Teaching the Dance Class
Strategies to Enhance Skill Acquisition, Mastery and Positive Self-Image

Lynda M. Mainwaring, Ph.D., C.Pysch., and Donna H. Krasnow, M.S.

Abstract

Effective teaching of dance skills is informed by a variety of theoretical frameworks and individual teaching and learning styles. The purpose of this paper is to present practical teaching strategies that enhance the mastery of skills and promote self-esteem, self-efficacy, and positive self-image. The predominant thinking and primary research findings from dance pedagogy, education, physical education and sport pedagogy, and psychology are distilled into 16 guidelines for teaching dance. Subsequently, theoretically and empirically informed strategies for best teaching practices are explored by reference to three broad categories: 1. clarifying the process and goals of the class, 2. discussing various influences that affect the dancer's progress, and 3. clearly defining the class structure and content.

E ffective teaching of dance skills is informed by a variety of theoretical frameworks, strategies, and individual styles. Critical pedagogy identifies a range of teaching styles from a command style (authoritarian), in which the teacher makes all the decisions, to a student-cen-tered style, directed by student decision-making. In addition to various teaching styles there are multiple ways to structure a dance class, ranging from classes devoted exclusively to skill acquisition to classes with a primary focus on developing personal and inter-personal skills. Class structure is determined by the teacher's expertise and her or his approach to the class. Just as dance educators have varied strengths, abilities, values, personalities, and constraints that influence how they teach, students also differ in ability, talent, personality, and learning styles. Can we identify styles of teaching and learning that optimize both skill acquisition and the development of high self-esteem and personal growth in dancers? Are there methods for designing and delivering dance class that can simultaneously enhance mastery of skills while promoting self-esteem and positive self-image?

A variety of disciplines and numerous theories within each discipline provide insight and knowledge that inform best teaching practices. These include dance pedagogy, education, physical education and sport pedagogy, and psychology. Mosston's Spectrum of Teaching Styles[1] (a continuum from teacher-directed to student-directed styles) has been the single most influential model of teaching for physical education pedagogy. It developed from Mosston's philosophy that physical attributes such as agility, balance, flexibility, endurance, strength, and relaxation were at the root of the development of physical performance and could be developed by gradual sequences of movement.[1] It was based on two processes: individualized learning and the cognitive processes.[2] In the original model, the ultimate goal for teachers and teaching was foster-

Lynda M. Mainwaring, Ph.D., C.Pysch., is an Associate Professor at the University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Donna H. Krasnow, M.S., is a Professor in the Department of Dance at York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Correspondence: Donna H. Krasnow, M.S., Department of Dance, Accolade East 313, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3; dkrasnow@yorku.ca

ing independent thinking and decision-making.[2] While the goal has remained the same, contemporary revisions[3-5] are not hierarchical and allow for more fluidity between various approaches. In other words, there is no one best method. Similarly, the study of the learning process has resulted in numerous taxonomies and inventories,[6-10] and no one classification system is thought better than any other; psychologists and educators have yet to identify the best method for learning despite numerous attempts to identify various styles or approaches to the learning process.

To date, there has been no comprehensive attempt to integrate the literature from these various disciplines with respect to teaching and learning to create a model for dance pedagogy. Gibbons[11] specifically applied Mosston and Ashworth's revised Spectrum of Teaching Styles to dance, and Puretz[12] and Skrinar[13] emphasized the importance of applying motor learning theory to teaching the dance technique class. Currently, there is no integrated theoretical or evidence-based model for teaching dance that encompasses theories and principles from a broad range of disciplines. Therefore, the main points from contemporary research on teaching and learning styles have been distilled into 16 guidelines for teachers and are presented in Table 1. The guidelines are then discussed by means of practical strategies, and specific examples are described.

