
Teaching to the Whole Dancer

Synthesizing Pedagogy, Anatomy, and Psychology

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The approach to technique training in both dance and music reflects the educational models of previous centuries in which the teacher was an experienced professional and the student an apprentice, learning at the feet of the master. Traditionally, dance has been taught from this hierarchical, teacher-centered perspective.¹ In this traditional model, the teacher is perceived as the primary source of knowledge; students learn through imitation and adherence to external instructions. Physical mastery is achieved through repetition, with minimal conceptual foundation. Technical goals are defined in terms of ideal physical accomplishments (e.g., 180 degrees of turnout). This approach relies heavily on innate natural talent and physical facility relative to the demands being placed on the body, with few accommodations made for individual limitations.

While there is no doubt that many exquisite dancers have emerged from this training system, it contains some serious drawbacks. The teacher-centered environment encourages students to equate learning with the acquisition of skills, placed within a right/wrong dance context that focuses on external product and results. Students trained in this model are generally motivated by their desire for external approval; they often become passive learners who excel at following instructions but lack internal awareness and motivation. Cognitively, they lack a conceptual foundation (anatomical, mechanical, somatic, etc.) to support their technical development.

There is often a physical toll associated with this approach to training. By ignoring individual physical limitations, a Darwinian system of professional preparation has evolved in which those with bodies well-suited to the field's demands thrive. Those with less than ideal physical instruments or whose bodies cannot tolerate the physical stress of improper mechanics may drop out of the field prematurely.

An artistic toll is taken as well. Mature artistry requires self-awareness and the capacity for creative collaboration. The emphasis on obedience, imitation, and submission to

external authority, in combination with the early age of entry into the profession, have led to fragile self-esteem, stunted emotional development, and a culture of infantilization of professional artists.² Lacking tools for self-empowerment and self-direction, many dancers do not fulfill their artistic potential.

Dance Technique Education for the 21st Century

The traditional dance training model was widely accepted in previous eras when the professional environment preferred dancers who aspired to become obedient tools. However, as the dance field evolves, we have seen an increase in the desire for thoughtful dancers: artists who can bring the depth of themselves and their training into the studio and onto the stage. To prepare dancers for current professional expectations and support their technical, artistic, and personal growth, we must invite the whole person into the dance studio. In doing so we must move from training, which emphasizes skill acquisition, to education, which addresses development of the whole person.

Whole person education provides students with diverse tools for growth. As dance educators, we can give dancers four important tools to develop artistry and physical mastery: conceptual understanding of anatomically sound dance technique; refined perceptual awareness; knowledge and understanding of how to work with one's own body; and a strong sense of self.

A conceptual understanding of anatomically sound dance technique enables dancers to base their technical form, goals, and process on the body's anatomical structure, with respect for individual variations and limitations. Working in an anatomically-sound manner reduces the risk of injury while enhancing performance, thus increasing the probability of a long and fulfilling life in dance.

To develop anatomically sound dance technique, dancers also need refined perceptual awareness that enables them to discern and differentiate subtle movement sensations. This kinesthetic sensitivity enables dancers to respond in a nuanced manner to both internal feedback

from their bodies and external feedback from teachers. It facilitates fine motor control, which enhances movement efficiency and expressive qualitative range.³ The two tools are complimentary: anatomical knowledge can serve as a scaffolding or framework for sensory experiences.

Both cognitive understanding and perceptual awareness empower students to explore their full potential by expanding their understanding of personal structural limitations and physical idiosyncrasies. Rather than teaching students to conform to an external ideal, we should teach them to find the optimal individual way to reach the desired aesthetic goal with the least amount of stress on their bodies. They should be encouraged to ask “How can I best achieve this result with *my* body?” This personalized approach to healthy dancing can be supported by tools for self-care, including knowledge of the principles of adjunct conditioning for strength, flexibility and endurance.

