

Supporting the Ballet Dancer from the Ground Up: Ankle & Foot Stability through Functional Awareness®

Allegra Romita and Nancy Romita

Abstract

This presentation/workshop advocates a position that ballet educators are poised to foster dancer wellness practices while providing strategies to enhance ankle/foot stability to improve performance. Fifty percent of overuse injuries in dancers are to the ankle and foot (Leiderbach 2018). This presentation examines current research on ankle/foot injuries in ballet dancers, demonstrates how unconscious daily habits can support or compromise ankle/foot stability, and provides specific strategies to be utilized in classroom training to improve both expressivity and stability of foot to support the ballet aesthetic.

The presenter's methodology translates/transforms/integrates research in functional anatomy and motor learning into practical embodied practices to support efficacy in dance training using Functional Awareness®. Functional Awareness® is a practical somatic approach to embodied anatomy to enhance understanding of movement function, facilitate ease in body action and improve dynamic alignment. The presenter's pedagogical philosophy embraces honoring diversity and inclusion during embodied movement practice and demonstrates specific verbal cueing to support empathy and student agency while enhancing skills. The cueing and communication strategies disseminated and practiced during the session are influenced by the work of Dermott McDermott, in active listening and peer feedback skills, Mary Whitehouse's authentic movement® practices, and current research on student agency and growth mindset by the Harvard research team of Ronald Ferguson et al. (2015) and Zeynep, Barlas & Obhi (2013).

This session can be successfully presented as an in-person lesson or as a synchronous learning experience in the virtual classroom.

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Ballet and Writing as incantatory practices: a collaborative pedagogical project

Kate Mattingly and Kristin Marrs

Abstract

We began our research with a shared belief in ludic and multimodal practices as essential to our teaching, in both ballet and writing pedagogies, and a desire to confront practices that rely on intimidation and policing. Both we and our students have experienced systems that rely on notions of an idealized dancer, essay, or class, and we turn, instead, to prompts and practices that honor individuality, value differences, and cultivate agency. In this paper, we analyze how our teaching of ballet and writing classes encourages collaboration and peer-to-peer feedback in order to dismantle authoritarian methods that position a teacher as the sole expert. By making space for discussions around feeling "not quite good enough," we foreground the ubiquity of self-doubt, and the importance of developing self-knowledge through interdependent learning spaces. We use a multimodal pedagogical approach that engages both writers and dancers in writing and kinesthetic practices, emphasizing discursive analysis in ballet class and embodiment in our writing practices. Taking a cue from Dr. Jessica Zeller, we too are "[t]ired of pedagogies that disregard the humanity and autonomy of young dancers [and] glorify the teacher as the center of the universe and as beyond reproach." Ultimately, we define both dancing and writing as incantatory—capable of shifting perceptions of self and others—and uniquely equipped to dismantle the inhumane patriarchal structures found in ballet settings, and to emphasize our investment in both ballet and writing as liberatory, activist, and joyful practices.

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Pedagogical Responses to Ballet's Infamous Problem: A Framework for Discouraging Self-Objectification and Encouraging Embodied Flow States in the Ballet Classroom

Courtney Liu

Abstract

This paper brings progressive pedagogical advances in ballet in conversation with eating and body image disturbances under the framework of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997) and proposes flow state facilitation as a buffer against body image and eating disturbances. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997) posits that women are trained to view themselves as visual objects for consumption. The related term, self-objectification, describes the altered psychological state where any individual begins to view themselves as a body or sum of body parts. Ballet dancers exhibit higher levels of self-objectification (Tiggeman et al. 2001) and eating disorders (Arcelus et al. 2014) than the general public while high levels of self-objectification are correlated to eating and body image disturbances (Tiggeman et al. 2012). Recently, Kathryn Morgan and fellow Miami City Ballet dancers created a social media upset by sharing their stories with body image and eating disturbances publicly. The timing of this uprising during a global pandemic and widespread social unrest may not be coincidental as thin preference is intimately connected to racism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of identity inequities (Taylor, 2018). Using objectification theory as a lens and drawing upon literature in psychology and ballet pedagogy, this paper develops a framework and toolkit for discouraging self-objectification in the ballet classroom and proposes the facilitation of embodied flow states as important step toward addressing one of ballet's most infamous problems. To illustrate, I describe methods implemented in my classes and share end-of-semester reflections from collegiate-level dancers (IRB-Approved).