There are many strategies teachers can employ to achieve the goals established by the guidelines in Table 1. These goals are to encourage students to learn and develop mastery while they develop positive self-esteem and remain passionate about dancing. The ability of a dancer to master a particular skill or technique depends on many factors: physical ability, motor and kinesthetic feedback and learning processes, physical practice, mental practice for skill enhancement, sufficient physiologic rest,[14] motor memory consolidation, appropriate breakdown and acquisition of complex skills, growth and development, knowledge of results through appropriate external feedback mechanisms, and an environment that facilitates learning and a sense of joy and purpose. One of the

Table 1	Guidelines for Dance Teaching and Learning

Process and Goals
1. **SMART Planning:** Encourage students to set specific, measureable, age-appropriate, realistic, and time-targeted goals
2. **Decision-Making by Objective:** Provide variety in decision-making aspects of class and identify the objectives to be met by each task
3. **Optimizing the Self Within Community:** Recognize individual differences and optimize individual potential; encourage students to work in collaboration with peers
4. **Ritualizing Respect:** Foster an environment of mutual, reciprocal and self-respect in and out of the classroom

Influences Affecting the Dancer
5. **Mentoring:** Embody the qualities of a positive leader and role model
6. **Nurturing the Learner:** Provide positive reinforcement and constructive criticism in ways the student can develop skill mastery and comprehension of principles
7. **Creating Fun and Challenges for All:** Foster an enjoyable, challenging atmosphere for learning and experience
8. **Empowering the Self:** Recognize and positively reinforce the dancer for personal qualities and contributions to the class; empower students to feel good about their bodies and their self development
9. **Focusing on the Task:** Encourage students to focus on the task at hand and not the outcome or social or inter-personal comparisons
10. **Thinking about Learning:** Provide opportunities for students to explore personal metacognitive strategies ("How do I learn?" activities and discussion)

Structure and Content of the Class
11. **Building Foundations**: Build foundations of domain specific knowledge in progressive sequence and with complementary background information
12. **Mixing and Matching:** Provide opportunities to learn or process information in various ways across learning tasks and situations, including somatic and analytic strategies, and contextual variety
13. **Developing Body Awareness:** Provide somatic experiences, information and opportunities
14. **Enhancing Body Image:** Provide opportunities to discuss and reinforce healthy body image and supportive strategies in terms of nutrition and conditioning
15. **Embracing the Safe and Sound:** Ensure safe practices are established and based on sound scientific, medical and/or empirical evidence regarding alignment work and prevention and management of injuries
16. **Creating Enlightened Practice:** Provide constructive feedback and incorporate appropriate repetition

most comprehensive and prominent theories of how humans acquire mastery, learn values, regulate themselves, and are motivated is Social Cognitive Theory.[15] A social-cognitive perspective emphasizes the interaction between a person's thinking and behavior and her or his social environment. Its main tenets state that people learn by observing others; learning is an internal process that may, or may not, change behavior; people behave in ways to attain goals; behavior is self-directed; and reinforcement effects behavior and learning.[16]

Teachers can enhance the learning environment for skill mastery with the enhancement of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem is a dancer's feelings of worth or value.[17] Self-efficacy[15] is a person's belief that she or he can perform a specific task successfully; it is one of the best predictors of successful achievement. Teachers can promote these positive psychological qualities by 1. clarifying the process and goals of the class, 2. discussing various influences that affect the dancer's progress, and 3. clearly defining the class structure and content. The teacher can expand and enhance the class content through a better understanding of related fields such as dance science, including anatomy, kinesiology, biomechanics, motor learning, and dance psychology.

