

# **Dancing Through Time and Space: African Dance and the G  w  l Tradition of Senegal at Suffolk University**

by

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the educational benefits of bringing African dance, specifically Sabar dance of Senegal, into the university curriculum. It presents two educational models - the Academic/Experiential Model and the G  w  l Tradition Model - that are used in teaching this particular African dance class. The article integrates the words of students who have taken the class between 2005 and 2012 into the text to illustrate, represent, and explain the efficacy of the educational models and the impacts of the educational experience. Hence, the article is based on a class titled Sabar: The Music and Dance of Senegal taught at Suffolk University in Boston, MA during the spring semesters in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2012, as well as during the fall semester in 2009. The class met twice a week with each class being one hour and twenty minutes in length. The class was developed by the G  w  l Tradition Project to share knowledge of the G  w  l tradition with interested university students (I come to dance as a historian and a drummer, but due to the close relationships between dance and music in African performance arts, learning about dance was necessary and thus allows me to introduce students to basic Sabar movements, taught by expert practitioners).

“This class wasn’t just a dance class, but a step into the Senegalese world twice a week.”  
(Student paper, spring 2005)

## Introduction

Bringing African dance into the university is much more than an exercise in multiculturalism. Learning about the body and how it moves involves a myriad of concepts and ideas including beauty, music, community and history. So to teach African dance in the university is to expose students to an African worldview and an African aesthetic sensibility. These are, at the very least, a challenge to the worldview and sensibilities that are found in the western epistemology that the university curriculum is built upon.

In West Africa, music and dance are inseparable (Green, 2011). And, most traditional dance, even in its modern manifestations, is danced to live music. There is a strong relationship between dance and music because they are born in a particular social context where they develop together and instantly shape and inform each other (Monroe, 2011). The Sabar dance tradition of Senegal, which is under consideration here, is a perfect example of the interrelationship between music and dance found in West Africa. The word Sabar has multiple meanings. It refers to the family of drums that play the traditional rhythms; it refers to the dances that are performed in conjunction with those rhythms; and it refers to the event in which the drums are played and the dances performed. (Bellinger, 2013, pp.65-66). The drums and the dance are mutually interdependent and the event cannot exist without the presence of both drum and dance. It is this close interrelationship that has caused African music to be referred to as “the language of the dance” (Green, 2011). In West Africa, sound and movement are parts of the whole and to have one without the other is incomplete. To teach in an American university therefore requires a class structure, and instructors, that are capable of making the connections between the dance movements, the drum music, and the cultural setting in which they are seated. This creates a holistic learning environment that gives students an opportunity to learn much more than the mechanics of this dance form.

To provide a clear understanding of what is involved in bringing African dance into traditional American (western) educational spaces, it is best to look at it in the framework of “critical postcolonial dance theory and practice,” (Banks, 2010, p. 26) developed by dance educator Ojeya Cruz Banks (2010). For Banks (2010), African dance involves not only a set of steps or movements, but it is also a “repository of knowledge, history and philosophy” (p. 26). It is important to understand “the way music and dance house not just physical information in the human body but also theoretical, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual information in a dance mode” (Banks, 2010, p. 26).

To recognize the existence of this “embodied knowledge” (Banks, 2010, p. 26) is to understand that African dance is based on a distinct epistemic system that represents both a cultural worldview and a sense of aesthetics (Banks, 2010). African dance, even when it is engaged in for purely social purposes, is connected to the culture it is part of; it is inseparable from the historical moments and intellectual concepts that gave birth to it (Banks, 2010, 26).

The class titled *Sabar: The Music and Dance of Senegal*, since its inception, has been structured to not only engage university students in African dance movement, but also to involve them in the culture that Sabar dance is rooted in historically and presently. To accomplish this, the class has been based on and structured around two educational models: the Academic/Experiential Model and the G  w  l Family Instruction Model.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Academic/Experiential Model**

Sabar dance is central to Senegal, West Africa. It is a cultural, historical, social, and spiritual activity that is both traditional and modern, and speaks to all age groups and social classes (Bellinger, 2013, p. 65-66). Its home base is in rural and urban neighborhoods throughout Senegal where it brings people together into community (Bellinger, 2013, p. 65-66). The Academic/Experiential Model has been developed specifically for the Sabar dance class so that this community activity could be transferred into a classroom setting at the university.

The Academic/Experiential model is based on the idea that in the African tradition, there are many texts that should be read to develop a clear understanding of the tradition. Some of those texts are in book form, but there are other forms of text that are also significant. There are texts of movement, texts of sound, texts of symbols and texts of space; and there are the myriad texts that are part of the oral tradition. This presupposes that African dance is connected to an African way of knowing within an African framework. It is not only a way of knowing but also a system for expressing that knowledge. Recognition of such a sensibility and structure is to understand that even the oral texts of the African tradition require particular, distinct skills to understand them. Through an exploration of the trinity of language, movement and sound, one gains an understanding of the deep cultural and historical information that provides the context for African performance art.

