

STUDENT AS TEACHER, TEACHER AS STUDENT*

Gail Lee Abrams **

The Motivation

As a college dance professor for the past fifteen years, I have often been confronted with questions about the validity of dance as a field of study at the post-secondary level. College administrators, faculty colleagues, students, parents, and even we, as dancers ourselves, ask about the value of dance in education, the practicality of dance as a possible career choice, and the impact dance can have in personal growth. Although I have become practised at answering these questions to most people's satisfaction, they have raised other questions about how I might better accomplish my goals as a teacher of movement, and convey to my students just how rich a contribution dance can make to their lives.

Many people who have not studied dance assume that it is a very specific, self-contained discipline which may not be particularly applicable within the broader context of a college education. What makes dance so potentially effective as a component of higher education is its interactive, participatory, experiential approach. Although possible, it is certainly not easy to get through a dance class without truly paying attention and actively getting involved. Since so many college classes are taught in a lecture format, in which students can merely sit, take notes, and decline to participate, a dance class can serve as a tremendously challenging, recuperative, and stimulating experience which calls on the physical and mental capabilities of the student in a totally unfamiliar way.

In striving to achieve this goal of total involvement, I have been evaluating many of my own teaching methods, and have discovered the value of incorporating "self-teaching" techniques into my classes. A few years ago, I noticed that some of my students were treating my dance technique course as simply another academic class; they were lazy and seemed to be "sleep-dancing" through classes at times. Many of them expected to be spoon-fed the material, just as they were in more traditional classes. The syndrome of "show me the movement, and I'll repeat it back" was surfacing more and more, and interactions between students and teacher, and between students themselves, were often mechanical and impersonal. It also seemed that when students did try to learn movement phrases, they did not really see what was important in the movement. Their concern was for the steps, the counts, i.e. the quantitative rather than the qualitative essence of the movement. Consequently, their own versions of the movement often tended to be mechanical and externally motivated rather than felt from and connected to internal motivation and sensation. In addition, I wanted to more effectively tap the creative potential of

*This paper was included in *Focus on Dance XII: Dance in Higher Education* published by AAHPERD/NDA in 1992.

** Assistant Professor of Dance - Scripps College. Claremont, California

all of my students, especially those who were not as technically skilled but who might have wonderful creative gifts. I began to look for more ways to clarify, and to teach students to clarify, concepts about movement and what it communicates.

It seemed that the best way to solve these problems was to involve students more, not only in the **learning** process, but also in the **teaching** process. This had always been a significant part of my composition classes, but I had applied it in my technique classes less often and more haphazardly. Although I sometimes had students help each other with movement phrases by learning the opposite side in pairs or by observing and correcting each other, and although we often did improvisation and short composition studies, these never seemed fully integrated into my teaching process in a way that really made a difference. I had always felt that as the teacher, I should be responsible for all, or most, of the teaching. Once I began to experiment with different ways of having students teach themselves and each other, I realised that more productive work was being accomplished, students were learning more, and I was learning more and teaching better.

The Methods

There is nothing magical about the specific techniques I have been using, except that they work: they help students understand more about movement, their own learning processes, and themselves. Many of the examples I will give are probably things that many dance instructors already do in their classes. If so, perhaps this will simply provide a new perspective on ways in which they can be effective; if not, I hope they will prove helpful.

Perhaps the most common self-teaching technique is having students coach each other in pairs, after having learned a movement phrase in technique class. The observer gives feedback about what she has seen and what she believes could be worked on, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The coaching process also includes discussion about how the mover **feels** when doing the movement, both on a physical and an expressive level. When the roles are reversed, both students realise that, although they are doing the same basic movement phrase, each puts her own imprint on the movement and claims it as her own, because she has discovered her own personal connection to it. By watching each other, students improve their observational skills: they have to define their own concept of the movement in terms of motivation, shape, quality, phrasing, etc. In developing images for herself and her partner, the student becomes accountable for her own movement and the choices she makes. She more consciously recognises her own tendencies and preferences, and gains confidence in her ability to observe, evaluate, and help another. While working as partners, students challenge each other to justify and clarify what they are doing.

