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**“Motivating and Evaluating Growth in Ballet Technique”**

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***Wiggle Genius note:*** *This article was published in 2012 but I believe retains its relevance today. There has been a long-standing argument in the arts that creativity, performance, and individual artistry is too difficult to assess or is inappropriate to assess, but I have long felt that anything that is taught and answers to stated objectives in instruction must absolutely also be able to be evaluated both objectively and clearly. This article makes an argument for the ability to do that in dance, no matter what is being taught, and thus applies to integrated dance instruction if the defense of assessing movement in instruction is needed. I also include references to established researchers in the areas of dance integration and assessment. I encourage teachers to share this article in support of advocating for this type of artful instruction being officially adopted by their school, district, and state as an alternative or additional way to teach effectiveness in teaching and the essential inclusion of artful instruction in the K12 classroom.*

I have long believed that an essential part of good teaching practices is the development and utilization of quality assessment tools. If objectives state our destination, then assessments confirm our arrival. By beginning with the end in mind, it is possible to clearly define and effectively guide students in their artistic and educational pursuits, no matter how unique their individual journey may prove to be or how tangible the movement goal. Rubrics in particular do this well. While objectively and specifically evaluating student success in learning, a quality rubric also clearly articulates expectations, can motivate the student to strive for the highest standards, and promotes collaboration, critical thinking and reflection in the learning process. Research conducted on this topic confirms that “assessment is a central element of the (effective) teaching process,” (Stronge, 55). When embedded in a diversity of ways in classroom instruction, rubrics foster deeply engaged students who are proactive, responsible and inspired in their learning and can (and do) claim their accomplishments with great pride. I have found this to be particularly true in the instruction of ballet technique (and at all levels) in K-12 Middle and High School dance programs.

Ballet can initially be an intimidating dance form to learn and is considered by many young dancers to be the “vegetable” of dance – the less initially accessible dance technique that, just like eating a carrot over a slice of cake, is a necessary but not preferred choice in their dance training. As a former professional ballet dancer and a lover of ballet, I sought a means to inspire more than this in even the most inexperienced ballet dancer. Through the incorporation of rubrics and comprehensive and creative instruction done in support of them, I strove to create a ballet classroom experience where enjoyment and discovery defined learning as much as the inherent rigor and challenges of the dance form. Gilbert reinforces the importance of this: “When students are emotionally engaged, they not only want to return to class but also learn more and remember more,” (Gilbert, 12). For the above stated benefits and more, I have found that a ballet curriculum that centralizes the use of rubrics is more interactive, enjoyable and successful. Because rubrics demystify what “meeting expectations” entailsin the student’s ballet training and concurrently helps them to set and work towards concrete goals, they feel equipped and empowered to achieve. Setting high expectations for students respects the learner and fosters a sense of responsibility for not only their talent but the development of it. The inclusion of quality assessment tools to inform, motivate, and evaluate learning is a means to accomplish this. More often than not, it also engenders a commitment to excellence and a positive spirit in students.

I began developing a rubric to accomplish the above objectives by initially outlining the skills, knowledge and professional dispositions I considered essential benchmarks for each level of ballet. Within the first two categories I articulated the ballet steps and supporting concepts specifically needed in the areas of technique and performance. Finally, I worked to disseminate my expectations for how the student approached and contributed to the learning process (professionalism). The areas listed under each of these three overarching categories were based on the defined exit competencies for each level of ballet (a document that details benchmarks students must achieve based on state and national dance education standards). I assigned and defined a points scale to make clear different levels of achievement in each area. For example, a “10” is something that happens all the time, without exception, and is correct, efficient and exemplary in execution. An “8” is meeting high expectations, where consistency is demonstrated and cognitive understanding is evident and informs execution. I purposely limited my points scale range from 10 – 6, with the “6” indicating a student who is still developing and working to achieve consistent and proper execution in the identified area. I did this for two reasons: to encourage students to not fall short of basic stated expectations (if they do, this also indicates that they may be placed in the wrong ballet level), and to give the rubric a positive tone. In the end, I included 14 areas under technique, 5 skills and concepts under performance, and 6 dispositions under professionalism. I named this rubric a “growth grade” and created one for each level (beginning, intermediate and advanced) of ballet. For each level of ballet, instead of changing the categories or areas being assessed, I adjusted the weight (total possible points) assigned to each. This allowed me to emphasize different things at different levels. For example, in advanced ballet, a student’s performance abilities are addressed in greater detail and more essential to success as they work towards personal artistry. In beginning ballet, alignment, accuracy and qualities of movement are the focus. I shifted the rubric’s points to reflect these stages of development and the areas that most define them. The growth grade rubric is worth 250 points. This translated to roughly 25% of their overall grade in ballet, effectively balancing out the influence of supporting written and creative work, and points typically given for attendance and daily student participation.