Conceptual knowledge, deep perceptual awareness, and understanding of individual solutions are facilitated by a learner-centered pedagogical approach that encourages students to become thinking dancers who assume responsibility for their own growth and progress. Learner-centered education shifts the class focus from what the teacher knows to what the student understands, valuing the student’s personal awareness and discoveries. It encourages active learning supported by self-reflection, accompanied by the self-cueing and self-direction essential to technical progress.⁴

By teaching dancers to value and trust their own perceptions and experiences, a learner-centered education also cultivates a strong sense of self, inner direction and self-esteem. These qualities enable artists to become creative collaborators who can participate fully in the choreographic process and access their own creative voices as both interpretative and generative artists.

Example: Teaching Postural Alignment and Core Support

An example of a learner-centered pedagogical approach that draws on both cognitive and perceptual tools to teach postural alignment and core support is presented below. This approach can be used to address any technical goal.

As a technique teacher, one can try to give students a conceptual framework, explaining the anatomical foundation of technical goals. To teach postural alignment and core support, begin on a skeletal level, explaining the desired relationship of skeletal reference points to one another and to the plumb line of gravity. Explain the desired pattern of core muscle activation and its relationship to breathing and use of the diaphragm.

Provide movement experiences that allow the students to explore these concepts physically, integrating cognitive knowledge with sensory experiences. These types of movement explorations can be integrated into technique classes or addressed in separate classes intended as laboratories for technique analysis. For this topic, movement explorations will include engaging the core muscles individually

and in combination, integrating core muscular support with breath and experimenting with postural alignment patterns. As part of this process, help students to identify their personal postural patterns and develop constructive approaches to working with their individual challenges.

It is essential that students learn to apply conceptual and perceptual knowledge to the specifics of dance technique. Assist them in this process by asking them to use their knowledge first in the simplest building blocks of dance technique and then in progressively more complex movements. In dance vocabulary, we begin with stationary movements such as standing on two legs with and without turnout, progressing to standing on one leg and doing gestural movements with the arms and legs, and on through changing levels and locomotive movement through space. The goal in this process is to help students understand the need for, and find a system of, body organization and postural support that they can use consistently throughout their dancing.

Although some dance scientists caution against what they term “micromanagement” of the body, finding and isolating desired muscle activation patterns and joint movements provides an enlightening specificity for the dancer that is highly useful when followed by integration into a global coordination and organization of the entire body. Having built a foundation of desired motor patterns and physical sensations as reference points, the dancer must integrate these isolated and specific movement experiences into the act of dancing. The final step, therefore, is to apply and utilize these isolated sensations during an actual technique class so that they become an automatic component of motor planning.

Learner-centered pedagogical strategies can help students to integrate and apply their anatomical knowledge and sensory experiences to dancing. These strategies include replacing instructions (“use your stomach”) with cues for awareness that encourage students to notice and make choices based on their perceptions (“notice if you are using your core support”). Awareness then becomes a tool for change.⁵ Instructions can also be framed as questions that facilitate discussion, such as “Do you notice any changes to your sense of balance when you use your core support?” Teachers can make the transferability of dance knowledge explicit by pointing out the way in which motor patterns in simple level changes such as pliés and relevés may be present in more complex level changes such as jumps, and by drawing students’ attention to these technical themes as a class progresses.⁶

In providing feedback, teachers can enhance student self-trust and confidence by acknowledging effort, change, and improvement (“I can see you working on your pelvic alignment”), and by encouraging the student to focus on and value his/her personal experience (“What does that feel like to you?” and “Can you feel the difference between...”).⁷ A common pedagogical strategy is the “compliment sandwich,” in which the teacher acknowledges progress and success before and after providing critical

feedback. Finally, it is important to provide opportunities for reflection and assimilation. Journals and essays that guide students to think critically about their experiences can help them identify and see the significance of their new sensations and realizations.

Summary

In summary, our goal as a field must be to educate dancers who can explore and discover the most effective ways that *their* bodies can dance, fulfilling desired aesthetic goals with the least amount of physical damage. We must change the intent of our dance education from producing obedient tools adept at following external commands to empowering self-directed, knowledgeable artists capable of artistic depth and creative collaboration. These goals are served by learner-centered, whole-person education that provides dancers with conceptual, perceptual, and personal tools for continued growth.

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