

Why Modern Dance Should Be Taught in Competition Studios

After studying many kinds of dance, maybe you think you're ready for a university dance major—but something could be missing

by Alexa Wade

After taking my first technique class at university as a dance major, I felt overprepared in my dance vocabulary, yet underprepared with my execution. Growing up as a competition dancer, I trained in every well-known stage dance genre: ballet, pointe, lyrical/contemporary, jazz, musical theatre, acrobatics, hip-hop, and tap. But my transition from dance studio training to collegiate pre-professional training was not as smooth as anticipated, because I lacked fundamental knowledge of modern dance. In fact, I had never taken a modern class before college. Competition dance studios that offer modern dance in their curriculum are uncommon, which explains the gap between studio training and college dance training. I believe students of competition dance studios can benefit from taking modern dance in preparation for the professional world, mainly because it will strengthen their ballet technique, develop further improvisational skills, and deepen their musicality in jazz dance and all concert styles.

What can modern dance do for your ballet technique? Through its emphasis on kinesthetic awareness, you learn to bring spinal alignment, pelvic placement, and core engagement together to create long lines. Center combinations of pliés, tendús, dégagés, and battements in modern technique connect ballet terminology with support and release of the upper body. In a master's thesis on the topic, Alison Durham surveyed college dancers who reflected on their level of preparedness for their program. One student said, "I had zero experience in modern, and my education in ballet had a lot of flaws, so I really felt like I had to relearn a lot" (Durham 42).

Similarly, during my undergraduate experience, I have felt like I had to "relearn" movement phrases that were brushed over in my competition dance training. More specifically, I took ballet from four teachers at my studio, who all taught different styles based on Cecchetti, Balanchine, or Vaganova. I soon realized as a dance major that the pedagogical methods of my ballet professors were very similar to each other, in that they offered insight into ballet pioneers who shaped ballet as it developed.

Similarly, through taking modern dance, I have learned that pioneers like Cunningham, Horton, and Limón all had ballet in their backgrounds. Not only did they train with ballet pioneers to develop their movement vocabulary, but they also learned how to incorporate kinesthetic awareness into their practice. In ballet class, I am given cues to "lift from the core" and "float from the top of the head," which essentially are taken as ways to improve posture. What modern dance does is flip those cues upside down. It's okay to undercurve when transferring my weight and to drop the weight of my head. If I had known that modern dance held onto ballet ideals and expanded on them in a different way, I would have started my modern dance training before college.

Although my home studio did not teach modern, I did eventually learn how to improvise, which is a fundamental component of modern dance. I knew I needed that skill after my audition for my high school dance team, where the judges told us to improvise for the first two 8-counts prior to starting the combination. I remember feeling all nerves and discomfort when I realized I hadn't practiced enough freestyle movement. It was easier for me to rely on tricks and pre-set choreography from other dances as my improvisation. Even though I was accepted onto the dance team, I still needed to improve my improvisation skills.

Things got better after I took a lyrical/contemporary class at my studio where my teacher would turn the lights off and lead us through a guided improvisation across the floor. This exercise allowed me to build confidence with my movement-based improvisation as the pressure of other dancers watching was lifted. By learning modern-dance-style improvisation, I found I could recover from a notable mistake onstage at competition. It was difficult to improvise in a group setting where all of us danced with the same timing, but easier when competing solos. Improvisation has taught me how to create and express movement spontaneously and bring awareness into my mind and body.

Another benefit of teaching modern dance in competition studios has to do with developing musicality. I became used to learning choreography only to a song with lyrics, never just an instrumental selection. At university, musical accompanists for ballet, modern, and jazz provide rhythmic and harmonic support, often improvising, so they challenge the dancer to keep up and improve awareness. This contrasts the competition dance experience where dancers are expected to perform the same routines over six months to the same songs.

I can argue that my competition dance experience did not fully prepare me for studying dance for the concert stage. Incorporating modern dance training into private competition studios might be a way to bridge the gap between that focus on competition and the professional dance world, especially for the pre-professional training universities offer. A good start for competition dance studios that are interested in offering modern dance is hiring guest artists to teach workshops. If more dance majors arrive at college with a modern dance background, it could spur an expansion of curriculum to accommodate them. On the other hand, I wonder how effective it is to introduce modern in competition studios if a dancer's goal is not to continue dancing in college or professionally. It would be smart to give dancers a choice—either prepare for a focus on concert dance as a college dance major, or stay in the competition space and audition for their college dance team or spirit squad. At the studio level, that would offer training for future college dance majors to arrive more prepared with a stronger foundation.

In conclusion, for the above reasons of strengthening ballet technique, improvisation, and musicality, it's clear that competition studios would benefit from teaching modern dance for those interested in university and the profession. There is work to be done to repair the gap in competition dance studio training and collegiate dance training, but I believe that it is possible. The next generation of dance studios can advertise themselves as "fusion dance studios," combining classical/concert and competition studios in one. Their overlapping genres would not

hold any specific genre on a pedestal. The next generation of collegiate, pre-professional dancers will be more equipped to handle variations of styles that are known to them. Most importantly, they will learn to challenge their own views on what genres should be taught in studios.

Alexa graduated from UC Irvine in June 2025 with a Bachelor of Arts in Dance and a Bachelor of Arts in Education Sciences. She will pursue her Multiple Subject Teaching Credential at Concordia University, Irvine, where she plans to add a Subject Matter Authorization in Dance. She continues to teach dance in both school and studio settings in Orange County, California.



SOURCE

Durham, Alison, "Are Competition Trained Dancers Ready for a College Dance Program? (2022). *Master's Thesis*. 256. <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/theses/256/> Unpublished M.A. thesis for the University of Northern Colorado.