

Bridging the Gap: Connecting Dance Studio and University Dance Communities

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Introduction

Many first year dance majors enter college with competitive studio-centered dance backgrounds and have strong communal ties to their studios and the larger competitive dance studio community. There is little doubt that the students' sense of comfort and responsibility within these communities are large factors in their accomplishments as dancers. As such, the transition into the university dance community is essential to the students' future individual successes. Yet, at the same time the shared values and traditions of competition based dance studios and college dance programs are often different.

In this paper I look at the commonalities and differences between the community of competitive dance studios and the community of university modern/postmodern based dance programs with a focus on how understanding these two environments can help ease the transition for incoming dance students and increase the likelihood of their success.

My understanding of these issues draws on my own experience learning and teaching in a competitive dance studio as well as the experiences of five university students who have similar backgrounds. I also draw upon my experiences of teaching Technique and Theory of Ballet I and Technique and Theory of Modern I classes at Arizona State University as well as the department's first year seminar course, which all first year dance major students are required to take.

Background

In previous work I have looked at how understanding dance competitions can help shed light on the goals and outlooks of adolescent dancers whose studios regularly participate as active members in the competition community.¹ To that end, I surveyed current college dance students who had competitive dance studio training to find out how they defined things such as good technique, the dancing body, and the role of gender in the context of dance competitions. For instance, the majority of students surveyed said that high extensions, strong leaps, and good turns defined good technique.

This is different from how good technique is defined in higher education, especially in programs where the emphasis is on modern or postmodern dance. Flexibility, powerful leaps, and the ability to turn are still valued. But the values of good technique grow to also include efficient and dynamic alignment and body patterning, clarity of initiations and follow through, the ability to take artistic risks, the ability to perform a wide range of dynamics, and rhythmic accuracy, to name a few.

This transition from studio training to becoming a college dance major is something that I experienced firsthand. I began training in a dance studio at the age of four and was not introduced to modern dance until I entered college. Needless to say, the values and methods of competitive studio training and teaching were ubiquitous during my childhood and adolescence and strongly flavored my outlook on dance as I entered college.

Because of my background, I find it much easier to understand the struggles, both intellectually and physically, that many first year dance majors face and this places me in a unique position to examine this transition. For example, most of my faculty colleagues at Arizona State University have had little to no direct contact with competition centered studios, yet the majority of our incoming students seem to come from competition centered studio

backgrounds. I usually get along with and connect with the first year students. I am sure that on some level my ability to empathize with their experiences as they transition from their studios into dance majors is a large factor in this connection. They are often surprised and curious when they find out that I literally grew up in a competitive dance studio and in some ways are more inspired to succeed.

Generational Attributes Related to Studio and College Dance Training

Before examining the dance characteristics of competitive studio trained dancers entering college it is helpful to look at the generational characteristics of current incoming first year college students in general to understand the wider trends within the transition of becoming a college student. In his article, “Generation Next Comes to College: Meeting the Postmodern Student,” Dr. Mark Taylor describes the characteristics of this generation of students and discusses how they relate to their successes and struggles as first time college students.² Some of the attributes Taylor observes in the current generation of college students include expecting instant gratification, being consumer oriented, entertainment oriented, close to their parents, being adaptable and pragmatic, self-interested, skeptical, cynical/distrustful, reluctant to commit, intellectually disengaged, selective risk-takers, and as highly techno-literate. Looking at how some of these traits relate to what is valued in competitive studio training and what is valued in modern/postmodern training reveals a lot about the advantages and disadvantages competitive studio trained dancers have entering into dance major programs. It appears that competitive studio training caters to these generational characteristics while college settings do not.

For example, when I teach Technique and Theory of Ballet I or Technique and Theory of Modern I, the majority of the semester focuses on finding and utilizing efficient, dynamic

alignment, primarily of the pelvis and torso. Making this adjustment is a long process. Especially at first, many students are reluctant to make this change because of the time and commitment involved (which reflects their expectations of instant gratification and commitment issues) and the level of intellectual engagement and understanding needed to truly succeed in making these changes (which reflects their intellectual disengagement). However, the biggest obstacle in the students' learning is the fact that they do not trust that this is an important change to make (because they are somewhat cynical/distrustful).