The growth grade rubric is used in a multiplicity of ways in the instructional process. Above all, it is a constant and malleable vehicle for feedback. For example, at midterm, the student uses it to self-reflect and self-evaluate their personal progress and as a basis for effective goal setting. As the instructor, I use the rubric to affirm successes and identify ongoing areas of potential through the year and in the end to make level assignments and determine grades. From the beginning of instruction -- where the rubric is distributed, discussed and disseminated along with course assignments and expectations -- to the end of the course when students are evaluated on their progress, the growth grade rubric expands and facilitates learning.

The growth grade rubric is particularly effective for the dancer who is new to ballet. At this stage, dancers are still learning the “language” of ballet (i.e. plie) along with the key concepts that help them to perform these accurately (i.e. alignment). In support of teaching the “basics,” I give an assignment titled “Imagery Presentations,” that requires the student to research an assigned ballet term or concept (identified in the growth grade rubric) and find a physical representation of this to share with the class. In their brief presentation to the class, the student compares their “prop” to the given ballet step/concept and explains how their prop demonstrates this clearly in action. A terrific example of this from a beginning ballet class was a student who brought in a toaster and a piece of toast and compared maintaining proper pelvic placement in a grand plie to not burning the toast on one side or another. These presentations are always creative and fun for the students to do, and add to the class’ collective resource of images while simultaneously defining the areas in the rubric.

An example of potential collaborative instructional possibilities (between peers) of this rubric, is “partner week.” During this unique unit, I initially teach a set ballet class to all students that they are charged to retain. On the second day, one dancer watches while the other takes the set class. On the third day, they switch roles. The observing student gives detailed feedback, using the growth grade rubric, to the dancing student. For each combination, specific feedback is written for each combination and at the end of the class, the pair work together to assign scores on the growth grade rubric. I have found that having the student adopt the role of “teacher” requires critical thinking, deepens knowledge, and fosters new insights and connections to other dance forms. The student being observed and evaluated in such a focused way, knows exactly what to work on to improve in ballet. In large classes, where a sole instructor can’t address every student individually in every class, this is particularly appreciated and effective. It is also a proven fact that students who are involved in the learning process retain more knowledge (Sousa, 42). An unexpected result of this process was students feeling connected to and trusting of their peers in new ways, thus feeling safer (in terms of taking necessary risks) and more supported in the classroom.

While the above instructional approaches and assignments focus primarily on technique, I also address the development of performance using the growth grade rubric in partnership with novel teaching strategies. For example, when teaching students about musicality, I will use alternative music (i.e. rock and roll) as accompaniment to inspire more obvious dynamics and more diverse phrasing. To coach projection of energy so essential to finding stability, expressivity, and length in ballet, I will put glitter on the top of each dancer’s head, the bottom of their shoes, the palm of each hand and on their sternum. Throughout class I ask them to let these areas “shine” and project energy out into the space. Both of these areas are referred to and assessed in the growth grade rubric. Students are responsive to these “creative ways” of helping them grasp the steps and concepts of ballet more deeply. I find it also answers to the many diverse types of learners and dancers in the room, and contribute significantly to the students’ enjoyment of class. Like all dance forms, ballet is learned through repetition and practice, however, this can become predictable which many times can result in the student disconnecting and losing focus and/or intrinsic motivation in the learning process. By utilizing “unexpected” methods in combination with necessary traditional training in ballet, and in conjunction with a rubric that validates and rewards this process and eventual abilities gained, this student tendency can be thwarted.