Another exercise in observation and clarification involves showing a movement phrase (usually not a counted phrase) and having the students repeat what they have seen after only one viewing. Obviously, they can't really repeat the phrase accurately; the point of the exercise is to find out what aspects of the movement have made the greatest initial impression. Students continue to work on what they

remember of the phrase until they have clarified and developed it into their own phrase. Through this evolutionary process, each version becomes something quite different from the original; however, there is also a unity because each version has sprung from the same source. Playing with the various phrases in duets, trios, etc. can yield fascinating results, and allows students to work on composition, improvisation, and technique simultaneously. While observing and guiding the students' working processes, I discover more about each individual's own learning methods. The more I understand how and what each student sees and does not see, and what each student perceives as being important in learning a phrase, the better equipped I am to give constructive feedback to that student. I can speak to her using her own language, and I can introduce her to new concepts from the startling point of things she already understands.

Another way of approaching this is by having students dialogue with themselves while dancing a phrase. I ask each dancer to literally talk to herself out loud; she describes what she is doing, how she is doing it, what she likes and doesn't like about the movement, how she feels when doing it, images that occur to her, etc. In this manner, the student consciously hooks into what she is doing and becomes more fully aware of the physical and mental connections. I also ask each student to identify the moment or moments in the phrase that she loves dancing the most, and to perform those with the fullest energy and commitment possible. Then she is asked to allow that energy and joy to extend itself through the movement that occurs before and after her favorite moment(s), so that eventually the entire phrase is infused with the same life she gave the isolated moment. This not only results in greater enjoyment and fuller performance, but also gives her a greater understanding of kinesthetic connections and movement transitions within a dance phrase.

Asking students to choreograph and teach their own sequences to the class is also an effective "self-teaching" method. In most classes, some students will jump at the opportunity to lead class, while others are terrified at the prospect of such responsibility. Once convinced to try it, they generally find it much more fun but also more difficult than they expected. As they see their classmates try to reproduce their movement, the "teachers" learn where they have been unclear, either in movement quality, initiation, phrasing, sequence, or time structure. Their own classmates challenge them to become more articulate as they ask for exactness in the teacher's performance or verbal description of the movement. By observing areas in which the students have difficulty communicating to each other, I learn what concepts I need to focus on more fully within a particular class. One of the most glaring problems to surface during this exercise has been in the area of rhythmic structure; students are invariably unable to do the movement the same way twice because they do not understand how to count their own phrases. I have been dismayed to see this occur even in more advanced classes. This has alerted me to the need for more emphasis on rhythmic analysis and music training in my classes, which I accomplish with Dalcroze Eurythmics exercises as well as consultation and team-teaching with my accompanist.

During technique and improvisation classes, the self-teaching method may also take form through the development of a ritual. To promote group unity, I often use this in a "disconnected" class, in which people do not seem to be relating to each

other as classmates or as friends. We decide on a particular concept around which to design a ritual; it may be an idea I suggest, or it may be something related to the season, or perhaps a political or social issue. The class brainstorms ideas verbally, tries to find some structure from those ideas, and then breaks into groups. Each group develops its own part of the ritual, and at least some part of the ritual brings everyone together at the beginning, end, or both. Several rehearsals precede the final performance. Discussion about the ritual itself as an effective communication of the chosen concept, and about the dynamics of group process, concludes the class.

In composition class, an excellent assignment in which students teach each other involves random pairing of classmates who will each create a movement study for the other. They frankly discuss their own technical and choreographic strengths, preferences, and weaknesses and give feedback to their partner on the same issues. In creating a study for the partner, each choreographer attempts to incorporate both people's assets into one dance, in order to capitalise on positive features and minimise negative ones. By blending both styles, each is moving in an unfamiliar way and attempting to give up crutches and discover new ways of dancing. Each is also learning to recognise what is good and valuable about her own movement style, which is vital since students often experience extreme insecurity and doubt about their own creative abilities. While watching the final studies in class, it is amazing to see how much each choreographer has grown, and how successfully each has been able to solve the problem. Through this assignment, the students usually achieve a new level of objectivity which greatly enhances and improves their subsequent work.