On the other hand, competitive studio dance training caters to these characteristics. Whereas in college dance programs the goals are more long term, in competitive studios the goals can appear to be more short term, such as learning a routine for the annual competitions, which feeds into the characteristic of instant gratification and commitment issues. When I was dancing (and initially teaching) at my studio I expected instant changes because the type of feedback I was given could be instantly and readily applied and did not require a high level of intellectual engagement. It is easier to wait and kick on count four instead of three than it is to maintain a neutral pelvis through out a plie phrase. Furthermore, it is easy to see the point and necessity of applying this type of feedback because, in this case, unity and precision are what win dance competitions and recognition. Students are less cynical and distrustful about working towards these goals because the real life application is everywhere from MTV to Broadway to the television show *So You Think You Can Dance*. Furthermore, the fact that this generation is also consumer and entertainment oriented with strong bonds to their parents also feeds into their success and comfort in competitive dance studios, which are businesses focused primarily on entertainment based dance forms in which the parents are frequently heavily involved. It is no wonder that the transition to training in modern dance in a college setting can be difficult.

There are also attributes of this generation that when combined with competitive studio training can help students succeed in this transition, most notably their abilities to adapt and be pragmatic, as well as their cynical nature. Taking myself as a competitive studio dancer for example, I would often learn and perform over 15 routines per year. I have no doubt that my ability to transition from a group ballet routine to a tap solo in less than 10 minutes played a large role in the versatility of dance forms that I am able to teach and perform today. Furthermore, because these students are adaptable and perform a lot of routines, their ability to pick up large movement patterns quickly is strong. I have seen this repeatedly while teaching level one ballet and modern classes at ASU. Competitive studio trained dancers can pick up the large picture of a phrase quickly, which then gives us the time to go back and address the nuances of the phrase. Because they are self-interested, they can be “go getters.” Many competitive studio students are given the opportunity to choreograph for themselves or younger students and therefore they are developing their own outlooks on dance sooner in their college careers. At ASU this semester, we had more first year students submit choreography for various concerts and showings than I can recall for any other semester, the majority of which were competitive studio trained dancers.

What is Valued in College Programs

In the ASU Department of Dance, there are guidelines for acceptance into each level of technique, which I assume are somewhat similar to many other dance departments' criteria. To be accepted into Technique and Theory of Ballet I or Technique and Theory of Modern I (the courses which the majority of first year dance majors place into) students must demonstrate: strength in the torso, feet, arms, and overall alignment; basic understanding of alignment; the

ability to move the upper body without severely displacing the lower body; safe second position plie (demi and grande). For their first year, students then work on meeting the criteria to progress to levels II in modern and ballet. Some of the criteria for acceptance into level II include: a strong sense of integration in the body; demonstrating an understanding and proper use of parallel and outwardly rotated positions; the ability to recover center and execute falls; confidence and ability to take weight into the arms. Granted, some of these criteria are specific to the aesthetics of modern and postmodern dance forms, but most can apply to all western concert dance forms including jazz and lyrical, two of the more popular competition forms.

The criteria address specific details of movement and a level of nuance that is not stressed in many of the competitive studio students' prior training. It does make sense that the level of refinement of movement should be more challenging in college. However, it is important to realize that the details we focus on in university dance, which are required for young dancers to accomplish in order to advance and mature, are completely different from their prior expectations of what makes a good dancer. Not only do we as educators need to change how they move, we need to motivate them to expand how they think about moving and in many cases what they value in movement. A junior transfer student's response to how "good" technique is defined in both a studio and in college illustrates these differences and her ability to see how they are related. According to her, in her studio good technique is defined as "high extension, control, stability, flexibility, and correct placement," while in college it is defined as "alignment, placement, control, stability, clear initiations, clear isolations, clear pathways, smooth transitions, using your full range of motion." At this point in her education, she understands how the level of nuance and detail is both different and yet related to the strengths that she brought in and valued as a first year student, although from my perspective she was initially very skeptical and

reluctant to expand her definition of good technique. Helping students to make this intellectual switch earlier in their educations would give them more confidence in their modern dancing as well as assist them in valuing and working towards long term goals.

Role of the Teacher and Pedagogical Differences

As the expectations are different in each environment, so are the teaching methods and practices of the instructors and teachers. Of the students surveyed, it seems that the most commonly perceived difference in teaching methods is the perception and definition of responsibility and the overall classroom environment. One student illustrates this when she describes the teaching methods in her competitive studio as “putting the fear of God into [the students] so that they take class seriously,” whereas in college the teachers “try to first thing build a community that is supportive, safe, sparks creativity and is basically a large gathering of those that love dance; to dance together and learn from each other and the instructor.” In my experiences, in a competitive studio setting it is primarily the teacher’s responsibility to give feedback and to improve the student’s technique. In a university setting however, teachers expect students to be responsible for the continued improvement of their technique. Of course, both of these situations exist on a continuum in which each participant has a certain level of responsibility. I have seen this frustrate many first year students – many expect the instructor to constantly remind them of the changes they need to make, and in some cases only address the changes when the instructor is specifically working with the student. Becoming self-responsible through developing an internal perspective is one of the most important changes that first year students need to make to be successful.

