

Amy Bramlett Turner
Teaching Philosophy

Dance is a craft that allows you to lose yourself, and find yourself, all at the same time. It is my privilege to work everyday in a beautiful studio, where students come to me with their energy, their problems, their smiles, their insecurities, some with the desire to shine on stage, and others just with a desire to find a safe place of belonging. It is my job to create a safe environment where they can discover who they are, develop acceptance and respect for their peers, escape their chaotic worlds, and pass down the passion and appreciation for the art of movement. Because of my consistent commitment, experience in dance, and love for our students, I am a teacher who does whatever it takes to develop a relationship with students and teach them to reach for the stars, for there is no dream too big when you work hard to achieve it.

As a teacher of dance, my desire is to instill a passion and a hunger within my students as they grow and develop into a life-long learners who are contributing citizens of our world. By establishing a nourishing community within the classroom, students will be more likely to feel safe and confident to study and gain efficient technique, voice their own individual opinions and thoughts, and reflect about their experiences and opportunities with peers and teacher while learning the power of their own voice within the world in which we live. Although I occasionally teach elementary aged students, I have spent the majority of my teaching career planning, developing, and learning from my students in seventh to twelfth grades. I am blessed to teach in a culturally diverse school where individuality, human heritage, and different religious beliefs are valued, but opportunity is not always present. I believe this drives my desire to not only teach dance as a form of structure, routine, and safe haven for my students, but to provide opportunities through dance education that may not be available otherwise.

Through vibrant and unwavering commitment, I hope to establish and nourish this community of respect and genuine compassion within the classroom, where students feel the support and acceptance of their peers and teacher. By modeling patience, generosity, respect and culturally responsiveness, I strive to provide a safe haven for students where they can escape the chaos and negativity of their lives and discover the confidence and trust within the community.

Dance allows all students to learn about and accept themselves, their peers, and the history and cultures from around the world. I am now in my sixth year of teaching dance to 7th-12th grade students, all with diverse experience levels, backgrounds, family lives, and expectations of themselves. I work consistently to create a safe environment where students can build self-confidence, develop technique in classical and contemporary styles, build a foundation for leadership skills and community involvement, define their voice, and cultivate relationships within the studio, school and community to inspire creativity, acceptance, and appreciation of the arts. Dance is an individual art form and a team-like athletic discipline. Every day, I see students not only become more comfortable with their own bodies physically, but also more confident in themselves as artists and people. It is truly a gift to be part of their journeys for multiple years, able to watch each of them grow as individuals.

In our dance family, every student is vital to our success and students must feel that from day one. In order for students to feel comfortable enough in class to take risks, be humble enough to take critical feedback, and be vulnerable enough to become an artist, students must feel safe. By developing certain practices within the dance program, students are more likely to develop that trusting relationship with each other and myself. For example, I constantly refer to our class and program as a dance family. I refer to dancers as “family members” instead of peers. I use the #hssddancefamily on all of our social media posts, as well as on our dance program t-shirts. We establish traditions such as a circle launch and family prayer before every performance. At the end of each class and rehearsal, we stand together in a circle, palm to palm and end with a simultaneous clap. Within our pre-performance prayer, students stand together in a circle, connected by hands and standing in first position. I also say “dancers who plie together,” and they respond with a plie and say, “stay together,” meaning that dancers who physically train together not only stay in unison, but also stand up for each other and support each other in and out of the studio.

Students also have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in the form of journal prompts and written expression, or “embodied writing.” I encourage students to be constructivists, constructing knowledge out of their own experiences. From this “experience learning,” students have the opportunity to critically think, reflect, and inquire about their experiences during class and performance (Warburton 2008, pg 11). The more my students practice “embodied writing,” the more likely they are to have somatic awareness in their own bodies and movements, and develop awareness and observation skills when observing others, (Cooper 2011, pg. 55). The impact of “experience learning” and “embodied writing” taps into the psychological level of action and reaction of all students through descriptive and authentic language, while simultaneously validating the student voice needed for individual expression and encouraging community development within our dance family.