With this model, the central focus is the art form, and the central energy of the instructors is to contextualize that art form both historically and culturally. Since the majority of students who take the class are not familiar with the various contexts to which Sabar is central, this portion of the class is of great necessity. Unlike in the West, dance in Africa is a multidimensional activity that not only entertains, but also communicates and informs. This necessitates a holistic style of teaching and learning.

In the Academic/Experiential model, the first half of the semester takes a more traditional academic approach to provide students with a context for understanding Sabar dance. Through readings, oral tradition, lectures, discussions, documentaries, feature films and materials collected from field research; students are introduced to the historical, social, traditional and spiritual contexts for Sabar. Through the use of indigenous knowledge systems, students are introduced to the underlying ideologies about the body, movement, communication and other concepts that inform and shape Sabar performance. Students are also introduced to the foundations of African dance technique in general, and of Sabar dance specifically. This section of the class provides the foundation for the instruction in Sabar dance that takes place during the remainder of the semester.

Many of the students who take this class are being exposed to African dance for the first time and, the “experience of taking an African Dance class is unlike any other class [they] have ever taken in college” (Student, spring 2008). They take the class for various reasons including: “to fill my cultural diversity requirement and to maybe give myself a good workout” (Student, spring 2008), and “it fit into my schedule and I needed to take another class” (Student, spring 2008). The students who take the class “come from a broad range of backgrounds and skill levels” (Student, spring 2008), and the majority of them “were not of African origin” (Student, spring 2006). They described themselves as “people of all different shapes and sizes” (Student, spring 2008) who “all had different levels of flexibility” (Student, spring 2011). There were “dancers from expert to beginner and everything in between” (Student, spring 2008), and some class members “did not have much dance experience” (Student, spring 2009). The most common factor was that the majority of them “had never participated in a class like this” (Student, spring 2006).

The academic portion of the class gives them a context for understanding “why the dancing and drumming in Africa was so important to everyday life” (student, spring 2005). The academic material also provides a link for students as they begin to explore the Sabar dance tradition. It builds an “informational net” (Student, spring 2005) under them, which helps the student dancers “learn, respect and grow from the experience of African Dance” (Student, spring 2005). It also provides them with a way to gauge their growth as dancers during the semester.

In addition to being “incredibly interesting,” (Student, fall 2009) the readings, films and discussions also create an entrance for students who come to class with experience in other styles of dance. This foundation gives them a method to both approach Sabar dance, and also to step away from the genres with which they have more familiarity. This is most clearly explained by one of the students who took the class. She said:

Sabar places a lot of emphasis on feeling the music and rhythm of the dance and I was able to leave my classical dance training behind me and embrace Sabar because of the background information I gained by reading these articles (Student, fall 2009).

Although the significance of the academic portion of the class is not immediately evident to the students, it prepares them to be ready to dance when they take the floor. During the first half of the class, when they are reading texts and viewing films, Sabar dance is just a subject of study. The dance itself is still a foreign entity even though they are in the process of building a foundation for understanding Sabar dance. “Without reading the articles before learning the dance it would have been a lot harder and more confusing to learn because the style of Sabar is so unique and unlike most Western styles of dance we are used to” (Students, spring 2012).

For many of the students, it is also their first experience dancing to live music, especially drums. In this instance, having read about the relationship between music and movement makes them aware, and prepares them to think about how to make that connection and develop their own relationship with Sabar. But, once the students enter the studio and begin the experiential section of the class, the academic material begins to make much more sense, and they begin to put together everything they have read about, from the general to the particular. Once they enter the dance studio students are able to “plug in concepts that [they] have learned” (Student, spring 2011). For the students, “the readings, videos, and recordings became clearer and the meaning and feeling behind Sabar was understood” (Students, spring 2005, spring 2012). In the intersection of academic and experiential, the students are able to “develop [their] own relationship with Sabar and Senegalese culture” (Student, spring 2009), and thus, have the opportunity to grow in a variety of ways during the class. “Though reading these articles was interesting enough,” a member of the class said, “actually embarking on a five week dance learning experience was a life changing event.” (Student, spring 2012).

## **The G  w  l Family Model**

The G  w  l Family Instruction Model is a necessary component of the experiential segment of the Sabar dance class. A G  w  l is a member of a class of people more commonly referred to in the west as griots, and are a significant part of the cultural milieu of many West African cultural groups (Bellinger, 2013, p. 62; Hale, 1998, p. 1-17). Generally speaking, griots play a myriad of roles for their communities and societies from historian and genealogist to praise singer and ceremony participant (Bellinger, 2013, p. 62-65; Hale, 1998, p. 18-58). They are central to every aspect of an individual’s life cycle from birth to death, and are responsible for the well-being of their communities (Bellinger, 2013, p. 62-65; Hale, 1998, p. 18-58). In short, a G  w  l has the responsibility for the cultural, historical and spiritual traditions of a people. A common characteristic of all griots is their particular skill with language, which is why griots are often referred to as masters of the word (Bellinger, 2013, p. 62-65; Hale, 1998, p. 18-58).

