

## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Life, in both its largest and smallest moments is a series of movements that embody the ever-changing relationships that surround us, day-in and day-out: this moment as a unique moment in this time, space, and community. The impermanence of dance, and its demand to be consciously present in the moment, is an element, which defines it from pieces of art that are created in other, lasting mediums. *To dance is to experience, to listen, to respond, and grow – to act and move in the world that surrounds you and is never the same again: to dance is to live.*

### CONTEXT

The macro view of the world exists, in part, because of the dualities that surround us. While I understand these opposite ends of the spectrum are useful in defining my world, they define a world of black and white. Instead, I find myself so often drawn to the grayscale – the range between the two opposites – which has a beautiful way of bringing together, in the minute details and nuances, a fully integrated place of existence. I believe it is necessary, however, that this grayscale has the context provided by the ends of the spectrum, for without that, the place of being becomes flighty and ungrounded in the larger picture. As Mosston (2001) took his spectrum beyond strictly teacher versus student centered classrooms, he traveled through the grayscale between them in order to not only more fully explore and clarify the possibilities that exist, but also to fully understand each place along the way – the why and how. I see Erick Hawkins' work as another example of taking two extremes – the science of kinesiology and the philosophies and ideals of the East – in order to bring a fully integrated consciousness to his dancing, work and life. *I believe the ability to understand the full picture rests in the gray areas: an area placed within a larger context but consciously aware and engaged with the details and nuances the make that place a unique and valued part of the whole.* Hawkins states “What the artist does to make art and the spectator does to receive it, is in no way disconnected from what he, as artist or spectator, thinks about everything else in the world” (Hawkins, 2004, p. 112).

### CONNECTING TO OTHERS

As an artist and part of a dance community, it is through this understanding of the bigger world picture that I can come to understand the role, which I, and the dance forms I engage with, fulfill and could fulfill in the future. *Knowing the “other” brings clarity to self.* Bruner's (Culatta,

2013) idea of scaffolding – based on the idea of building on top of past knowledge – is able to reach its fullest potential only when one is able to know what they know. *I find historical knowledge in dance to be one of the often-abandoned areas of priority. Whether we are learning about our own dance lineage, societies and cultures of the past, or other world communities – through their dance forms, or about the dance forms through their cultural practices – to know what we know allows us to fully utilize the potential that scaffolding can provide.* “Knowing what we know” fulfills the latter portions of Bloom’s cognitive processes dimension, which “emphasize transfer” (Anderson et al., 2001). These phases help determine relationships between several elements and organize new information into a cohesive, coherent, and relatable whole. It is this epistemological act of knowing what we know, that increases our foundational knowledge – increasing the circumference of our base knowledge and allowing us to reach further and make more grounded connections when interpreting new information and experiences. I feel, as a life-long-learner, that this is a method for increasing my own Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which Vygotsky (Morris, 2008) describes as one’s ability to learn skills or aspects of a skill, with the assistance of a more capable person, expanding beyond their own developmental or maturation level. It is by expanding our own foundations of knowledge that we can further increase our reach and utilization of the assistance offered.

## TRAINING THE DANCER

As a student, I find the articulation by the teacher, of what and from whom the technical elements stem from, to be extremely valuable in providing a framework, in which I can work – not only to know what I know, but to also more fully embody the technique. This brings us first to the question of what is technique?

**I believe technique to be movement that facilitates the embodiment of artistic perspectives/philosophies (others or your own) while training and tuning the anatomical instrument to safely share and play in the physically articulated and expressive form of communication (language), known as dance.**

I find the support structure for one’s artistic action, however, comes not only from an embodiment of the technique, but also from the individual’s passion. *Technique alone may be knowledge, understanding, and execution, but the artistry of communication and expression through dance can only come when paired with one’s passion; I see the fullest potential of physical expression being reached when these two foundational elements are found in equal balance.* H’Doubler

(1957) states, “To know is the essential first step, but it is the expression of what we know that develops a character and a sense of values” (p. 62). Dewey (1938) also discusses this duality by cautioning that looking at an activity as an end in itself (ie. technique), instead of emphasizing “*intelligent activity*,” leads to a confusion of impulse with purpose (p. 69). The intellectual anticipation of the impulse’s consequences must “blend with the desire and impulse to acquire moving force. It then gives direction to what otherwise is blind, while desire gives ideas impetus and momentum” (Dewey, 1938, p. 69). He then goes on to say that the “intensity of the desire measures the strength of the efforts that will be put forth” (Dewey, 1938, p. 70): passion and technique, equally present.