Process and Goals of the Dance Class
SMART Planning

From the first day, the teacher needs to establish clear goals and expectations so that there is no confusion or uncertainty about the class objectives. Students respond well to goals that are specific, and they benefit from being able to assess measurable results such as increased stamina in jumping and improved control in one-legged balances. The teacher needs to understand what is age-appropriate in designing the class, and establish a process over time that acknowledges both physical and motor development for that age group. By stating the daily and long-term goals, the teacher provides a context that determines how students can realistically succeed and observe their improvement.[18]

Decision-Making by Objective

Identifying specific objectives encourages students to express their personal goals for individual progress in conjunction with the goals and tasks established for the group. This process of establishing and expressing personal goals can be self-empowering as well as motivating. Asking students to write down their personal goals or keep a journal can highlight this process of clarity and self-direction. In addition to motivating dancers to identify their goals, the teacher can provide oppor-

tunities for individual and group decision making. For example, when learning new material the class can be given a choice of whether they wish to review the material presented or whether they wish to add sequences or complexity. Even if the class wishes to add complexity, an individual student can be given the choice to continue working on the simpler phrase. This teaching style is consistent with the student-directed approach described in Mosston and Ashworth's Spectrum of Teaching Styles.[3]

Optimizing the Self within Community

The teacher can provide information that allows students to understand and embrace individual differences in both anatomical physique and dynamic movement qualities. As dancers learn about their unique qualities and potential, both physical and artistic, they can direct their energy toward optimal development. For example, the highly flexible dancer who lacks strength and core support can understand that investing time in enhancing those attributes, rather than stretching all the time, will result in far more progress. Such open discussion of individual differences also encourages students to appreciate each other's qualities and learn from each other through observation and discussion. As dancers become more self-reliant and peer-reliant, they are less likely to become overly dependent on teacher approval and more appreciative of peer feedback.

The teacher can allow time for personal exploration and for students to work in pairs or small groups to review and discuss material and to give feedback to each other. Appreciating that not all the answers lie with the teacher, but that the students can discover information through self-exploration and work with peers, can build self-confidence as well as enhance learning. It can also assist in encouraging students to be both leaders and listeners and embrace the benefits of collaborative work.

Ritualizing Respect

It is useful to clarify class etiquette from the perspective of an atmosphere that optimizes concentration and mutual respect, rather than autocratic rules and good behavior. This approach can assist students in learning to balance self-involvement with group sensitivity. For example, observing an atmosphere of quiet encourages dancers to support and respect others' learning processes; it is not so the teacher can control their behavior. An atmosphere of concentration and focus promotes optimal learning, and creates a sense of community rather than competition. The work on motivational climate is particularly relevant to this discussion of class atmosphere. Motivational climate describes

the context in which teaching and learning occur within the classroom, including teaching style, type of task, modes of feedback, recognition of students and their work, class groupings, and pacing or timing associated with skill learning.[19] There are two stages of ritualizing respect in the classroom that can occur: the first is creating this motivational climate and the second is open discussion and acknowledgment of its purpose and benefits.

Influences that Affect the Dancer's Progress

Mentoring

Of the multiple influences that impact student development, the teacher is central. In the traditional class model, teachers represent authority. In the current environment of expanding pedagogy, teachers may choose a more authoritarian or a student-directed style. Regardless of teaching style, the teacher is perceived as a role model. In the students' minds, the teacher brings not only personal perspective to the environment, but represents the broader knowledge of the field, and all the teachers that have come before this individual. Rather than trying to avoid this role, teachers can recognize that they are powerful influences. They can maintain a disciplined and driven atmosphere while inspiring and encouraging the dancers through energetic and constructive criticism and praise. They can serve as positive role models in terms of respecting the whole person and recognizing individual needs and differences.

Nurturing the Learner

Optimal development of a young mind and body occurs with healthy experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, and the dance class offers a particularly enriching environment and experience for the development of skill mastery and of the whole person. Students come to class with a desire to develop dance skills; the training will be enhanced if the teacher provides a larger conceptual context and a thorough understanding of movement principles. For example, taking time in class to explore principles of good alignment is more beneficial than simply adjusting a student's pelvis during a particular exercise.

There are various methods that the teacher can use to explore viewing dance from a broader conceptual perspective. Initially, the teacher can construct and present specific set material, followed by an open time period for reflection and questions. These questions can be posed by both the teacher and the students, and can encourage not merely inquiry about form and details (i.e., what are the counts, which leg is the pirouette on, and so forth)

but also the critical and conceptual background for the movement. As dancers learn to observe material and think about it conceptually, their understanding improves, and hence they develop more self-confidence in approaching new material.