In the most traditional way, this rubric is used to assess a student’s overall abilities in ballet. In support of this, students learn a final ballet assessment phrase. Depending on their level in ballet, this assessment phrase is a combination of given movement phrases learned throughout the term (beginning ballet) or the restaging of an actual ballet variation (intermediate and advanced ballet). This final performance is designed to give equal weight to the student’s technical and performance skills, stressing the integration of both and answering to the growth grade rubric as a whole. A specific rubric is created to evaluate this final performance, and is based directly on the growth grade rubric categories. At the same time, I grade the student’s overall progress during the term and current abilities using the growth grade rubric. Final assessment phrase and growth grade rubrics measure student accomplishments and also identify “where from here” feedback to motivate ongoing learning and motivation towards achieving the highest standards possible in their ballet training. I copy and file each student’s growth grade rubric for future reference when planning for their further instruction in ballet.

Aside from the various benefits and applications of the growth grade rubric in direct instruction and evaluation of the student, this rubric can be a clear and measurable way to communicate students’ progress with parents. Data aggregated from this rubric can also be used to show the effectiveness of the teacher’s instructional strategies and the relevance of course content and its fulfillment of stated district, state and national dance education benchmarks and standards. In today’s educational environment where “proof” of these things is emphasized to ever increasing degrees, this “evidence” is valuable, and can be submitted in support of funding, staffing and advocacy efforts demanded of the dance program.

Experience has taught me that the use of rubrics and presenting information in ballet in creative ways that support their full integration in the learning process, can transform the ballet class. Above all, this approach fosters an interactive classroom where the student and the teacher work together to achieve a greater understanding and appreciation of ballet. Ballet is no longer the dance form to be “endured,” but becomes a class that students anticipate, are invested in, and benefit greatly from. It was my intention in this article to share this information so it can be tailored to and serve any dance program, so our collective efforts and successes will continue to propel dance to its rightful place as an essential subject of study in all K-12 schools.

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**DAN 202 Growth Grade Fall 2012**

**Dancer \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Technical Skills & Knowledge**

Use of plie 10 9 8 7 6

(depth, resiliency, power)

Articulation of the feet 10 9 8 7 6

(brushing, closings, weight)

Alignment of the spine 10 9 8 7 6

(plumb line, verticality in action)

Use of rotation in legs and pelvis 10 9 8 7 6

(barre, centre, locomotor, non-locomotor)

Use of port de bras 10 9 8 7 6

(placement and movement through all positions)

Coordination & connectivity 10 9 8 7 6

(upper to lower, front to back, core to limbs)

Use of weight (ballet aesthetic) 10 9 8 7 6

Degree of athleticism & fitness 10 9 8 7 6

(strength, cardiovascular)

Range of motion & extensions 10 9 8 7 6

(flexibility, 45 degrees in all directions)

Qualitative range of movement 10 9 8 7 6

(dynamics as dictated by ballet steps)

Foot & arm positions; body directions 10 9 8 7 6

Ability to retain & reverse combinations 10 9 8 7 6

Pirouettes 10 9 8 7 6

(all directions and types, singles)

Jumps and elevations 10 9 8 7 6

(petit & grand allegro)

Spatial awareness 10 9 8 7 6

(general & personal space)

**Performance Skills & Knowledge**

Use of focus & projection of energy 10 9 8 7 6

Phrasing & use of transitions 10 9 8 7 6

Expressivity 10 9 8 7 6

Use of breath 10 9 8 7 6

(to motivate & fulfill movement)

**Disposition & Professionalism**

Dedication to training & the learning process 10 9 8 7 6

(apparent work outside of class, finding connections

between written, technical & performance work)

Positive and open attitude; collaborative spirit 10 9 8 7 6

Willingness & ability to risk ` 10 9 8 7 6

Ability to set, pursue & achieve appropriate 10 9 8 7 6

personal goals (self-motivation & assessment)

Ability to appropriately receive, apply 10 9 8 7 6

& retain corrections (personal & general)

Dedication to class community 10 9 8 7 6

(investment in & encouragement of others,

reliable presence & valuable contributor)

**Comments:**