## OPENING DOORS

In addition to being articulate about the content and ideas that I am sharing in the classroom, I find it is vital that teachers acknowledge the two-toned dialogue that exists and infuses every element and level of one’s interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. It is communication that is not only verbal, which can subconsciously draw in unintentional connotations or baggage established by past experiences individual to each, but also non-verbal communication, made up of cues and references, which carry with them an honest clarity and bring focus to the movement of dance. Studd & Cox (2013) propose that it is from our movement experience that language evolves; in fact, that language is an extension of movement (p. 15). It is no wonder that social constructs that most strongly utilize a codification of words, can, for some, allow verbal communications to live isolated – remaining in the context of the original social situation – from true depth and clarity that the movement itself deserves and demands if we are to fully understand and experience this medium of dance. While these verbal cues are often useful as memory tools or abbreviations for an understood phrase, I find they can also become a distraction from movement itself, leading to endpoints and shapes versus the journey of this physical motion. ***In this regard, special attention should be given to the vocabulary used by the teacher and its potential to support or limit the future movement experiences of the students.***

Having an awareness of the impact that my language can have, is directly dependent upon my ability to utilize Maxine Greene’s phenomenology of the imagination (Pinar, 1998, p. 133). Being able to “grasp” the world of student, opens doorways for helping understand their past knowledge, history, and experiences that have made them the student they are today. It also helps

clarify the most honest and accurate way of sharing in dialogue with the students. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2006) states,

**“Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future” (p. 84).**

I find that by knowing what I know as both a teacher and student, as individuals, as well as in the teacher/student relationship, I come to see my strengths and weaknesses, and understand how my past has made me who I am. This provides another tool in developing curriculum with greater depth and a fuller capacity to meet the students where they are. Bruner (Culatta, 2013) states it is the task of the teacher to “translate information to be learned into a format appropriate to the learner’s current state of understanding” (para. 2). Individual growth and learning through engaged experience then becomes based on the “continuity of [their] significant knowledge” (Dewey, 1938, p. 10), and has the ability to change their perspectives and skills upon the grounded foundation of what they knew before.

## SMART BODIES

As a student, my clearest realizations come from listening to the body and movement instead of analytically articulating the step-by-step process of what to do. *By using relationships, be it within the physical body, the social structure or the cosmic rules and orders that affect us daily [gravity, physics, etc...], movement becomes the focus; movement happens and is defined by these relationships.* This to me does not suggest that the mind or the brain is therefore dormant but rather it is freed up to focus on what is and to learn and assess, or listen. Trusting the body to make the connections – or rather, connect the dots between relationships that are in dialogue - can allow one's body and mind to grow with the depth of knowledge that comes from experiencing that moment as a unique moment.

*Details and knowledge become integrated into us as individuals through embodied experiences and relationships.*

Guiding others through their personal experience and search for knowledge demands many skills and an articulated eye. With each student dealing with their bodies as an ever-changing instrument – especially when the body is in a state of injury or trauma – a teacher needs a strong and kinesthetically grounded understanding of the neutral or pure body. H'Doubler (1957) addresses this idea and the use of the word *natural* in the world of dance, suggesting that the natural or “correct” body requires training in order to be able to achieve “good body motion; consequently the

first step is to train back to the natural or correct way of moving” (p. 93). I find one way of approaching movement and anatomy in this holistic way is by utilizing the extreme ends of the movement spectrum to therefore articulate the in between: right/left, straight/curved, etc. By finding this center or neutral place, one – as was the goal in the Baroque period – is able to remain “supremely natural” (Hilton, 1997, p. 269), with the “head and the body... relaxed but at the same time ready for any action or movement” (Little & Jenne, 2001, p. 8). The presence of this body state was seen to be a demonstration of one's virtue, showing the purity of the soul through the purity of the body and its lack of affectation.