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BarreLab: embodying change

Paige Cunningham Caldarella and Emily Stein

Abstract

How do we develop new relationships to the ballet tradition, and to each other in the ballet classroom? This class offers an experimental approach to ballet barre, using a collaborative 'relay' format. Classic barre exercises will serve as a laboratory for how we might physically embody a new relationship to the ballet tradition, and to ourselves as teachers and dancers of it. Presenters will co-teach, integrating deep knowledge of ballet technique with practices of compositional improvisation and devising in the moment. Their approach stretches and challenges the ritual of ballet class, shifting the locus of control from the traditionally "omnipotent" teacher to the possibilities of connection, collaboration, and improvisation within its frame. A brief conversation will follow.

The presenters are dedicated to nourishing the rigor of ballet training, while interrogating the rigidity of the power system in which that occurs. They have engaged in a decade-long dialog on the evolution of ballet training in higher education, in the context of an institution which has a long-term commitment to anti-racism and equity. Their work re-envision the skills palette of the ballet teacher, as well as that of the dancer, exploring how dancers can push off from the touchstones of traditional ballet technique to make it relevant, equitable, flexible and joyful. At the juncture of the new world of remote education, the urgency of racial reckoning, and the developing science around attention, teaching, and learning, they offer this experimental barre experience as a chance to practice embodying change.

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Research into practice: teaching ballet under lockdown

Susie Crow

Abstract

The ballet class shapes not just the dancing but the attitudes and perceptions of dancers throughout their careers. Through observation, teacher interviews, documentation and analysis of current and historic examples my doctoral research questioned the role of the class in developing dancers as creative artists, and the relationship of artistry and technique within it. It examined ballet's venerable mechanisms of oral transmission and situated learning, and discussed the evolving relationship of class content to performance repertoire. It proposed that rather than simply deliver a centralised curriculum ballet teachers should model in their classes the enquiring attitudes and personal interpretations that they would wish to foster in the aspiring artists learning with them.

This auto-ethnographic paper reflects on problems and discoveries experienced translating such ideas into practice as a teacher and choreographer in the time of Covid19. The restrictions of successive lockdowns on ballet's practice and study pose grave challenges; but also open new possibilities. Limitations of physical space render impossible the embodied experience of much existing repertoire; but can impose a constructive change of dancing focus. Moving beyond a narrow immediate concern with maintaining physical fitness, increased digital access to alternative teaching can bring wider cultural and historic perspective, encouraging deeper engagement and critique of ballet's primary learning environment. Needing to adapt requires the development of strategies for autonomous learning and creative practice. Most radically the situation has witnessed development of new digital forms and more democratic modes of dissemination, making ballet's knowledge more widely accessible, and raising questions of ownership.

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What a Difference a Year Makes: Making a Case for Examining Subtext as a Basis of Liberatory Practice in Ballet; Or, Sometimes a Tendu isn't Just a Tendu

Molly Faulkner and Julia Gleich

Abstract

When teaching ballet, what else are you teaching? What should you be teaching? How can the implicit be shaped into liberation and agency for the students? And how has this year shaped our subtexts as teachers?

Foucault defines liberation as the practice of freedom and freedom as, “The care for the self” (in Viriasova 74), Marshall goes on to say there is “no escape from power into freedom” (in Baker 3) and “to exercise freedom it must not be in tutelage” (Ibid. 269).

hooks, states, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin...” (hooks, 1994).

Love calls for abolitionist teaching, focussing on intersectionality and mattering. “Mattering is essential in that you must matter enough to yourself, to your students, and to your students’ community to fight” (Love 45).