Another goal of dance class is expanding learning styles and strategies. Individuals tend to have preferred methods of learning, such as visual (seeing a demonstration), aural analytic (hearing an explanation of how to do a phrase or execute a skill), or kinesthetic (learning through touch or sensation).[20] Teachers can encourage the use of a variety of strategies to learn material, and to increase the speed and accuracy of learning strategies. As learning of material and skills improves, students becoming increasingly motivated to examine material from a variety of perspectives.

Finally, looking to the psychological realm, dance class can incorporate methods to enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy. Dancers need encouragement to nurture self-esteem and to instill self-belief. When students are struggling to achieve the material, teacher confidence in student abilities can provide the encouragement and motivation needed for continued effort. Verbal communication, body language, and tone all convey the teacher's attitude. The teacher can provide praise when improvement is demonstrated, and constructive criticism when changes and corrections are needed. Positive reinforcement can both inspire and motivate the dancer in class.

Creating Fun and Challenges for All

As the teacher presents the material and influences how the students absorb and refine the work, the teacher is simultaneously establishing the atmosphere or motivational climate.[18,19,21,22] Students learn more effectively in an environment that is both challenging and enjoyable. If the pace of the class is too slow or the goals are too easy, students can become bored and unmotivated. In the other extreme, if the pace is too pressured or the goals too difficult, students can become frustrated and anxious. The teacher's task is to find a balance and promote an atmosphere of joy and stimulation.

Empowering the Self

It is important to discuss beliefs and attitudes regarding what determines a good dancer, with a focus on the whole person and not merely the body. If the only attributes discussed are physique-related (such as extreme flexibility, perfect proportions, or low body weight) dancers can begin to feel overwhelmed and hopeless, that they have little control over their progress. Physique comments can be balanced with discussions of performance

skills, musicality, and artistic qualities. Students can be encouraged to develop all aspects of artistic and technical skills, and begin to value personal attributes as well as understand areas that need improvement.

Additionally, there are other influences that may be less obvious, but equally powerful. It is beneficial to explore openly the dancers' internal dialogue, especially as it reflects negative self-talk, and the impact of negative inner dialogue and the associated underlying beliefs on diminished skill development and performance. While it is the nature of dance training to develop self-critical skills, constant negative thoughts and belief systems interfere with concentration and the willingness to take risks. It is also essential to allow discussion of external influences that affect internal dialogue, such as media, dance culture expectations, and previous learning experiences. For example, some dancers have experienced insulting corrections and public humiliation in previous learning environments, and these events can leave lasting inhibitory impact on future progress.

Focusing on the Task

There are numerous distractions that interfere with the dancer's ability to stay on task and to focus on the important elements of the work during class and rehearsal. Focusing on the task at hand can lead to a sense of competence that relates to the results of one's work. In contrast, focusing on comparisons to others can lead to the fixation on proving oneself superior in order to feel competent, and distract from the task at hand.[10] Dancers might become concerned with comparisons with other dancers in the class, with body image issues, and with the pace of progress and fears of not being sufficiently skilled to work in the professional community. Teachers can encourage students to focus on the task through a variety of strategies. For example, by acknowledging and respecting the attributes and accomplishments of each individual, teachers can reduce the compulsion for students to compare themselves with others and encourage each dancer to remain focused on personal development.

Thinking About Learning

The teacher can enhance student learning through recognition of each student's personal learning style: visual, auditory, analytic, kinesthetic-spatial, kinesthetic-external, kinesthetic-internal, and so on. It can be useful to assist each dancer in understanding the benefits of the various learning styles and how the individual can broaden one's approach to learning new material. The teacher can pose questions that encourage dancers to observe how they learn[23]: Do I hear music through rhythm or melody? Do I learn material through shape design or spatial information? Am I visual or kinesthetic in how I absorb new information? How do I learn best? It is empowering for students to learn about their own learning styles.[9] Initially, individual corrections can be geared to align with these learning style preferences so that learning is easier for the dancer. Eventually, students can be challenged to attempt to learn in a style that is typically not in their comfort zones. Improving and expanding learning strategies enhances skill development and self-esteem simultaneously. It will also give the dancers advantages in auditions for programs and performances, and can boost self-confidence.