As in the Baroque era, this neutral or pure body cannot be obtained only through the correction of the physical alignment. Our bodies, by nature, are individually unique and each face their own bony/muscular limitations and extremes – differing even between our own body halves – that I have often found benefit from the use of somatic work. Using imagery and the different points of initiation or shifts of energy/dynamic can help counteract the quirks of one's body and establishes a state of groundedness that provides a safe and neutral place, as well as providing the foundations and tools for dancers to understand alternative options available for approaching movement and dynamic alignment (Studd & Cox, 2013, p. 45). Many of my teachers, especially those rooted in imagery work such as Lu Lu Sweigard, Mary Todd, etc., **often used the word natural as something desirable and most ideal in the body's movement; the discovery of this becomes a foundational necessity in helping a dancer reach their fullest movement potential, and one that encourages a holistic respect for one's self and body - a necessity in the field.** H'Doubler (1957) agrees with this goal for dance as she states, “This is the only basis upon which consciousness of art movement can be established” (p. 93).

## **A LIVING CLASSROOM**

In order to fully engage with and learn from the experiences in the classroom, I find it is necessary that the eyes of both the teacher and the student be trained. ***I believe the ability of the teacher to actually see what is in front of them – versus what they assume or think should be in front of them – is a mark of a teacher's maturity and their desire to invest in their students.*** When one is newer to presenting material, it is easy to focus on what the curriculum “should be.” While planning and curriculum development is necessary and vital to carrying a group of dancers forward towards their learning goal, as well as aiding the teacher in articulating what the priorities are in their approach, I feel you have to first *see* where the students are to know what the next step is in

helping them move forward, or scaffold, in a very practical and concise manner. I find that as a teacher who is training my eyes to articulate what I am seeing, I often use my personal, kinesthetic experience to help me articulate my feedback. If I am unable to identify what is needed or what I am seeing, I do what I observe the student doing, and can kinesthetically “hear” what link is missing. As a teacher who is continually training my eyes, I strive to maintain transparency in my learning to inspire the students to do the same. To have the ability to see the difference between movements and to experience and know the differences in the body is something that can exponentially expand their learning curve in current and future experiences: *to see and articulate, that which is present.*

As I strive to be a teacher who is openly a student as well, there comes the need for me to know how I learn. As a teacher, it is very natural for one to teach as they learn. In dance I find my relationship to space - internal and external - to be a natural pathway for me to absorb knowledge, and a lens through which I tend to see movements. Movement, however, is never isolated in that way and constantly lives in relationship to weight and time as well. I find it helpful to focus on these areas that resonate with me in a less dominant way to help maintain a more holistic and diverse curriculum in my classes. Additionally, incorporating these other elements and approaches, which play to Gardner’s multiple intelligences, leads me, “to develop new approaches that might better meet the needs of the range of learners in...[my] classrooms” (Palmer & Cooper, 2001, p. 276). I find this to be an important consideration, especially for a teacher who is responsible for assisting and helping expand the students’ ZPD as discussed by Vygotsky (Morris, 2008): to provide equal opportunity for all students to achieve their highest ZPD no matter the type(s) of intelligence that dominates their learning. As a teacher, armed with the knowledge of my own learning tendencies and preferences, I must caution myself to also be aware of this in pacing. I love the challenge of learning quickly and, as a dancer, I am thrilled to receive a multitude of information, taking what I can, and then experiencing it with all of these possible tools or references to give context to what I am experiencing. As a teacher, I have to caution myself to not give them everything I can at once – allowing it to be a layered experience for the students makes it less daunting and more productive in that it can become their experience that teaches them, not an overabundance of my words. I do not mean for this to suggest the teacher is uninvolved in the learning process but that their focus is not on the information they know and are teaching, but rather on developing environments and tasks that will guide the students to discoveries that will

continually develop and that they can own as their own knowledge. Freire (2001) speaks of his role as a progressive teacher as

**“helping students to recognize themselves as the architects of their own cognition process” (p. 112).**

*Giving them the power to utilize their own experiences for growth and helping to situate them within an environment where that can optimally be achieved is the essence of a classroom that I feel respects and gives power to the students while also giving their journey and existence value.*

Maxine Greene’s understanding of education, and the role of the arts within that, emphasizes the importance of dialogue.

