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Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy is all about the students and listening to their needs. If they are truly motivated dancers, then they will want to push themselves, and we will make that commitment to each other at the beginning of the season. I will push them, and they will work hard to live up to that expectation that we have set. However, students are constantly getting injured with the pressure of pushing your body to it’s farthest limits. I want to learn more about injury prevention and provide a space for dancers to listen to their bodies, know their limits, and take care of themselves. I think the knowing our bodies anatomy is extremely important and I want to start integrating it into every day dance classes. Eventually, I would push to make a mandatory injury prevention class for competition dancers that are dancing several hours a week.

Along with that, the progression of class is one of the main ways to prevent injury. Jan Erkert talks a lot about this in her book “Harnessing the Wind: The Art of Teaching Modern Dance.” Each section of class should lead to the next, warming the body up for the next activity, and creating themes that will be kept throughout class. Erkert has an extensive chart that explains each part of class, the what it is working, the intensity of it, and what time signature it is working in, if any. This chart can help teachers make sure they are not being extremely repetitive, make sure their class runs in the correct progression, and that it incorporates a good mix of difficulty and basics along with new and old material. Having this balance leads to a very dynamic class and sets a great curve for a year long class to always be pushing but also aiding the students in the right direction.

Another great way to organize a class is by having themes. I have seen this done in a variety of ways. Sydney, who teachers at Four Seasons, incorporates dance elements that change every few classes. She makes her entire lesson plans around this one topic. I thought this to work very well in her school physical education class setting. It gave structure to a class where students are being graded on their participation and understanding of objectives. Another approach that I saw in a different setting was with Talya in her competition jazz technique classes at Platinum Dance Center. She also included a theme every month. However, she was reminding the students and altering the warmup to focus on the theme while still working on other essential technical elements that are needed throughout the season. She does not have the luxury to only focus on her theme each class as they still have a big picture to work towards as well for competition. Anne Green Gilbert also really enforces the important of these themes in class. Reading her work, “Brain Compatible, Dance Education,” helped me with possible themes in class and ways to incorporate them into the class seamlessly. I’ve learned that these themes are essential for the growth of dancers because dance has so many aspects and just talking about each aspect periodically does not let it stick. Having to start over with each concept every time it is not going well sometimes feels like working backwards. Giving the dancers the chance to revisit themes multiple times in a short period of time helps them remember and embody what the focus is.

Along with progression and themes, I like to combine a mix of conditioning, strengthening, stretching, and technique into my technique classes. I like to find a balance between challenging the dancers as well as going back to the basics. Some weeks we will fly through material just to keep the dancers moving and fit as much into a class as possible, and some weeks we will slow down and take time on something that the dancers need work on. For example, if they are not understanding the correct muscle groups to use when lifting their leg into an extension or battement, we will do exercises to try to help them find that difference. That is then something that will get incorporated into our warm-up and that I will continually remind them about. Habits are hard to break so just talking about it once will not fix a continual mistake. A good balance of this is something that I learned through taking Toni-Pierce Sands class. She always kept us on our toes with her center floor works and changing up the combination for the warm-ups but kept consistency in what the actual movements were in the warm up. It allowed us to grow with repetition but also to always be actively engaged so we were not falling back on muscle memory. We also got to sit down and chat with Toni about this, which made me realize that she was doing this even if I did not notice as I was taking class.

My teaching style is assertive and energized. I tend to be the one with the most energy in the room, and I have learned most of my students give back to me half of what I give to them. This is something that I have learned from working as a Universal Dance Association instructor. The kids come to camps that are 4 days long and they are just exhausted. Our staff is expected to keep up the energy and make it contagious to keep the girls going. Because of this, I try to stay consistent with this concept in other classroom dynamics as well because we have had a good success with this tactic. I am actively involved in class moving around the room, giving hands on corrections, and moving with them across the floor to encourage them to travel and use the correct technique like using a deep plie when necessary, straightening their supporting leg in pirouettes and battements, or leaping up rather than forward. I think this teaching style pushes the students and even frustrates them sometimes when something does not click but when it does, it is so much more rewarding. This is where my passion lies. The moment it clicks and I know that something I said helped them. Seeing their motivation come pouring out when they succeed is what will always keep my fire going.

I also have been exploring the emotional outlet in dance and how much we take that for granted. Dancers do not always realize how much dance is helping them until they are without it. It brings a space to forget everything else that is going on or to utilize any emotions stirring as inspiration to the way you move that day. Since dance is more common at a juvenile age, I think that this is something that needs to be talked about at a younger age. This is not something that I was introduced to until I was 17 or 18 years old, which often times is the end of a dance career. One way that I have started to work this into my teaching method is a project that I am doing about mental health. I tried to make it as personal or impersonal as possible so the dancers could choose their level of connection to something to new and sensitive. This has been an amazing experience to just introduce the emotional side of dance to such youthful movers.

I truly believe in learning from other teachers always as well. This can help you weigh out your own reflection on different teaching styles, philosophies, and management styles. Having Ann Williams come in and talk about her management style in comparison to what I have seen at studios that I have been to and taught at, was a great way to compare and contrast what is a norm at most studios and how things can be run differently. Doing research on the many different ways a studio can run and what works best is important to me as a future endeavor of mine would be to open up my own studio.

I also want to translate this to my students. As I am learning from a variety of people, they should be too. I believe in the importance of conventions and studio mingling in order to get the most out of your dance career. The more people you learn from, the bigger your toolbox is. You should never stop taking class, even as a teacher. The studio that I work at offers $100 to the teachers towards taking class every year. Jennifer Tell, our studio owner, values this aspect of her teachers and that is something I whole-heartedly agree with. This is something that I would always like to keep up. For example, I take class from Deborah Johnson at the Cowles Center downtown to learn different techniques for teaching a jazz or contemporary class. One specific thing I took away from her is her breath techniques for pirouettes. We also have staff meetings where we share the knowledge that we have learned from conventions and such, which I also think is extremely helpful and important.

Another management style that I strongly support is streamlining the lesson plans of the teachers, while still allowing artistic freedom for the teachers to give their own imprint. Jennifer Tell seems to do a great job of this as well. A lot of studios are doing choreographed warmups that all teachers follow. I think this strips away some of the artistic freedom from the teachers, and I believe the teachers should be able to bring their own ideas to the classroom. However, I also think it is imperative to have staff meetings to discuss themes that teachers are working on and make sure they are complimenting each other. The same goes for discipline in the classroom. If teachers have the same expectations for the students, then there should be no excuse for the students to misbehave in class. I think this takes time to establish and figure out what works best because every student is different and discipline changes with generations. If teachers stay in constant communication about this and support each other’s decisions, then this should run as smoothly as possible.

Overall, there are a million different aspects to being a dance teacher and each teacher emphasizes their own importance. These topics are just a few that I like to keep my main focus amongst many other smaller focuses. It is amazing to have a group of teachers all with different backgrounds coming together and emphasizing their own philosophies.

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