Three seemingly disparate theorists highlight the need for the examination of subtext in teaching, forcing us to consider the role of tutelage in liberatory practices.

Using Foucault, hooks and Love as theoretical underpinnings, this idea-generating workshop allows participants to examine and engage their own subtexts. The hope is to consider this year of change, its short and long-term impacts on ballet pedagogy, and begin to create new liberatory frameworks.

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Trauma, Development, and Functionality: Prosocial Strategies for Humane Teaching in the Ballet Class

Elizabeth Johnson and Luc Vanier

Abstract

Developmental psychologist Dr. Phillippe Rochat asserts the fundamental human need is to be seen and valued by others as fully human: “the recognition and acknowledgment of self by others,” “being affiliated,” and “feeling safe” from being rejected. In this presentation, we consider traditional and current Ballet teaching practices alongside this important question: What is humane teaching?

In many typical ballet classes, there is a degrading capacity for even “trained” bodies to skillfully adapt to environment and culture. Student sensitivities to stress and trauma can be inevitable characteristics of ballet class yet the historical format provides clear opportunity to witness mind/body behaviors that interfere with meaningful learning. Frequent affects are students’ excessive muscular tension and anxious hyper-vigilance.

In describing his term neuroception, author Dr. Stephen W. Porges asserts “the detection of a person as safe or dangerous triggers neurobiologically determined prosocial or defensive behaviors.” When students unconsciously perceive the environment, teacher, or fellow students as threats, two possible neurobiological paths are present. One readies the student for fight, flight, or freeze strategies, while the other navigates social cues and awareness of bodily sensations to connect and adapt to the environment instead of fleeing it.

We link neuroception to Alexander Technique principles of Inhibition (non-reactivity) and Faulty Sensory Awareness (mis-calibrated proprioception/coordination). Applying examples of these somatic concepts to familiar ballet class “moments,” we aim to provide teachers tools that address student stress responses and support a class community that can counterbalance the habits of trauma.

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Gestures of Hierarchy in Ballet

Michael Landez

Abstract

Most of the research I have encountered on decolonizing ballet class in the 21st century is focused on large-scale, systemic changes to the structure of curricula, syllabi, schools, and other dance organizations that place diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at the core of the work. While this work is important and deserves praise in a contained form, I question the greater implications of invitational spaces created by instructors, facilitators, choreographers, and/or directors. My interest, therefore, is not in how the bodies relate in a gross-movement and linguistic scale, but rather in the acute gestural codes and cues that the instructor/facilitator/choreographer enacts daily. Often, these gestures are unknowingly employed in order to establish a sense of sovereignty over the students/dancers and have been passed down for generations in the name of tradition. Analysis of these gestural codes will illuminate some of the ways in which instructors may be unconsciously participating in an embodied form of non-inclusive and unjust practices in the dance studio. I speculate on the gestures that are enacted in ballet classrooms, apart from the prescribed movements of ballet technique itself, that reify the instructor's body as superior and the student as inferior. The goal of this manuscript is to enliven discussion on the format of ballet class as a democratic exchange of ideas to produce meaningful embodied knowledge in contrast to an autocratic placement of predetermined motion on a docile body.

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Ruth Page's "Modernist Turn" in Ballet Choreography, 1928–1933

Joellen Meglin and Jennifer Conley

Abstract

New York dance critic Lucille Marsh extolled Ruth Page's *Ballet Scaffolding* (1928) as "a perfect conception of the relation of the modern style of movement to the classic ballet" and "both a modern version of ballet and a ballet version of modernism. The balance was so perfectly preserved between the two that it ought once and for all to win the balletites over to the moderns and the moderns to the balletites." The Chicago ballerina and choreographer was a boundary-crosser, if ever there was one. In this presentation, we focus on Page's incorporation of modernist techniques, including the use of masks, objects, and sack-like costumes to extend the body in space, to disrupt conventional body contours, and to map out new movement possibilities. The centerpiece of our lecture-demonstration is our 2017 re-creation of Page's *Expanding Universe* (1932), performed in a "sack" reconstructed after Isamu Noguchi's original design. We also reveal archival evidence (photographs, films, costume designs) to demonstrate Page's modernist turn.

