

What Am I Even Doing as a Dance Teacher?

Qualities and Strategies for the Effective Dance Teacher

by Kimberly Joyce

In my early years of teaching dance classes, I used to bombard myself with doubt and question my effectiveness. *What is the purpose of my classes? Do my students really learn anything? I feel like I am just regurgitating dance steps...* It was true. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't understand what was needed to be an effective dance teacher, or the fact there are very real methods, approaches, and guidelines to teaching dance, just like teaching in a scholarly setting. I just knew I loved dance and understood in my heart the great benefits it provided, which I wanted to share with other students. That was a great place to start, but not nearly enough information to be an effective teacher with.

After studying in both the dance and educational fields, I find much is offered to the dance teacher who hopes to make a difference in their students' success. Dance education scholars discuss dance pedagogy and structuring classes, but there is little concrete evidence as to which methods are most effective. In 2010, *The Journal of Dance Education's* article, "Teaching the Dance Class" stated, "Critical pedagogy identifies a range of teaching styles from a command style (authoritarian), in which the teacher makes all the decisions, to a student-centered style, directed by student decision-making."

A dance class is usually perceived as a place where an authoritarian approach may seem like the best option, often accompanied by instruction that is rigid or even tyrannical. However, these old-fashioned approaches tend to lack certain positive attributes that are showing to be more enriching in modern-day dance education. Now, educators are beginning to create emphasis on the development of positive life skills like self-esteem and self-efficacy within the class structure.

Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy

Self-esteem, broken down into more specific concepts like confidence, self-respect, and feelings of value or worth, will follow a dancer throughout their training and seep into other aspects of the student's life. A directly correlated concept defined by widely popular psychologist Albert Bandura, is self-efficacy. Essentially, it is the belief in one's ability to perform a task. According to Bandura studies, students with higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy are more likely to have higher levels of motivation and achievement in all areas of their life, not just in dance.

As outlined in psychologist and educator Kendra Cherry's article "Self-Efficacy: Why Believing in Yourself Matters," there are four major sources of self-efficacy: 1) Mastery Experiences, 2) Social Modeling, 3) Social Persuasion, and 4) Psychological Responses. Each of these can be found in the dance classroom. Dancers can master skills through practice and repetition, creating a series of successes for themselves. Before they reach each goal, they can see other students model achievement and be encouraged by their success. Teachers and other students who offer encouragement create a social persuasion that convinces the student of their ability to succeed. Lastly, the performance aspect of dance often creates stress or anxieties.

Through training and guidance, a student can learn how to cope by using different strategies, gaining more control over their psychological responses to distress.

The Effective Dance Teacher

Developing self-esteem and self-efficacy is not something that will necessarily happen naturally in a dance class. It requires an effective teacher. Which poses the question: *What qualities or techniques make a teacher effective?* Different teachers choose different styles and techniques, from authoritarian to student-centered. Pedagogy literature includes a list of what makes good teachers. As a student and teacher of many years, I am suggesting a few of what I find to be most important.

1) Thoughtfulness in lesson planning and goal setting

A good place to start is the class structure. An effective teacher will have a goal for the class and create a curriculum that will meet the needs of the goal. Possible goals include technique development, performance readiness, increasing movement vocabulary, etc. The class should have a comfortable and logical flow, while staying mindful of safe dance practice. It should warm up the dancers adequately and offer them the appropriate degree of challenge.

Beyond focusing on dance technique, an effective teacher will have a curriculum that goes deeper into the learning process. A good curriculum will provide opportunities for thoughtful learning; helping students to practice using self-analysis as a tool to better themselves and develop better body awareness. An effective teacher will also provide a wholesome learning experience by incorporating further knowledge about the work done in class; supporting it with information to facilitate a deeper understanding of physical mechanics, movement qualities, theory, and history, etc. Creating a well-rounded learning experience gives the student more ways to store new information and offers different ideas for application. Lastly, because dance is an art, an effective teacher will assist in developing the creative artist in a student by offering choices, incorporating improvisation, and providing opportunities for performance.

2) Clear Communication

Its possible communication is one of the most important factors contributing to an effective teacher. There are three main areas of communication that need to be considered. The first is offering clear expectations for the students. This means expressing through words and/or movement demonstration what combinations are and what is supposed to be focused on or gained from them. The second is offering adequate corrections, both verbally and physically. Sometimes, the verbal correction is not enough. The student can be too preoccupied with other thoughts to process the correction, or sometimes, the student may think they are applying the correction but not realize there is more potential within their body. These are times when hands-on corrections can be most effective. The third important piece of communication is to offer feedback on progress. This can be confirmation of a correction immediately applied or a larger scale progress report over a period of time. Students tend to lose track of their development while they work multiple times a week on the same movements. This is an opportunity to build their self-esteem and self-efficacy by reminding them to notice the progress they have made due to their efforts.