In Senegal, Géwël families maintain the Sabar tradition, and members of these families are brought into this tradition from birth so they truly understand the many dimensions of the rhythms and the dances, as well as the connections between all of the elements of Sabar. It is a shared knowledge that is linked firmly to the past, but continues to evolve in the present.

Sabar is not a singular activity. It is, in every aspect, a communal activity. It brings the community together to recognize and celebrate important events in the lives of its members. It is, therefore, not possible to introduce people to Sabar in a singular fashion. A traditional Sabar ensemble consisted of four or five drummers; a modern ensemble can number between seven and fourteen or more (Djibi Faye, personal communication, March 25, 2009; Tang, 2007, p. 29, 42). It is not only the rhythms that are played by the drums that are significant, but also the responses to these rhythms by the community, especially the dancers. In Senegal, a Sabar event is a multidimensional conversation.

Ideally, the Géwël Family Instruction Model employs at least two drummers and one dance teacher from the Sing Sing<sup>2</sup> family, one of the most prominent Géwël families in Dakar, Senegal (Tang, 2001, p. 59-62). In Senegal, it is said that if one does not have much money to hire drummers when they have an event, they will only hear ñaari gorong at the event (Moustapha Faye, personal communication, July, 2005). Ñaari gorong is a particular rhythm, but it also literally means two drums: two being the minimum number of drummers needed to play Sabar rhythms (Tang, 2007, p. 111). The use of two drummers, along with the dance teacher, allows a clear presentation of the subtleties and intricacies of the conversation between the rhythms and movements of Sabar.

The Géwël Family Instruction Model privileges indigenous culture and tradition and privileges indigenous practitioners and preservationists. It also supports bringing indigenous practitioners into the academy, and thus serves as a bridge between the academy and the traditional cultural community. The presence of Géwëls is essential to the class experience, and the students recognize this.

The Faye family brings unique qualities, and the students feel a qualitative difference in the class once members of the family arrive. Students refer to these qualities as bringing “a whole new life to the table” (Student, fall 2009) which is felt through the teachers “passion” for the music and dance which is expressed by the “contagious” smiles that “light up” their faces and “fills the whole room with happiness and joy” (Student, fall 2009). These are elements of Géwëlness, which are as significant a part of the class as the dance movements that are taught. The students realize that their understanding of “the culture, music and dance of Senegal” (student, fall 2009) is increased by the opportunity to study with members of a Géwël family. “By watching, experiencing, and getting to know our visitors from Senegal” their “understanding of Sabar dance and Senegalese culture” deepened (Student, fall 2009).

The power of the drums, the impact of singing songs in Wolof and the dance in relation to it all are the major elements of the student's experience. This is all enhanced by the qualities of the instructor. As expressed by a student:

[Our teachers] are part of the Sing Sing family, one of the G  w  l families in Senegal, who are responsible for carrying on the cultural traditions of the country. Drumming and dancing are a huge part of their lives, as is spreading this beautiful tradition. The passion that these men have for their music is evident in class, especially when they dance. They take pride in the movements knowing that they are not only dancing but carrying on the tradition of their ancestors (Student, fall 2009).

In addition to their expertise in dancing and drumming, the members of the Sing Sing family, being G  w  l, also bring many other aspects of "G  w  lness" to the class. This not only informs the instruction, but also is essential in creating the cultural climate in the classroom space where Sabar is experienced.

## **The Role of the G  w  l in Creating Community**

The student dancers in the Sabar class are learning much more than how to become capable dancers. Since dance is the central focus of this class, learning to dance is a big part of the experience. When the students begin to dance, they enter into new and different relationships. They begin to learn how to interact with the drums and drummers, and how to interact with one another. It is through dancing that students get to know each other, and immerse themselves in a Senegalese cultural setting. First, they are brought into the understanding that they must all work together to make the dance work properly. Students spoke about learning how to work as a team, and developing a sense of connectedness with the group. As one student said, "It is the group efforts that stood out in class, and it was noticeable right from the first day of class . . ." (Student, spring 2005).

Recognizing the need to work together is an important beginning to one of the most significant elements of the G  w  l Family Instruction Model. In Senegal, G  w  ls have the important role of bringing the community together, and they have the responsibility for the health and well-being of the community. In class, through their masterful use of movement and rhythm G  w  ls bring students into a distinct communal setting. A recent student said: "When the drummers arrived we were able to create our own community. The creation of community has helped foster a better dancing environment for the students in the class" (Student, spring 2012). This was echoed by other students who commented that: "[a]nother aspect this class brought to my attention was the sense of community and home the dance brings to people" (Student, spring 2012).