In addition, I require composition students to schedule "labs" with each other each week (rotating partners throughout the semester) in order to get and give feedback on a more basis before showing their work to a larger audience in class. This enables students to refine their work one step further before showing, and gives them more practice in critiquing each other. Consequently, they have more confidence in their ability to talk about movement in greater depth, and their comments quickly progress past the level of "it was really good (but I don't know why)."

Students tie their experiences together through journal writing, a vital component of the self-teaching process. By recording experiences, reactions, observations, and insights about events occurring in and out of class, students articulate, verbalise, and bring to the conscious level many ideas and connections of which they might otherwise be unaware. This written diary provides them with a chronological record of their growth and development, which can be a valuable resource not only during the semester, but later on as well. By reading and commenting on the journal at mid-semester, I can encourage students who are on the right track, and challenge those who are not to dig deeper or consider other possibilities. At the end of the semester, all students are required to re-read their entire journal and write a concluding entry, which may be a summation of feelings about the course and their progress, an altered response to something they wrote earlier in the semester, or any other thoughts that may emerge as a result of re-reading. This process serves as a synthesis of everything that has occurred

throughout the semester. Through reading the journals, it is clear that students not only recognise how much they have progressed in their dance lives, but also how applicable their experience is to their personal and academic lives.

The Benefits

Although many of the advantages of self-teaching are discussed above, there are a few others which should be mentioned. Initially, I began to use self-teaching techniques more frequently during a semester in which I was teaching over seven hours of dance in one day (fortunately, not every day!). Fear of burn-out and a neck injury that semester forced me to find ways of conducting a full class while protecting myself and not cheating my students. Later on, teaching through a pregnancy helped me test and refine other ways of using students to teach each other. I found this to be a tremendous energy-saver, and my teaching style and enthusiasm were quite rejuvenated. Having students work with each other also freed my eyes so that I could observe more and give more thorough feedback to individuals in the class. As many of us do, I suffered from the "Super-teacher Syndrome": I must see everything that is going on in the room, I must be able to help everyone at once, and I must know all the answers. Students can, with the right guidance, find the answers for themselves, and often there are several appropriate solutions to a particular problem. Using students to help each other gives rise to many possibilities the teacher may not see herself.

Having students coach each other also helped solve the problem of what to do with the rest of the class when I was giving corrections or feedback to one particular student. Occupying the rest of the class in pairs or groups prevented me from losing the attention of the class or stopping its momentum, while promoting class unity and mutual support relationships at the same time. Equalisation of skill level among class members also occurred, as each recognised her ability to help another regardless of her technical ability. For example, one student may not be as technically advanced as another, but she may be an excellent observer, give articulate feedback, or have tremendous creative skills. Thus, students gain confidence in themselves through awareness of their own special abilities, and they gain respect for each others' individual contributions. In addition, respect for their teacher and for the process of teaching, is enhanced.

Dance is often assumed to be a non-verbal discipline which is experienced solely through the body; this concept must be dispelled, and use of these techniques is one way to do it. Asking students to articulate their body experiences makes light bulbs go on for them in a way that is new and revealing. By consciously thinking through and verbalising what they feel and see, concepts hit home more quickly and become better integrated, and the student is much more likely to apply her new-found knowledge to her dancing and choreography.

The study of dance can have tremendous impact on the college student by helping to facilitate problem-finding and problem-solving. It also fosters recognition of learning processes, working processes, and studying processes, as well as awareness of how one functions within a group and within interpersonal relationships.

These characteristics establish dance as a rejuvenator and builder of the individual, who is then better able to approach the rest of her curriculum with the same sense of connection, vision, and creative insight.

The concept of "student as teacher, teacher as student" can further facilitate significant, integrated, active learning among students, while also maximising our energy, efficiency, and effectiveness as teachers. As teachers, we must each remain the observer, the seeker - the student.



daniel ferrio 94