

Preparing to Teach the Dance Class

Teaching children and adults how to dance can be a most rewarding experience. Watching students master difficult physical challenges such as balance and proper body placement, or using their own creativity to choreograph and perform a dance is a joyous part of teaching dance. However, it requires hours of thought, planning, reteaching, and evaluation.

Dance teachers manage large public-school classes, dance studio classes of close friends, or community center classes filled with adult beginners. They all want their classes to run smoothly and safely so that their students have a safe environment that is conducive to learning. Determining clear rules for the dance room prevents confusion, behavior problems and possible injuries. It also enables the dance teacher to confidently manage students and classroom procedures.

Students of all ages need rules for safety when moving around each other, for respecting the participation of everyone in the class and to facilitate their own learning. Practicing predetermined rules during the first week of classes is crucial to the yearly success of the class. Therefore, it is helpful for the teacher to determine non-negotiable rules ahead of time.

Non-Negotiable Rules

Non-negotiables are rules that are the most important to the teacher and should fit well with the teacher's individual teaching style. They are rules that all students must follow, no matter how accomplished they are, how popular they are, or how much they mean to the teacher. Non-Negotiables are displayed somewhere in the dance room for as long as the classes last. This might be a semester or a whole school year. Some non-negotiables might be

- Wait until someone is finished speaking before you speak
- Address others by their name
- Use appropriate language

- Keep your hands and feet to yourself
- Dance in your spot
- Help each other
- Respect the property used by the class

Some public schools allow their students to make their own list of Non-Negotiables. This makes the students accountable to each other as well as the teacher. Some that have been used by students are

- Listen
- Finish your work
- Take it seriously
- Be on time

The most important of these can be given to adult students in a respectful and calm way. All ages benefit from an explanation of what can go wrong when dance class rules are not followed.

Entering the Dance Room

Dance class will always start with less talking and unnecessary movement when students know where to go when they come into the dance room. Elementary children in public school will not have the time or the place for changing into dancewear. However, they should always take off their shoes. These students almost always come to dance escorted by their teacher in their class lines. The line stays organized if the line leader enters the dance room and goes all the way to the other side of the room so that the line spreads out along the walls of the room. The students stop in place and remove their shoes. The shoes are left against the walls. Secondary students usually have a place to change, like a nearby bathroom, the gym locker room, or the dance room itself. After

changing they can place their belongings against the walls of the room, with the exception of the mirrors.

Dance Spots

Students should have their own dance spot in which they will warmup, learn dance technique, and stretch. After preparing for the class students will immediately come to their dance spot. Dance spots can be configured in several ways:

- *A circle on the floor.* Objects can be put on the floor which the students will sit behind when they come into the dance room. The objects can be paper shapes, wooden shapes or even items they will use that day, such as hats, scarves, ribbons, etc. This is a great start for K-1.
- *Horizontal lines* in which each student has a personal place. The teacher usually determines who sits where, especially if students are seen constantly talking with each other and need to be separated. To remember where they sit students can learn who is on either side of them or numbers can be placed on the floor for them to sit at or behind.
- *Vertical lines* can be used in large spaces like a gym or community center exercise room where the students have space to move forward and backward.
- Each line can be given a number, a letter, a color, an animal name, etc. For older students and adults, names of students can be given, such as Michael's line, Hope's line, etc.
- **Center Work**

Dance spots can actually remain the same for center work, especially if horizontal lines or vertical lines have been established. This makes for a very smooth transition into center work because the students are already where the teacher needs them to be. Students in a circle can be organized into horizontal lines by creating a front line out of the students closest to the mirror or front of the dance space, a back line out of the students closest to the back of the dance space and a middle line out

the students closest to each side of the dance space. At this point each line can be given a number, a letter, a color, an animal name, etc.

Locomotor Movements Across the Floor

Individual lines can be called to the starting corner of the locomotor exercises. Elementary students respond very well to this organization as they are already used to getting around school in lines. It is best to call the lines in order, such as line 1, then line 2, or line A, then line B. If colors or animal names are used it is best to call them in the order they were in from the front of the dance space to the back of the dance space.

The secondary grades enjoy some creative changes getting to the starting corner of the locomotor exercises. For example, the teacher could say, “Everyone wearing a blue shirt today start the line across the floor”, or “Everyone with birthdays in January, February or March, start the line across the floor.” Sometimes the students can be called with July, August, September to start the line. Other ideas to use are students whose first or last names start with A, B, C and D, students whose street names start with S or T, students whose favorite color is blue, red, yellow, etc. This approach requires that the students listen during the transition instead of losing focus and talking with each other on their way to the line.

The End of Class

Students return to their dance spots for a cool down. The teacher calls them using any of the examples given above or creates new ways of calling the students. The same process is repeated for the students to return to their shoes or other belongings so that they can change back into street wear.

When dance teachers establish clear dance class rules and enforce them consistently, students feel respected and safe. They are able to concentrate on their personal and creative achievements. A smoothly operating dance class enables teachers to concentrate on student participation and progress and a fulfilling, rewarding experience is had by all. A lesson plan for teaching the first dance class is the starting place for connecting students through experiencing the structure, learning process, and the expectations for the dance class.