Another approach I use to facilitate a community and family-like atmosphere within our class and 7-12 dance program is the use of reflective peer coaching. This provides a vehicle to establish a culture for learning and exploration, as opposed to a suffocating room full of competition and intimidation. Through conscious language and approachability, dancers can begin to see each other and myself as a humans-imperfect, but knowledgeable and understanding-and begin to feel the “dance family” atmosphere. The relationships between students develop through peer coaching, giving students the opportunity to learn to communicate verbally about what they observe. They also reflect, and give each other feedback, as critical thinkers and respectful members of our family. “Students who practice ‘intentional watching’ actively look for ways to improve performance by considering aspects of agreed upon criteria and giving clear, immediate feedback,” (Harding, pg. 42). This ‘intentional watching’ keeps students actively engaged in the class even when they are not dancing. By having students participate in this active and intentional observation, students will undoubtedly build a relationship with other students, learn how to analyze and communicate verbally about movement on a physical and emotional level in a respectful way as well as apply and implement feedback immediately. My students are expected to exercise respectful and compassionate peer-coaching, reiterating the importance of our dance family, and training a

critical-thinking mind. The combination of self-reflection and peer-analysis, undoubtedly transforms our in-studio class into our very own dance family.

During each technique class, I challenge the physicality of each dancer with carefully constructed exercises, layering vocabulary, anatomy and imagery. As a dance teacher, I establish a consistent and progressive curriculum that scaffolds anatomically and cognitively within ballet, jazz, and modern technique class. I do believe that “practice makes permanent” when referring to the importance of dancing with full commitment and consciousness. I, therefore, stress the importance of fully committing to movement every day, requiring students to dress out and fully commit to the technique class according to our class schedule (i.e. Modern Mondays, Ballet Wednesdays, and Jazzy Fridays). In addition, I also have a strong desire to make my studio a laboratory for exploration within technique and choreography class, as opposed to merely a stage for performance. I verbally give feedback to students constantly and insist on providing scaffolding exercises because “repetition is an inherent feature of learning any movement skill, (Stanton 2011, p. 89). In this process, I may call to a student individually but include the reference, “Jamie, and several friends in this class, are having trouble executing this transition. Let’s make sure we step in front, shifting our weight forward, to better transition into the next section.” This way, students do not feel isolated, but now have clarity for transition and the confidence to try again.

In order to give relevance and lay a foundation of understanding, I also believe in the importance of integrating historical and cultural context throughout my dance class in order to give students a frame of reference. By giving students bits of cultural and historical references and context to the type of movement, students embody the style of movement with clear and authentic motivation and initiation. For example, when I explain that African movement is motivated from the life the earth provides and we, therefore, must feel the rhythms of the earth and all of creation, students understand why we must be barefoot, without shoes or socks, and then are more likely to embrace the practice. In addition, I also ask students frequently to repeat vocabulary such as ballet terminology and ask the class or individuals what the word means. When we discuss the intentionality of movement, I integrate Laban Movement Analysis to differentiate movement. By talking about the specific vocabulary used, students understand the importance of the language of the technique as well as how it effects the weight, energy, time, and space of a movement. With this questioning and open-discussion technique, students are more likely to be engaged and actively thinking about what the word means and how that translates to our body in an explicit way.

I believe that teaching dance is an honor where I can foster creative exploration by involving my students in the choreographic process with inspirations from our world of contrast, history, art, and literature. It is vital for my students to understand that they each have a voice that is important, respected, and should be heard. By integrating the creative process of choreography, my students have the opportunity to move through improvisation, creative choreographic explorations as individuals and with partners, and participate in meaningful feedback sessions that provide a system of productive and respectful communication. Liz Lerman has established the “Critical Response Process” or a series of steps that cultivates a class where the teacher and peer observe movement, spatial patterns, and other choreographic choices as a means of constructive and

informative feedback, instead of personal opinions and aesthetics that “judges” the work, (Williams 2002, pg.99). By modeling and guiding students through this process for their individual, as well as guest performance pieces, the class becomes a community where the importance of the work and its community is at its core.

“The intention is not for my voice to dominate the experience on any level; instead, as a facilitator, I offer direction in an unfolding creative process,” (Fitzgerald 2017, pg. 2). This kind of feminist pedagogical approach reiterates to students that I am a human being, equal to collaborating partners, that models understanding, flexibility, support, guidance, and equality. I am specifically interested in communicating real emotion, stories, and conflicts of social injustices through the art of movement and how to help my students communicate in an academic, artistic, and non violent way.