When the students start to learn to dance Sabar, they are entering into new and unfamiliar territory. The experience of navigating this new terrain is challenging, but it also awakens the student's sense of curiosity, their joy in learning, and their excitement in mastering something new. The shared nature of this experience provided students with "a way to interact with each other through dancing" (Student, spring 2011). It gave them the opportunity to recognize that, "as [our teacher] said, we are all friends and it is important that we get to know each other as friends so that when we dance we can feel comfortable and have more of a bond" (Student, fall 2009). This enabled students to be more open, communicate with one another and provide support for each other. "We let down our guards and just danced bringing us as a class more together because of it." (Student, spring 2011) Lowering barriers between people and creating bridges that connect people is an important role of the G  w  l, and this is imparted through the dance class. "Sabar is a dance that joins the community together and brings a sense of unity to everyone around them" (Student, spring 2012).

## **Dancing to the Drum**

For many of the students it is their first experience dancing to live music, especially drums. In this instance having read about the connection makes them aware and prepares them to think about how to make that connection and develop their own relationship with Sabar. As a result of the academic background, and the G  w  l Family Instruction Model the students developed an understanding of the drum rhythms, in relationship to the dance movements and as a language in itself. Working with members of the G  w  l family enhanced this.

For most of the students, it is not only their first time dancing to drums, but also their first time being in the presence of drums being played. The power of the drum, its ability to affect movement, and its significance as part of the Sabar tradition are quickly recognized by the student dancers. "The experience of dancing to live drumming is also different from anything I have ever done before . . . having drummers in the room drumming for you to dance to make for an entirely different kind of experience. You can feel the actual music in you when you dance" (Student, spring 2008). For many, the power of the drum was unmistakable. "When [the drummers] start to play it is like an infectious disease, one's head and body can't help but move along to the rhythm of the drums" (Student, fall 2009). Another student added, "I found the sounds created by the drums to be contagious and forced a certain sense of unconscious movement into my body" (Student, spring 2011). Most students recognized that the drums made movement irresistible. "When [the drummers] start playing the drum it is impossible not to want to get up and dance" (Student, fall 2009), a student explained. "Every time when I heard the sound of the drums, I felt like moving my body," (Student, spring 2008) said another. The drums made movement irresistible for most students.



“The beat makes me want to move automatically in class. I am always so exhausted after class because I am moving constantly . . . I am either swaying or shaking when I listen to the drums” (Student, spring 2012). The interrelationship between sound and movement became very clear for the students. As summarized by one student: “Through this experience I have learned that the drummer is just as important as the dancer” (Student, spring 2008).

In addition to recognizing the power of the drums, the students also begin to feel connected to the drums as they dance. “I came to the realization that there was actually something humbling that accompanied dancing with bare feet. It may sound cheesy, but you feel a much stronger connection to the rhythm of the drums when you can feel the rhythm under your feet” (Student, spring 2011).

The feeling of the rhythms helped the students learn the movements. “I have a big problem with moving to the beat and when I take the time to listen to the drums it becomes easier for me to do the dance steps” (Student, spring 2012). The rhythms also helped them relax and feel the movements. “With the drums there was a better connection to the steps than without and they also helped us to be less stiff with our movements” (Student, spring 2005).

As the students move through the experiential portion of the class, they were able to develop a fuller understanding of the role of the drums in the Sabar tradition. By learning to dance with the rhythms, they become familiar with them, and begin to understand that the rhythms have a relationship to the spoken word. “Drummers in Sabar also have the responsibility to make their drums speak the songs or phrases” (Student, spring 2006). The students begin to recognize the rhythms as a language and understand that “[w]hen the drummers play, you can learn the words to the beats” (Student, spring 2005). As the students listened to those beats, they realized that “the drums ‘told’ us what song would come next, for one could hear the lyrics from them” (Student, spring 2006).

Once the student dancers are aware of the language of the drums, they are able to recognize that a conversation is taking place between the dance movements and the rhythms. “I learned that my body movements can match the exact rhythm the drummer is playing” (Student, spring 2012). This not only makes it possible for them to tune into the way the drum rhythms are connected to the dance movements, but it helps them to understand how to enter the conversation (rhythms) as dancers. In discussing their new awareness, students have said “when dancing with the drums, it is almost like the drums are telling a story; and the dancing fits right in with it” (Student, spring 2006). In addition to fitting in, they realize that their “job as dancers was to interpret the story through dance” (Student, spring 2008).