3) *Relational Care Approach*

The National Education Association offers a code of ethical principles that educators should abide by. The very first is “Commitment to the Student,” in which “The educator strives to help each student realize his or her potential....” Nel Noddings, an ethics philosopher focused in the field of education, would take this a step deeper, emphasizing that the development of caring relations with students is the best way to create a foundation for effective teaching. Noddings believes there are three pieces to the relational care model. First, students will become more trusting as teachers *listen* to what they have to say when developing relationships with integrity. Second, as conversations centered on the student occur, the teacher becomes familiar with the needs, desires, and passions of the student, allowing more information on which to *build a targeted curriculum* tailored to the needs of the student. Third, as teachers learn about the needs and requirements beyond the standard class curriculum, they become inspired to *increase their own competence* to better support their students.

Clearly, relational care takes effort on the teacher’s part. In a way, it is going above and beyond the call of a teacher to become a support system for the student. The student is given a sense of value, knowing they are cared for and their best interests are looked after, which can also increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy. To accomplish this, a teacher must be observant, ask questions, be a good listener, and be approachable. The valuable side-effect of a caring relationship is trust, which is very important in developing the last item on the effective teacher list.

4) *Creating Respect*

Students who trust their teachers tend to take what the teacher is teaching more seriously and are more likely to adopt their theories and ideas. This is because trust can lead to respect. An effective teacher will instill respect within their students. The dance world is a harsh reality for many students, often with expectations that are not realistic for everyone. Teaching students to respect themselves, especially their bodies, not only will help to facilitate safe dance practice, but also help develop self-esteem and healthy self-body image. Students should also learn to respect others, including their teacher and peers. Students should be viewed as members of a community, supporting and encouraging one another. More accomplished students should not view those below them with contempt, but should instead aim to be role models and remain approachable in character. Less experienced students should be encouraged and inspired by those above them, able to reach out for advice or support. It is the teacher’s job to create and emphasize these types of relationships. This level of respect can be inculcated through class activities that require the collaboration or cooperation of the varying levels within the class or between separate classes if possible.

Lastly, students should learn to respect the efforts, tradition and culture of dance. Studying dance requires a great deal of mental training as well as physical training, and helping students understand the amount of effort they must use in class will help them develop a respect for what they do. In most cases, the study of dance involves rules and guidelines, like a dress code or repetition of movement to achieve mastery, and these ideas fall into the tradition of what learning dance is. This can also be perceived as respecting the class environment. Having a higher level of respect towards the classroom can quickly lift the energy, mood, and quality of effort put out by students. Usually, it is something about the culture that draws the student to dance in the first place, and the teacher just needs to continue to educate the student to support their understanding and tolerance in the dance studio and elsewhere.

How to do it?

These four areas of focus are only pieces of the many options available to dance teachers in becoming effective. With so much information available, it can become a bit overwhelming. However, discovering what is important to you as a teacher is the first step in becoming a better and more effective one. Simply investigate your own feelings about dance and teaching, and decide what you want to pass on to students. After that, prepare. The effective teacher will spend time and energy preparing a class. It's hard work at first, but with practice, it gets easier and faster. Then you will know, you are teaching for a purpose. Your class will have meaning and you will at the very least be more effective than you were before.

References

- Cherry, Kendra. "Self Efficacy: Why Believing in Yourself Matters" *verywell.com*.
[<https://www.verywell.com/what-is-self-efficacy-2795954>. Retrieved: May 10, 2017.]
- Mainwaring, Lynda M., Pysch, C, Krasnow, Donna. "Teaching the Dance Class: Strategies to Enhance Skill Acquisition, Mastery, and Positive Self-Image." *Journal of Dance Education*, Volume 10: Number 1, 2010. *cittraining.com*.
[<http://www.cittraining.com/Teaching-the-Dance-Class-Strategies.html>. Retrieved: May 10, 2017.]
- National Education Association. "Code of Ethics" *nea.org*.
[<http://www.nea.org/home/30442.html>. Retrieved: May 10, 2017.]
- Noddings, N. (2005). 'Caring in Education', *the encyclopedia of informal education*.
[<http://infed.org/mobi/caring-in-education/>. Retrieved: May 10, 2017].

Kimberly Joyce was part of the 2017 graduating class at the University of California, Irvine, with a B.F.A in Dance Choreography and minor in Education.