Structure and Content of the Class
Building Foundations

Every teacher knows that a dance class is more than a series of exercises and combinations across the floor. Most teachers construct a class around a particular approach to movement or a specific dance technique. A good dance class builds progressively from the basic knowledge and skills to a wide array of abilities that support the complexity of the art form. In each aspect of dance training, the teacher needs to identify the basic foundation, and then build upon that knowledge base. Whether a dance class is founded in ballet, modern, jazz, African, or urban dance, certain fundamental movement skills will be explored. These skills include aspects such as alignment, balancing mechanisms, spatial awareness, musicality, motor control, and coordination. This foundation must be in place before more complex and sophisticated vocabulary and skills can be absorbed.[24]

Mixing and Matching

Teachers can enhance learning by providing opportunities to learn in a variety of ways. One day a combination might be approached analytically, that is, breaking down the material and examining its detail and components. The next day the teacher might use a somatic practice to address the material from a kinesthetic perspective.[25,26] To deepen the experience, the material can be explored through various states: feeling, sensory, and physical.

Another teaching strategy that can enhance learning is the removal of certain aspects of the traditional class that can limit the use of multiple sensorimotor modalities, especially for dancers with some experience. Examples of strategies the teacher can explore include working entirely without the barre in ballet class on certain days, work-

ing with no mirrors, working with no floor work in modern or jazz class on certain days, removing the sense of "front" in the room (face various directions), trying stationary work with eyes closed, and taking away music and working in silence, or using unusual music on occasion. Contextual variety is an excellent way to challenge motor learning and enhance progress.

Developing Body Awareness

Another essential component of the dance class is increasing body awareness and the mind-body connection. This may be directly approached through incorporation of somatic work in the class,[14,25,26] or indirectly addressed through traditional class structures and exercises, emphasizing awareness and focus as an important component in dance instruction. A useful tool in stimulating the mind-body connection is the use of imagery. Imagery, created both by teachers and students, can provide a multi-dimensional perspective and experience of the physical work and can consolidate movement principles. Imagery can enhance alignment and physical expertise, as well as develop expressivity and projection. Allowing students to describe their personal imagery creations with each other serves a twofold purpose: it gives students more tools to explore body awareness, and it reinforces the idea that the teacher values the students' ideas, thus building their self confidence.

Enhancing Body Image

The current dance literature strongly suggests that there are serious issues with dancers' nutrition and physical and psychological health. Due to the body image demands of the profession, many dancers have poor self-image, and resultant disordered eating.[27-29] Striving for the traditional vision of the ideal female classical dancer places students at risk for injury or psychological difficulties. In general, self-esteem has been shown to be related to psychological well-being, global physical self-concept, depression,[30,31] and body dissatisfaction.[32] Repeated exposure to the contemporary ideal images of beauty can result in increased dissatisfaction with self, depression, anger, dissatisfaction with body image, and poor self-esteem.[33] The teacher can provide opportunities to discuss and reinforce healthy body image and supportive strategies in terms of proper nutrition. Dance teachers can set the appropriate tone and standards for weight management, through discussions on thinness, the societal ideal of an underweight female body, and good health behaviors and practices. Teachers can also incorporate creative work in the dance class as a strategy. Creative movement in dance classes has been related to increases in social self-esteem[34] and physical self-esteem in young children.[35]

