

Creating an Inclusive Dance Studio: Berklee ABLE Assembly 2020

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Introduction

Thank you for attending our presentation, “Creating an Inclusive Dance Studio”. We hope that this written summary can provide an alternative way of sharing the content of our presentation. In this summary, we plan to provide information on how to prepare staff, participants and the studio space. We will also provide suggestions for instruction and delivery of a dance curriculum. And lastly, we hope that our entire learning module can serve as launchpad for developing a greater inclusive dance community in Boston and beyond. Thank you for your dedication, energy, and commitment to increasing access to the arts.

Mindset Shift

When it comes to creating an inclusive dance studio, it all begins with a mindset shift. This mindset shift starts with yourself and expands to include anyone involved with the programming, such as, teachers, administrators, accompanists, therapists, students, and caregivers. A shared belief that diversity is the norm, not the exception and that everyone has unique and specific needs provides a foundation for inclusivity. Removing blame on individuals and rather becoming aware of any barriers to access that have previously prevented inclusion and participation is also an essential shift. Recognizing that when teachers change instructional practices rather than trying to force change in students provides the window of possibility, inclusion, to be opened for all.

Inclusive Language and Communication

When working with individuals with disabilities, it is important to use inclusive language and communication so that you are welcoming and respectful to all people. This comes down to the principles of what you say and how you say it. When speaking to someone with a disability, use strengths-based and emotionally neutral language. For example, the phrase “a person with low vision” is more inclusive than “a blind person”. The first phrase places the individual before his/her/their disability. It is also important to have emotionally neutral language, that does not focus on disadvantages. Speak to everyone how you would like to be spoken to. That includes speaking to adults with disabilities as adults and using age-appropriate tone and language. Keep

in mind that some individuals may use a communication device. Remembering the mindset shift, be flexible and adaptable. If someone does not communicate verbally, it does not mean that they cannot understand what you are saying. Communication should not be confused with competency. Someone who uses a device is still communicating with you, it just might be in a way that may be new to you. Feel free to ask the person for clarification when communicating, and always speak directly to the person when you are communicating with them – not their family member or caregiver. Using these principles will help foster an environment of respect among all individuals you work with.

Universal Design for Learning and Instruction

Teaching inclusively will benefit everyone. Understanding the concept of universal design for learning will engage the teacher and the students in the most wholistic way. Although this way of teaching stemmed from the architectural concept, the universal design for learning is an approach to designing curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of the greatest number of users. This is done through multiple means of representation, expression, action, and engagement. The more access points provided and the more opportunities for individuals to express, learn, and embody the concepts presented allow for the greatest amount of participation. This makes the learning environment exciting, as the teacher is providing a variety of opportunities for learning, and the students are able to respond and engage in various ways, all understanding and that their contributions are important and a valid part of the class.

Preparation for your staff

Before you begin your program, it is important to prepare your staff and get to know your students and families. In Boston Ballet's Adaptive Dance program, our administrative staff conduct intake interviews with all new families. This is a 30-minute phone call prior to program start date that helps build rapport, clarify expectations, and gather information such as communication, behavior, physical needs, sensory needs, other preferences, motivators, or interests, and goals for their student in a recreational setting. These intake interview summaries are then shared with dance faculty before the start of class, so that everyone is prepared can best prepare their lessons and facilitate a smooth transition into the program. Lastly, holding a pre-service or pre-program orientation with your faculty and going over program procedures, lesson plan design, and curriculum will help set everyone up for a successful year.

When determining registration costs, keep in mind the financial context of families of children with disabilities—many may be facing additional financial costs such as medical bills. Offering financial aid as much as possible can help increase access to your programming. Be responsive and dependable, and most importantly, listen to families’ needs and feedback. If you do not identify as a person with a disability, it is especially important that you listen to the needs of the community you work with and not make assumptions. Being empathetic and understanding, while upholding program policies, will help build trust between program staff and families.

Preparation for your families

As you prepare your staff to begin your dance program, so will you prepare your students and families to begin their dance experience. At Boston Ballet, we help introduce students to our program using social stories and preparatory videos. We also hold Family Observation weeks where families can attend their child’s class to see what they have been working on. Holding Open Houses with new and current families can also be an effective way to encourage community and help make connections before classes begin.

Preparing your physical space and sensory considerations

In setting up your physical space, you want to create the most accessible and calm space possible. Remove distractions, such as flashy colors or screens, that may distract attention during class. Use seating and chairs throughout your dance class to provide opportunities for students to exercise while seated, rest, or take a break. Have an entry and exit plan for how students will get in and out of the space. Plan for transitions such as the beginning and end of class, a family being late, and build in wait time so that you are not stressed trying to move one place to another. Allow you and your families time to comfortably navigate your space. Lastly, it is important to take into account the sensory considerations of students with disabilities. Depending on the individual or need, some students may be sensitive to light, sound, scent, touch, or attire such as scratchy or tight clothing. Make sure there are no excessive loud noises going off such as a fire alarm, or flickering fluorescent lights overhead. In the intake interview, ask what the sensory needs are of the student beforehand so you can prepare your space ahead of time. At Boston Ballet we offer dress code options, such as wearing our Adaptive Dance t-shirt and black leggings or bottoms, and bare feet, as well as the option for students to wear a leotard, tights or shorts, and ballet slippers if they would like.

How does one begin to teach dance in a way that is inspired by the universal design for learning?

With any well-thought instructional planning, it begins by identifying end goals and setting clear learning objectives. From there, planning backwards in order to scaffold material in a safe and supportive way so that there is a retraceable map that can be followed throughout each class, session, semester, year. Developing consistency and ritual within the dance class encourages confidence and risk-taking, both of which are indicators of a supportive, inclusive learning environment. Making sure there are clear and high expectations for every individual and for the group as a whole. Taking the time to develop classroom culture is an essential element that is not to be underestimated or taken for granted.

Once the delivery of content begins, make sure it is delivered with a total language approach; say it, do it, show it, sign it. Keeping directions clear, short, and single step provide support without overwhelming, and allows for a scaffolded approach to engagement. The use of props is encouraged in order to continue to support the universal design of learning throughout class. Some props and their uses and benefits include:

- Visual Schedules
 - Create a safe and predictable learning environment
 - Previewing
 - Visual cues and reminders
- Chairs
 - Create a sense of inclusion
 - Containment and grounding
 - Avoid fatigue while building strength
- Rubber floor Markers
 - Visually identify and reinforce space and location
 - Create visible pathways and patterns
- Scarves
 - Support apprehensive movers
 - Increase fluidity of movement
- Instruments
 - Provide sensory input
 - Develop musicality
 - Allow for additional participation
- Therabands
 - Develop strength through sensory input/resistance
 - Create barrier for contact

- Stim toys
 - Create safety, structure, and comfort
 - Use strategically

Teaching dance inclusively should be a fun, fulfilling experience for all. Listening and paying attention to what is happening in the moment, being able to support and steer the class in a positive way, and keeping an open mind but a clear, unwavering mission will help guide the class and hopefully foster a lifelong love of dance.