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Teaching students to dance with the mind as well as the body

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Home > 2012 | 11 | November > November 2012 | Intent and Expressiveness

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Teaching students to dance with the mind as well as the body

By Don Halquist

There was a time when the goal of modern dance technique training was to make all dancers look as much alike as possible. That day has passed. Today most choreographers expect dancers to bring themselves to the movement they are given, and in many cases, to participate in the creation of the movement itself.

Today's dancers need to learn sequence, rhythm, style, and the choreographer's intent while also revealing their own personal uniqueness in the way they clarify, define, and amplify various aspects of the choreography's style and movement. Successful dance artists today have dynamic presence as well as highly developed skills and well-trained bodies.



Encouraging students to show intent behind the movement phrases will enable them to move with a wholeness of mind and body.

Dancers who have a vibrant, lively sense of the movement they experience, and can express their own emotional relationship to the dances they perform, are in high demand. Technique classes, therefore, must incorporate opportunities for personal meaning-making, validation of personal uniqueness, and communication of sensory experiences.

Intent

According to early-20th-century Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, “thought creates action.” That is, we move to fulfill an inner intent. Teaching students body forms (shapes), counts, directions, and focus is important. But encouraging students to determine and show intent behind the movement phrases we are teaching them will enable them to move with a wholeness of mind and body.

The viewer sees what is most important to the performer. If a dancer is thinking about counts or physical skills, this is what will be expressed. If she goes beyond counts and skills and focuses on qualitative, spatial, or emotional aspects of the movement, then this is what will be expressed. In this way, the dance is more than the sum of its parts. It is a vibrant physical experience for the viewer as well as the dancer. It is also an opportunity for the unique interpretation of that intent, which will be realized differently for each dance artist.

Irmgard Bartenieff, a physical therapist and the creator of Bartenieff Fundamentals, often said that intent organizes the neuromuscular system for efficient execution of movement phrases. Throughout our day-to-day lives we move to satisfy intention. For example, a child in ballet class might wobble when asked to relevé, but when she reaches for a cookie on the kitchen counter, her spatial intent makes her very stable. Our bodies know how to organize themselves efficiently when we let intent guide us.

Movement is highly complex, and we cannot be mindful of all the many activities going on in different parts of the body as we are moving. By studying Bartenieff Fundamentals, we understand that when we give ourselves a clear intention, the body’s wisdom can serve us and we can move with body–mind integration and coordination.

Imagery and internal experience

A dancer can improve sheer technique by attaching an image to a technical task and trusting it to fulfill itself within the neuromuscular system. Images travel at the speed of light, and the whole body–mind can be reorganized in a moment to fulfill a movement phrase in an efficient, connected, authentic, and personally expressive manner.

As teachers, it is essential for us to provide imagery as well as musical and technical guidance as we teach movement phrases. We should encourage reflection on the part of our students. Ask them to think about what the movement phrases mean to them, and encourage them to bring their own images to the material they are learning and performing.

It is also important to constantly encourage our students to be aware of internal sensory experience. “It is a dancer’s job to reveal her internal experience,” choreographer and movement analyst Bill Evans often says in his classes. According to Evans, dancers need to tune into the kinesthetic and emotional sensations that come alive within them and let them pour out freely to those watching.

Asking students to pair up in technique classes and observe each other can serve many purposes. As they perform dance phrases for each other, guiding questions can lead them to deeper exploration and enhanced understanding of a phrase. Try such prompts as: “How did your partner reveal her personal uniqueness in that phrase?”; “What images came alive for you as you watched your partner perform?”; and “When did you experience your own kinesthetic response to your

partner's dancing?"

Expression

Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung famously posited four functions of the human psyche: thinking, sensing, feeling, and intuiting. Applying those concepts to dancers, Rudolf Laban, founder of Laban Movement Analysis, believed that those functions are expressed in distinct ways.

- Thinking expresses itself in the dancer's attention to space—either direct or multi-focused.
- Sensing expresses itself in the dancer's awareness of her weight—emanating either powerfully from the pelvis or delicately from the sternum.
- Feeling expresses itself in the dancer's attitude toward flow—either freely outpouring or precisely controlled.
- Intuition expresses itself in the dancer's attitude toward time—either indulgent or urgent.

By encouraging students to experience and reveal these different responses as they learn movement phrases in technique classes, we are preparing them to dance with their whole unique selves.

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