Embracing the Safe and Sound

In the interest of healthy and safe dance practice, there is an increasing focus and interest on the need to improve physical attributes such as strength, flexibility, core support, and a variety of other types of conditioning.[36-39] Some teachers have added supplementary classes to assist dancers in developing these traits, while others have added specialized exercises directly into the dance class. Many teachers would agree that these are important features of dancer development, and many are exploring ways to improve dance training in this regard. Assisting energy management and helping dancers develop stamina are also components of the dance class. While dance classes are not necessarily structured to enhance cardiorespiratory endurance and anaerobic capacity (important considerations for overall fitness), these aspects can be improved in dance classes. Some teachers choose to make these improvements specific class goals. Teachers are taking a wide range of approaches to these health-related developments, and there is a growing interest in ways to incorporate scientific information into the class structure to work on prevention and management of injuries. One of the more recent developments in dance training is the creation of teacher certification programs in safe and healthy dance practice. For example, Trinity College and the International Association for Dance Medicine & Science have collaborated to produce an international qualification for dance teachers, rehearsal directors, professional dancers, and community dance leaders.[40]

Pacing is probably one of the most challenging aspects of teaching dance, and the pace or timing of the dance class is critical in developing both the mastery of skill and high self-esteem. Class material can be progressed in a manner consistent with what is known as progressive overload in the conditioning domain, pushing the limits of capacity without overwhelming the student. If the student is overwhelmed, it can lead to physical injury as well as lowered confidence levels.

Finally, the teacher can empower students with the knowledge and "permission" to modify material in respecting safe dance practices. This might be during a period of a growth spurt for an adolescent, where the dancer is encouraged to lower leg extensions to avoid strain. It might be learning to modify material such as relevés and jumps while recovering from an ankle injury, or reduce range of motion in the spine while developing core support after a back injury has healed. A dancer can feel

highly anxious after an injury, and giving them knowledge of how to best recover full function can relieve some of these fears, giving the dancer a confident approach to the return to dance.

Creating Enlightened Practice

The study and impact of feedback on learning movement skills has been a focus in the motor learning literature for some time.[41] It is important to provide constructive feedback (evaluation) both from the teacher and from students after material is attempted. Repeating material over and over with no time for reflection and feedback can result in repeating the same errors, and thus produce diminished self-esteem. It is also best to allow students to repeat material after receiving feedback, so that they are provided with the opportunity to improve the work, and not merely hear what was lacking. This helps develop and consolidate cognitive and motor schemas.

How the teacher provides corrections and feedback can significantly impact on dancers' willingness to take risks, and their understanding of the nature of mistakes and motor learning. After an attempted exercise or combination, the teacher can discuss how and why the attempted work was useful in the learning context, regardless of how "successful" or "correct" it was from the traditional dance perspective. This approach demands a shift in the teacher's perspective from the idea that the goal is to make no mistakes (e.g., there should be no loss of balance) to the idea that mistakes are in fact part of the learning process (e.g., the neuromotor system and the balancing mechanisms require error and loss of balance to learn new motor strategies). Through this process, experimentation and risk-taking are highly encouraged. While perfectionist qualities are often found in the dancer's personality make-up, this experimental approach can allow for error in a positive way, and enhance self-esteem through a more accepting point of view. In essence, all of the above call for a reframing of the class point of view. It is not that the teacher is being less demanding by permitting errors and imperfection; in fact, the teacher is being more demanding because error and experimentation helps to accelerate progress and develop improved motor control.

Conclusion

Teaching dance class based on the above theoretical foundations and accompanying practical strategies relies on the fundamental belief that students essentially want to progress, work at their optimal level, and be their best. Only in an environment of mutual respect can open discussion and self-motivation be encouraged. The results are rewarding to both the teacher and the dancers. The teacher can act as a guide in providing an environment that challenges and stimulates dancers to achieve their highest level of mastery, and at the same time inspires the dancers to honor the body and elevate the spirit. Teachers and dancers can embrace the concept of the healthy dancer in the context of high technical demand. In this way, mastery and self-esteem can work hand-in-hand to create great artists who are self-reliant and ready to become the next generation of great teachers.

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