After the dancers know how to enter the conversation and begin to work with the rhythms, they become conversant with the drummers. The students learn that, “the drums are not the only ones making statements. The dances are an enormous part of the messages given through Sabar” (Student, spring 2005). Through the experience of Sabar the students learn how to connect with the drums and how to become the rhythm. “It is sometimes difficult to tell whether it is the musician who guide the dancer, or if it is the latter that runs the rhythm played. It could be both” (Student, spring 2012). The give and take of this conversation creates a symbiosis of sound and movement, where each feeds off of the other. “We were able to see the passion between dancer and drummer; drummer and dancer; dancer and dancer and, drummer and drummer, and understand the importance of the communication between each” (Student, spring 2011). Another student said: “the dance of the Sabar lets the dancer become the music. Dancers and drummers of the Sabar work together and melt into one another to become a whole other medium” (Student, spring 2008). In summarizing the experience, a student concluded: “The relationship between the dancer and the instrument is a beautiful one” (Student, spring 2012).

## **Language and Movement**

In addition to movement and rhythm, Géwëls also make use of language. (Bellinger, 2013, p. 62-63; Hale, 1998, p. 18-58). The first use of language is in relation to the drum rhythms. “[W]e not only danced,” a student explained, “but also sang together the rhythms, . . . no matter whether we had a good voice or not, each of our voices was an important component of the dance and our united chorus was needed to provide the right rhythm for the dance” (Student, spring 2006).

As the student dancers become more comfortable with the movements, they are also taught songs that go along with the dances. “Not only did we learn Sabar dance movements we learned some songs in the form of call and response” (Student, spring 2008). The songs give students exposure to the Wolof language, insights into the culture of Senegal and aid the development of a sense of community. The students saw several benefits to the vocal aspect of the class. For one they recognized that “Learning the songs in Wolof,” helped them “become better acquainted with the culture” (Student, spring 2005). The students “also learned how [Senegalese] speak by learning these phrases,” which enabled them “to embrace another aspect of the culture and not just the dance” (Student, spring 2008).

One other use of language was employed in the class - encouragement. In West Africa the line between participant and observer is fluid, so it is common for those making up the Sabar dance circle to shout approval and encouragement to dancers. This is also a skill in which Géwëls excel. “There are also vocal components of performing. While dancing, I learned phrases to project that encouraged the dancing such as the words ‘waa waa waa’ meaning yes, yes, yes” (Student, spring 2012).

The use of language also supported the feeling of connectedness between the members of the class. Trying “to chant the songs correctly and cheer each other on,” was very “helpful in bonding with our classmates” (Student, spring 2005). A student vividly expressed the transformative power of the combination of the voice, music and movement:

When it was my turn to enter in the circle, I was afraid but with the encouragement of m[y] classmates and the rhythms of the music I experienced the “magic” of the dance. I wasn’t aware of my movements, the thing that I could hear was only the sound of the drum as if the people around me were no more there. It was like a conversation between me and the drum, it was telling me “Don’t stop!!! Keep dancing!!!” (Student, spring 2012).

This description contains many of the elements that are significant to the experience: overcoming fear, the role of encouragement, the power of the drums, the relationship between the dance and the drum, and the excitement one gets from the experience.

## **What Students Gain**

African dance serves as a social medicine<sup>3</sup> that empowers students by helping them develop a sense of human and community well-being; create a sense of community cohesion; challenge negative mental space; and engage in self-transformation. The pedagogy of the Sabar dance class operates on several levels simultaneously. On one level, the focus is to teach the students the techniques of Sabar dance; on another level, it is to expose students to Senegal specifically, and Africa in general. It is also to enhance student’s knowledge of Africa and the world outside of the one they are familiar with when they come to class; it provides them with a holistic model of learning; and ultimately, involves personal transformation.

In the first half of the semester, many students are unsure of their ability to dance Sabar. For a few students, this is because they do not see themselves as dancers. “To be honest,” a student said, “as the semester approached I was a bit apprehensive and was contemplating switching out of the class. This is because with zero dance experience I was not quite sure what I was signing myself up for” (Student, spring 2011). For other students, their reticence is the result of shyness or previous experiences:

I did not know that this class had a dancing portion to it. When I found out I was absolutely terrified because I do not like public dancing. I am very shy and dancing in public is stepping out of my comfort zone which I never do voluntarily. I have had bad experiences in the past with dancing, ballet specifically and I did not want to go through that again. I had all of those negative thoughts running through my mind such as, embarrassing myself and not being able to do and learn the steps. I tried extremely hard to shake my fear and proceed with the class (Student, spring 2012).

In some instances, the hesitancy did not surface until students were first introduced to the dance form in the classroom. Several students were concerned about the difficulty of the dance movements. “At first, when I saw the video in class of people dancing and how much energy, flexibility, and downright talent it took to perform such a complex dance, I admit I think this was something I could never do” (Student, fall 2009). Some of the students concerns were about the challenge of connecting the movements with the drum rhythms:

I had never been exposed to Sabar, and when I first saw a video of the dance I remember thinking that the jumps and movements seemed to be at random and not quite correlating to the drum beats. It was unlike any other dance I had seen, and I was unsure about my ability to perform this seemingly impossible dance, (Student, fall 2009).

