is important to know which way is North, South, East, and West as well as the limitations of the space that might cause me to modify my sacred contemplative practices.

Abstract pedagogical spaces are linked to the physicality of the pedagogical space and my positionality as a self-study researcher. In the pedagogical space of mirroring, theatre-style seating or a seating arrangement in the form of rows helps to promote the crucial mirroring. Sometimes, the abstract pedagogical spaces are determined by the concrete nature of the pedagogical spaces whereas other times the concrete nature of the pedagogical spaces determines the abstract nature of the pedagogical space. Here, I think especially of the pedagogical space of the theatre. In the theatre, I aim to use Kuchipudi dance pedagogically to educate. How do I teach in a theatrical space? I certainly cannot move the theatre seats or determine the concrete nature of the stage. However, I could use the pedagogical tools that accompany the pedagogical space of mirroring in the theatre space. Now if I were in the pedagogical space of a classroom with desks and chairs, I might have the option of choosing to rearrange the furniture to endorse a particular abstract pedagogical space. For instance, I could arrange the desks into a semi-circle as I dance and then engage in a dialogue with the students.

This research hopes to contribute to the scholarly community through an examination of an approach to Philosophy for Children in a pedagogical space that may not have the opportunity for external dialogue. I hope to shed light on how to engage in Philosophy for Children model of education despite the challenges for dialogical inquiry in the pedagogical space of the theatre. Now, I am inclined to think about YouTube as I further explore the pedagogical space of mirroring. It seems that YouTube brings forth new challenges and opportunities for me to engage in de-Orientalized pedagogy in a virtual learning space. Evidently, my self-study is never finished but is always under improvement as I hope to consistently re-envision my pedagogy in a community of inquiry.

¹ Suresh, Vidya Bhavani. 2003. *What is Kuchipudi?* Chennai, India: Skanda Publications.

² Splitter, Laurance J., and Ann Margaret Sharp. 1995. *Teaching for better thinking: the classroom community of inquiry.* Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.

³ Said, Edward W. 1999. *Out of place: a memoir.* New York: Knopf.

⁴ Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage Books.

⁵ MisirHiralall, Sabrina D. 2015. *De-Orientalized Pedagogy: Educating Non-Hindus About Hinduism With Postcolonial Realities in Mind.*

⁶ Gregory, Maughn, and Nathan Brubaker. 2008. *Philosophy for children: practitioner handbook.* Montclair, N.J.: Montclair State University.

⁷ Loughran, John. 2004. *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices.* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.

⁸ "Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices SIG." *Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices SIG.* Accessed January 28, 2016. <http://www.aera.net/SIG109/Self-StudyofTeacherEducationPractices/tabid/15029/Default.aspx>.

⁹ I use the term "Peer Scholars" to refer to my colleagues who deliberate with me about my dance journals. Some researchers use the term "critical friend" instead.

¹⁰ Nandy, Ashis. *Time warps: silent and evasive pasts in Indian politics and religion.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶ Bodone, Franc, oise, Hafdi's Guđjo'nsdo' ttir, and Mary C. Dalmau. "Revisioning and recreating practice: Collaboration in self-study." In *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2004. 760.

¹⁷ Savin-Baden, Maggi. *Learning spaces creating opportunities for knowledge creation in academic life*. Maidenhead, England: McGraw Hill/Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 2008.144.

¹⁸ MisirHiralall, Sabrina. "Contemplative Kuchipudi Dance." Theatrical, Contemplative Kuchipudi Dance sponsored by Montclair State University's The College of the Arts, The Office of Equity and Diversity, The Center for Faith and Spirituality, and Japan Club , Montclair , April 21, 2013.

¹⁹ Ray Reutzel, D., and Sarah Clark. 2011. "Organizing Literacy Classrooms for Effective Instruction". *The Reading Teacher*. 65 (2): 96-109.

²⁰ Juschka, D. M. "The Construction Of Pedagogical Spaces: Religious Studies In The University." *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 28, no. 1 (1999): 85-97.