In this REVISIONIST HISTORY, we propose that, during the years 1928–1933, Page pioneered the process of incorporating modernist techniques into ballet choreography in the United States. Though trained by Anna Pavlova and Adolph Bolm, Page eagerly sought new influences, partnering with Austrian modern dancer Harald Kreutzberg and collaborating with visual artists who nudged her toward international modernism. Page's brand of ballet modernism rejected neo-classicism and embraced ballet as dance theatre, showcasing relations between the dancing body and material design, and reinforcing ballet's legacy as an intermedial art form.

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Preservationist Pedagogy: “Visibilizing” Culturally-Specific Language in Ballet Curricula.

Amanda Whitehead

Abstract

In *The African Aesthetic* (1994), Kariamu Welsh-Asante shows how two close synonyms – the words “stance” and “posture” – are actually respectively descriptive of two very contrasting aesthetic lineages. The dynamic, primed “stance” describes a body in readiness for the improvisation, and change that are emblematic of many African-derived art forms. Linear, vertical “posture,” on the other hand, describes a European-influenced body, one that stands in deference to the hierarchy and conservatism that underlie a great deal European art. This is, of course, a simplification of several hundred years of artistic and historical change, but I believe the assertion at the heart of it holds true: some of the broad truths held within any cultural tradition are revealed in the words that tradition uses to describe the human body in action.

I propose to dive into the vocabulary that acts in stewardship of Europeanist dance traditions by unpacking some of the key terms used in major ballet curricula of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I will examine the deployment of words like “posture” and “aplomb,” seeking to illuminate their very specific relationship to European aesthetic and spiritual traditions. I will also examine the universalizing language in these curricula that works to obscure their own cultural specificity: words like “natural” and “clean”. It is my great hope that a fully historicized understanding of the language ballet teachers use will help them make informed choices about both the preservation of ballet’s cultural heritage and its enrichment with other aesthetic and pedagogical approaches.

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Style, Aesthetic, and Credibility of the Black Ballet Teacher

Monica Stephenson

Abstract

The paper presentation entitled *Style, Aesthetic, and Credibility of the Black Ballet Teacher*, examines the existing scholarship primarily across the domain of education on black teaching style, black artistic aesthetic, and discourses on the ways in which expertise is determined. The scholarship that is investigated for this presentation seeks to uncover the stylistic characteristics of black teaching, the defining characteristics of black artistic aesthetic, and how expertise in a subject area is constructed. From research done on the perception of black educators in predominately white schools and universities, one can draw parallels to the challenges and experiences of black classical ballet teachers whom most often instruct in predominately white spaces. There is a direct correlation to these areas of inquiry as black ballet teachers may differ in both teaching style and artistic aesthetic from their white peers.

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Quare Dance: Fashioning a Queer, Black, Fem (me)inist Aesthetic in Ballet

Alyah Baker

Abstract

What can an intersectional lens that considers race, gender, and sexuality offer ballet in the 21st century? Historically, Black and Queer stories have been relegated to the margins of ballet history in service of eurocentric, heteronormative ideals. This paper investigates the ways Black Queer Ballerinas disrupt dominant discourses on dance and identity by moving against, through, and around oppressive structures. Grounded in the present moment and framed by a close reading of Black and Queer presences in the archive, this paper details how Kiara Felder, Audrey Malek, Cortney Taylor Key, and Alyah Baker imagine and enact new possibilities for ballet's future—possibilities that have both aesthetic and pedagogical implications. Situating these performances of Black Queer Fem(me)inity in relationship to critical race theory, Black feminist studies, Queer theory, and dance and performance studies, I argue that Black Queer Ballerinas embody a fresh perspective on what ballet (and the ballerina) is, and can be.

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