However, for most students, the panic attacks and self-doubt are challenged or set aside and they continue with the class.

By the end of the semester, students are aware of the totality of the experience they have had. The student dancers understand how much technique is involved in Sabar dance (and thus, all African dance), and how much they have gained from learning the technique. First, students are brought to an understanding of the fact that, like most dance in Africa, Sabar is a communal dance and activity, which is to be danced by everyone. Sabar is, therefore, accessible to everyone. “Coming to class, I was afraid of not being able to do the dance due to my lack of flexibility. After taking a few class sessions, I realized that Sabar is basically danceable by everyone. It is something one does to one’s ability” (Student, spring 2009). Because “African dance utilizes the natural bends of a person’s body . . . a person is able to adapt the dance to their own physical ability” (Student, spring 2011) The students recognize this accessibility as “one of the main differences between western and African dance” (student, spring 2009), and they “love the fact “ that “everyone can have a shot in expressing themselves” (Student, spring 2009). It becomes clear, as one student stated: “the universal feeling of Sabar, anyone can dance, even someone with two left feet who has the flavor of a Saltine” (Student, spring 2012).

The students, as they recognize the accessibility of Sabar, also begin to explore how to access it themselves. They figure out how to move to the drums and how to gain meaning from the rhythms. This allows them to transform themselves through the movement. One student said, “I slowly went from being a rigid stiff cardboard cutout shuffling awkwardly down the line to a limber elastic form sliding gracefully along the floor” (Student, spring 2012). Through the dancing they are taken on a personal journey where they move from apprehension to understanding how to take part in Sabar. They also begin to connect it to the history and culture of the people. This journey is best described in the words of one of the students:

At first hearing the music and seeing the dances that correspond with it, I was both confused and worried. First, I was confused because I could not follow the music and rhythms that the drums and other instruments made. To me, the music was all over the place, without a steady beat that I could follow. Secondly, I was worried because if I could not follow the music how was I supposed to dance to it. Also viewing the dances worried me because the dances that were being perform[ed] had multiple movements that occurred at the same time, and at a very fast pace. I thought to myself that there was no way I was going to be able to mimic those moves. However, after being taught Sabar I realized that it was very possible for me to achieve those moves because each element is intertwined. In order for me to understand the dance I had to understand the music; in order for me to understand the music I had to understand the dance; and in order for me to understand the music and the dance I had to understand the people and the culture” (Student, spring 2012).

The students make a clear connection between the academic and experiential sections of the class.

During the semester, the students become aware of the fact that there is technique involved in Sabar dance. As they begin to dance, they realize that “Sabar has a distinct feeling from other dances – very different than ballet, tap, and jazz dance that I have taken in the past” (Student, spring 2011) In class they were presented with “the art of the dance and the many different variables in the body movement” (Student, spring 2009), and learned that “Sabar dance techniques require modeling an instructor but at the same time making a dance one’s own” (Student, spring 2011), by taking the movements into one’s memory and then connecting the movements with the rhythm. By following and working with the dance instructor, the students “learned about many different aspects of the dances such as body position, footwork, attitude, and most importantly, how to follow the rhythm of the ever present drums” (Student, spring 2009). Through instruction, they learn the kinesthetic vocabulary that is distinct to this movement style.

By the end of the semester, the students recognize that Sabar dance technique is connected to the underlying concepts about movement and the body that they learned during the academic portion. “The concepts of the central movement axes and the natural bends did not really click in my head until we began dancing” (Student, spring 2012) said one student. Another said: “Until I started to actually learn to dance, I didn’t realize how much you actually move every part of your body in isolation” (Student, spring 2012).

In addition to movement related concepts such as isolations, central movement axes and natural bends, students are exposed to concepts about the relationship between the individual and the group. As mentioned earlier, they develop an understanding of the importance of the community. But, they also learn that the community provides a place for individual identity and expression. There is room within the technique for each person to add their own “flavor” or “decoration” to it so students felt “there was a sense of expressing individuality while still being united together” (Student, spring 2012). Students realize the importance of the interplay between the individual and the community. “Everyone brings their own light to the dance and when they are brought together it is truly beautiful” (Student, spring 2011).

When students looked back over the semester, they found that in addition to dance movements, they learned a great deal from the class. “By experiencing the validity of perspectives other than what [they] already knew” (Student, spring 2011), student dancers learned that dance is neither an innate gift nor reserved for those who are specially trained; they learned to not be limited by their own physicality; they learned the importance of community; and they learned a new way of expressing themselves. The recognition of Sabar technique also makes students challenge their assumptions about the world they knew. One student, in discussing what they learned, said: “I never knew there was a technique to the dances in Africa. I always believed it was just a feeling and they dance freely. But knowing there are certain things they do and techniques in doing it, I have more respect for everyone in Africa” (Student, spring 2011). Students found that by learning to dance Sabar, they were also broadening their awareness and interest in the world at large.