“*Socially Engaged Arts Practice* refers to individuals that work to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and develop the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation in order to make a difference,” (Fitzgerald 2017, pg. 3). By providing these opportunities to work through the developmental process of creating choreography and performance, students should find the reiteration that each individual is part of a whole, a member of a family, community, state, country, and world. I believe that I can empower young students by creating opportunity to create, layer, analyze, and revise choreography with underlying themes of their own concerns, fears, pain, or emotion. This kind of teaching is referred to as social justice art education, where students create “art that draws attention to mobilize action towards, or attempts to intervene in systems of inequality or injustice,” (Dewhurst, p. 7). Students who engage in this type of artistic expression must first reflect on their personal concerns within our world and how it affects their lives. Students then use poetry, visual art or other inspirations to annotate and deconstruct to create movement and choreography. By utilizing reflective practice throughout this process, students are more likely to develop meaningful dances with supportive, intentional movement and choreographic choices.

By establishing relationships between universities, organizations, schools, outreach programs, and youth groups, my students will witness the emphasis on the development of artistic skills in a living, breathing relationship with others that bridges people from all age groups, genders, nationalities, religious or financial backgrounds, and heritages. This type of relationship is key to develop a dance program that models high expectations, mentorships and opportunities for young artists, where the modeling begins with me.

Specifically to my tenure at HSSD, I engage students in our dance program by creating unique and rewarding experiences within the classroom. Professional and university programs visit as guest teachers and present their works. We travel to professional concerts, attend local workshops and produce two formal concerts per year, while performing in the community year around in collaborations such as flash mobs for Arts in the Park and Magic Screams. I bring in guest choreographers and teachers throughout the year and give students the opportunity to continue their training in summer dance camp and elementary workshops. Students are constantly part of the development of our program, as they get to run for office and be part of the National Honors Society for Dance Arts Chapter. They perform for community events such as the Youth Advisory Council, Women’s Chamber of Commerce’s Dancin’ for a Cause, Relay

for Life, the NAACP Prayer Breakfast and more. Since beginning as the dance teacher, I have brought quality dance education to my students, completed my Masters of Arts in Dance Education to continue the growth of my pedagogical approach and practices, established and directed the Hot Springs Dance Troupe, established HSWCHS as an Institution Member of the National Dance Education Organization and the first Arkansas Chapter of National Honor Society for Dance Arts, expanded the courses to include Dance I, Dance II, Dance III, Dance IV at HSWCHS, and will start an International Baccalaureate Dance Course in fall of 2019. Through tireless efforts for two years, I made it possible for the Hot Springs Dance Troupe to fundraise over \$48,000 to perform and study dance in Austria, Italy and Germany in the summer of 2018, proving no dream is too big. I also spearheaded the first annual Arkansas High School Dance Festival which brought together six high school dance programs, three universities, and several dance organizations, putting HSSD Dance on the map.

By maintaining this high set of expectations for myself as a dance educator, my students of all ages, backgrounds, experience levels and beliefs, experience a dance education that develops and feeds growing individuals as well as cultivate the next generation of dedicated artists and compassionate community members of our world. It is imperative that my students develop knowledge of their body as a working instrument through technique class, but also find the importance of their individual voice as an artist. I strongly believe that the culture of studio is one built on mutual respect, genuine love, and equality, creating a safe space for all students to grow and develop as dancers, artists, and people. Dance allows all students to learn about and accept themselves, their peers, and the history and cultures from around the world. I work consistently to create a safe environment where students can build self-confidence, develop technique in classical and contemporary styles, build a foundation for leadership skills and community involvement, define their voice, and cultivate relationships within the studio, school and community to inspire creativity, acceptance, and appreciation of the arts. Dance is an individual art form and a team-like athletic discipline. Every day, I see students not only become more comfortable with their own bodies physically, but also more confident in themselves as artists and people. It is truly a gift to be part of their journeys for multiple years, able to watch each of them grow as individuals.

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