This is further complicated by the fact that many of the students from competitive studios were the best students at their studios and therefore probably received a lot of individual feedback and attention from an external perspective. In a situation like this, the student can become overly reliant on an outsider to provide feedback, which makes it difficult to develop the internal perspective on his/her dancing needed to mature as an artist and mover. Add in the fact that most competitive studio dance teaching is geared towards meeting a preconceived universal ideal of “good” which can be seen in the mirror and taking responsibility through developing an internal perspective is even more difficult.

The classroom hierarchy is different in competitive studios and college settings. In most competitive studios, the teacher is a clear authority figure inside the classroom who then takes on a more familiar role, similar to that of an aunt or a friend, outside of the classroom. While all of the students surveyed said that they had a good relationship with their modern dance teachers, none of them described them as friends or aunts outside of the classroom. Yet, inside the college classroom the hierarchy can be less authoritative. Some college educators, myself included, view themselves as experts in their subject matter who then facilitate the learning of that subject matter in a carefully constructed learning community instead of “putting the fear of God” in our students to get the material across.

This again is a difficult switch to make. I too was very close with my studio teacher, and did view her as a relative. She was very active in my non-studio life and was present at birthdays, graduation parties, etc. I find many students have difficulty switching out of this mind set. It is hard for them to understand that although I care tremendously about their success as dancers and that I am friendly with them my job is not to be their friend, but their teacher.

How to help the transition and help achieve success

To help competitive studio trained dancers succeed as dance majors there are a few things we can do as dance educators during their first year. First, it is important to acknowledge the students' past training and the skills that they bring with them, especially those attributes that will benefit their future dance education. A lot of first year students have very little previous knowledge of modern/postmodern dance and can be confused about how their previous training is relevant. Many of these students would be surprised to learn how Jack Cole was influenced by the modern dance pioneers or about how George Balanchine was influenced by the Broadway musical. Helping the students to see how the lines between the dance forms are blurred historically might help them to see how they can physically be blurred. It is also important to remember their kinesthetic learning attributes when planning the pacing of a class. Their ability to quickly learn material needs to still be challenged while also drawing their attention to nuance and detail.

Classroom activities need to be planned so that they not only address the development of the students' technique but that also address the skills they need to adapt to college level dance learning. Taking responsibility for their own learning in dance classes (and in non-dance classes) can be a huge adjustment. This responsibility needs to be cultivated and developed over the course of a semester. Just as there is a logical progression of difficulty movement-wise over the course of a term, there should be a logical progression of student learning responsibility too.

It is also important to remember that many of these students are just now figuring out that dance is their life, not something that they are doing to escape from life. With this in mind, it is important to stress the enjoyment level of dance (kinesthetic, musical, etc) as well as the intellectual and kinesthetic understandings. Because there is so much potential for change in the

level I classes, it is easy as teachers to forget to emphasize that dancing feels good and is fun. Ideally, it can feel good and be fun while discussing the details that will advance their technical and artistic understanding of movement.

It is equally important to explain to students what the short term and long term goals of the class are, as well as what the short and long term goals of the changes you are asking them to consider, whether they are physical, intellectual or artistic. A lot of their cynicism towards making what appear to be minute changes is because they do not understand the benefits. I had a first year student ask me this year why he should want to move efficiently. Answering this question took more work on my part but after he and his peers understood that their ranges of motion could increase, that their likelihood of injury would decrease, etc., they were more actively involved in making these changes. Again, as mentioned before, because they are unfamiliar with modern/postmodern dance they also know little about the movement values associated with this form of dance.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that our role as the teacher might be vastly different from how they perceive their teachers in their competitive studios. This is further complicated by the fact that many students are also away from home for the first time and are encountering all sorts of firsts outside of the studio as well. It is important to be open and empathetic to their experiences inside and outside of the classroom while maintaining high expectations. Only by recognizing where the students have come from and where they are currently can we help them to transition into successful college level dance students.

Conclusion

By looking at the characteristics of competitive dance studio communities and university dance communities we can begin to understand how the similarities and differences impact the successful transition of adolescent dancers into college dance majors. With further exploration of these distinctions, changes can be made to university dance curriculums, course content, and instructional techniques that promote student success in the first year. It could also influence studio training geared towards dancers who want to pursue dance in higher education. Although the communities are distinct, they are directly related. Continuing to learn about the commonalities and differences will hopefully lead to areas of overlap, which will not only strengthen the experiences of our students, but of the dance community as a whole.

References

1. Schupp K: The culture of dance competitions. Congress on Research in Dance Conference Proceedings, 2006.
2. Taylor M: Generation next comes to college: meeting the postmodern student. (Paper presented at the HLC/NCA Meeting in Chicago, IL, April 2004).