All of the students expressed that they “thoroughly enjoyed each and every class that [they] attended” (Student, spring 2008), and “got so much more out of it than [they] thought [they] would” (Student, spring 2008). In the process of learning about Sabar dance, students were also exposed to “African literature, music, dance, food, and performances” (Student, spring 2009). The cultural elements of the class made it both a unique “experience like [they] have never had before” (Student, spring 2006), and an enjoyable experience that “taught [them] a lot about the African culture,” and gave them “an understanding [they] will keep” (Student, spring 2006) for their lives. By being “encircled in a culture unlike [their] own” (Student, spring 2006), they were given the opportunity to “break out of [their] own cultural experience, if even briefly” (Student, spring 2011), and learn about Senegal’s “culture, religions, social lifestyle, and especially its way of dancing” (Student, spring 2009).

At the end of the semester a student concluded: “For those of us who have never had the opportunity to visit this beautiful land [Senegal], through this class we were able to get a taste of its life, its people, its language, its music, and very fortunately its food” (Student, spring 2006).

The inclusion of African performance arts, such as Sabar dance, in the university curriculum is valuable in many ways that stretch beyond the art form itself. It not only provides students with new information, but aids them in developing a new set of skills for learning about the world that they are part of. It allows students:

. . . to become citizens of the world, prepared to apprehend what may or may not at first seem only strange and to participate in a human creativity that is not hemmed in by fear and suspicion or tightly bounded in space and time (Task Force on the Arts, 2008, p. 12).

In learning about Sabar, an African performance art, students are presented an opportunity to look at the world from a different perspective. This exposure not only increased student’s knowledge of Senegal in specific and Africa in general. It also increased their interest in learning more about Africa, and ultimately, the world. “From African Dance,” a student concluded, “I have developed more of a thirst for knowledge about other cultures and places” (Student, spring 2006).

When the student dancers were able to “let down their guards,” and move aside their apprehensions, they were able to experience the joy that accompanies the creative process. This includes:

an ability to heighten vitality and enhance the textures of everyday life, a productive linking of tradition and the individual talent, a willingness to cross the boundaries of space and time, a conjunction of hard-won skill and conceptual daring. (Task Force on the Arts, 2008, p. 9-10)

This class also gave students an opportunity to have new experiences. These new experiences included exposure to the performance art of Sabar, cultural insights into Senegal, and a chance to step outside of their “comfort zones” and experience what one student describes as “a wonderful journey that has sparked an admiration for the art form within me” (Student, spring 2008).

The atmosphere of the dance space that the G  w  l Family Model creates allows students to feel “more comfortable in this class than [they] have in so many other classes” (Student, spring 2011). Through the semester, that sense of comfort allows students to become more deeply connected with the rhythms and movements that are Sabar. As one student explained “I personally felt as though I was wrapped up in the rhythm and the energy” (Student, spring 2012). Immersing themselves in the dance in this way helps them to understand that “Sabar is all about being comfortable in your own skin and just dancing” (Student, spring 2011). This understanding provided students with the ability to challenge and express themselves in new ways. “I am grateful for being able to take this course this semester. It helped me to learn to extract fears of dancing, while being publicly exposed” (Student, spring 2009). They overcame individual concerns and made personal discoveries. “Normally I get shy around new people, but through dance I felt that people were able to gain a sense of my personality through dance, which had been mentioned in one of the articles” (Student, spring 2008).

In some instances, the significance of what students gained from the class is difficult to measure empirically because they involve personal growth. For some students, the class led them to glean deeper meanings from the experience of learning about and dancing Sabar. For some, participating in the class gave them a new outlook on the world. They spoke of feeling “spiritually enhanced” and “changed as a person” (Student, spring 2008), with a “new perspective on dance and life” (Student, spring 2009). For some students the new perspective was personal. One student said, “I found out I am quite good with my hips. It was an interesting process of discovery of my own body and how to move and control it” (Student, spring 2012). Several students learned “Not to approach life surgically, but to immerse oneself in the moment” (Student, spring 2012). As one student explained: “From this class I take the lesson that no matter what you do, you should always put your heart and sole [sic] into it and tell a story” (Student, spring 2012). Still others saw what they learned as a metaphor for life. “Each element of Sabar dance and drums serve that one purpose to be in sync with each other and to gain momentum from each other just as a society, each person gains momentum from one another. In a sense the Sabar dance and drums is a metaphor for the society in general” (Student, spring 2012). Ultimately, students learn that “Dance is much more than choreography it is a way of life” (Student, spring 2011).

While the majority of students taking the class are American, in recent years, students from various African countries have enrolled in the class. Students who were from countries other than Senegal, like all students, increased their knowledge of Africa. “I’m African; however, . . . It was a great experience and a great opportunity for me to learn other country cultural dance and music” (Student, spring 2011). For students who were from Senegal, their experience was more layered and nuanced as it also included memories of home and elements of nostalgia. A Senegalese student expressed this well when she said, “I am very glad that I took this class, I was starting to be homesick in this city with a new lifestyle and all. The Sabar class took me way back to my hometown” (Student, spring 2012).