**“To connect the arts with lived experience for the purpose of opening spaces where persons speaking together, and being together, can discover what it signifies to incarnate and act upon values far too often taken for granted” (Pinar, 1998, p. 46).**

*This is the space, in which the teacher/student relationship exists in its ideal form, and as she states, it is a space created by a mutual coming together – only as open a source of information as they both allow.* The teachers and mentors that most strongly helped shape who I am today taught so much more than dance – they taught life as well. It was a blend of teaching respect for one’s self, body, and world through both action and word, while also being very open with their expectation when they saw more potential. Those moments of saying while this is not bad, it could be better, and sending me back to revisit a first attempt were often those moments when I had the biggest discoveries. A Developer (of people) was identified as one of my top 5 strengths in StrengthsFinder2.0 developed by Gallup Press. Relationally I have always found myself drawn to helping or encouraging people – even as a child I was called the mother of the group or the eternal optimist. While I do appreciate this trait, and my stubbornness to see the best and find silver linings, I also acknowledge that my mentors were often the ones setting the bar higher for me, not always saying look what you’ve accomplished but rather, you can accomplish more.

## **HOLISTIC EDUCATION**

*I believe that a huge responsibility of a teacher is to give students information with the larger picture in mind. Teachers must have an understanding of the demands and necessities of working in the real world so students can leave prepared physically and artistically as a dancer,*

*as well as with an understanding of how they currently fit into the world and how they could develop into the bigger picture.*

**“It requires of a teacher a general competence that involves knowledge of the nature of knowledge itself as well as the specific knowledge that is linked to one’s field of specialization” (Freire, 2001, p. 67).**

H’Doubler (1957) goes on to say that “Education should be a building towards the integration of human capacities and powers resulting in a well-adjusted, useful, balanced individual” (p. 60). Especially coming from a university bubble, it is not uncommon for students to be blindsided by the realities or competition they suddenly face. It has often been my professors who have helped, through their teaching, establish a safe and supportive environment that carried me through transitions and provided the tools I would need - though it has never been an environment filled with entitlement or false hope.

Understanding the form in which I work as well as the role and impact it has within our world community, allows me to share and contribute to the world around me. *The idea that is immanent in my definition of art, is that “art is ever the same, the effort of mankind to represent and interpret life”* (H’Doubler, 1957, p. 107). I believe that it exists all around us; it is the same thing in different mediums – be it music, cooking, or poetry: “only its forms change” (H’Doubler, 1957, p. 107). I feel dance is something that everyone can come to appreciate and experience in some form or fashion. *Dance is beyond the technically trained form, but rather part of the search for how/why we live, a bigger order, and part of our daily relationships.* Especially in our Western world, dance is so often isolated from life, belief, and our daily culture that we must prove its value on every single level. I believe as H’Doubler (1957) states that “art cannot be divorced from life – it is of life’s essence” (p. xxvi), and that it is not a special endowment bestowed [upon a few],” but an “innate capacity possessed by everyone” (p. xx).

As teachers of dance, it is vital that we know whom we are teaching, why they are there, and what dance can provide and share with them. As dance is directly connected to the experience of life and the individuals within a community, it is accessible and relevant to all. I am continually navigating how I can best share dance with the community that immediately surrounds me, be it advanced technique classes or a community, social engagement. *I strive to create an experience of “wide-awakeness” (Pinar, 1998) and relations for the students by engaging them (and with them) in a space of rich dialogue about our world, and our place, existence, and expression within it.* How do we keep our perspectives broad and open, giving dance its place in our world

today, while still juggling the freelance performer and professional dance communities in which we find our work? It is a struggle that requires, in my mind, a larger more universal appreciation for dance (art) and an understanding of its value in perhaps a less defined but more clearly articulated manner.

**Art, when really understood, is the province of every human being. It is simply a question of doing anything well. It is not an outside, extra thing. When the artist is alive in any person, whatever kind of mind may be, he becomes an inventive, searching, daring self-expressive creature. He becomes interesting to other people. The world would stagnate without him – and the world would be beautiful with him... He does not have to be a painter or sculptor to be an artist. He can work in any medium. He simply has to find the gain in the work itself, not outside of it. Museums and art will not make a country an art country. But where there is the art spirit, there will be precious works to fill museums. (H'Doubler, 1957, p. 50-51)**

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