This sentiment was echoed by other Senegalese students who were in the class, and by the many Senegalese students who, though not enrolled, came to the dance portion of the class regularly. Overall, the dance class experience provided all African students a validation and thus, an increased sense of place and of self. "From this class," a Cape Verdean student summarized,

"I take back the lesson that you should always remember where you came from, and always be able to track back your roots and be able to say proudly where you are from and know the background. Sabar has given me a new found appreciation for my own culture and being able to say I am proud of what I stand for," (Student, spring 2012)

The importance of the inclusion of African performance arts (and arts in general) in the university curriculum, and the development and utilization of formats such as the Academic Experiential Model and the Géwël Family Model to teach the class cannot be overemphasized. The significance of the Academic Experiential Model and the Géwël Family Model is that the classroom becomes a holistic learning space that provides learning in a multi-dimensional way. By providing students with the "opportunity to experience everything from attending Sabar dance classes in Boston, to indulging ourselves with real Senegalese cuisine" (Student, spring 2011), they learn to utilize a different set of mental and physical skills than in their usual academic classes. An apt description of the effects of the multi-dimensional, holistic approach was given by a student who summarized the semester with these words: ". . . as I have discovered throughout the semester, there is no definition that can do justice to the complete experience that Sabar creates" (Student, spring 2011).

The complete experience of Sabar brings together everything the students learned during the semester. They gain a particularly clear understanding of Sabar as community. The various dimensions of the relationship between Sabar and community was detailed by a student from a West African country:

Personally, when I dance in the class and that my classmates, [our dance teacher] or even the drummers encourage me, either by clapping their hands, by screaming, or by singing. I really feel powerful and more energetic. It is like you are the best dancer in the whole world and that people are really enjoying what you are doing. And I really think that it is when we are dancing that students really become classmates. Everyone smile, they chat with each other, and the most important part is that when we are dancing we just come as one team. Everybody get involve and this give a really great energy to the class that we all want to dance and the time moves on quickly that I even don't want the class to be over.

It is true that in the class we are not all friends and we even don't know the name of each other, also we are all from different backgrounds and the class is made up by different nationalities. But when it comes to dancing we all know each other, it feels like we are the best friends ever because of the screaming, the hands clapping, the motivation to the one who is dancing. We really form a great team when the drummers start playing. The Sabars bond us and make us powerful and energetic. So, I really experienced the fact that Sabar dance unite people and bring them together without any consideration of race and gender (African student, spring 2012).

For many students, the traversing of new and unfamiliar territory, the linking of mental and physical learning in the classroom, the inclusiveness of the experience - in short the experience of holistic learning - made this class the most memorable learning experience of their college years. Many students "looked forward to every single class" (student, spring 2009), and most felt that "[e]ven though it is a dance class we learned much more than dancing" (student, spring 2008). Most students, in some way expressed that "African dance [was] the most knowledgeable and pleasurable class I have taken" (Student, spring 2009), while several said they "regret not taking more classes like this," (Student, spring 2009). In reflecting on their experience in the class, and on their undergraduate experience, a graduating student said it was "the best class that I have taken my whole college career" (Student, spring 2008), while another senior ranked the class as "the best experience I have had in my four years at [the university]" (Student, spring 2006).

## **Conclusion**

The experience of learning about Sabar was more than an academic one; it was a living experience that engaged students in a multidimensional, holistic way. It took students from the world that they knew into a new reality. In learning the art of Sabar dance from G  w  ls, who are living repositories of this cultural manifestation, the students are not just being exposed to art as a discipline, but to art as life. By learning from G  w  ls in an experiential way with an academic foundation, students were exposed to the subtleties of Senegalese culture in a way that was transformative. Through their semester long study of Sabar music and dance, students learn about culture, history, philosophy, language, community, and ultimately, themselves.

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Aziz Faye dancing with students (2012)





Moustapha Faye teaching dance moves (2013)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Academic/Experiential Model and the G  w  l Family Instruction Model were developed by Prof. Robert A. Bellinger, Kevin King and Moustapha Faye for the G  w  l Tradition Project.

<sup>2</sup> Sing Sing is the name that the Faye G  w  l family in Dakar, Senegal is known as. It is the name of one of their ancestors who was instrumental in developing the distinct tradition this family maintains. The class was created with and taught by Moustapha Faye, a member of the Sing Sing family. The transition of the class from Dakar, Senegal to Boston, MA the class was taught several times by Lamine Tour   a member of the Mbaye family, another prominent G  w  l family in Dakar.

<sup>3</sup> The term “social medicine” is taken from Banks (2010, p. 20) in his discussion of the work of dance educator Yvonne Daniels (2005).