

Teaching Philosophy- Kelly Hirina

“Action isn’t just the effect of motivation, it’s also the cause of it.”¹

-Mark Manson

Once an individual has committed to study dance, it is clear they love it. In my classroom, it is important that the learning process does not dilute this passion. It is a source that sustains the exhausting rigor needed each day to step onto the dance floor as a professional, possibly through pain, failure or an arduous rehearsal process. Building expertise in performance is necessary to become a professional dancer, but when this becomes the main focus in training, it breeds a mindset focused solely on appearance, performance and execution. I find importance in creating a balance between focused work and play. This helps the dancer relieve stress, anxiety and identity-based criticism and helps them to grow. A main focus of my teaching method is to support the students developing their intrinsic motivation. My aim is to encourage the students to take more responsibility in their learning process. Post-graduation, as dance entrepreneurs, these skills are necessary to maintain their level of artistry.

I want the students to participate mentally in evaluating, examining and analyzing the practice. During the class, I ask questions, seeking the students’ perspectives; What are they experiencing in their attempt? Did the execution seem successful or are they struggling? Which tools would help improve the particular movement or task we are working on? By offering tools and time to reflect, the discourse helps students develop metacognitive skills and helps them realize the process will be different for each individual student. The benefit of creating an environment where the students become empowered thinkers/dancers, is a space where students feel safe to remain open to new ideas, failures, tests and play. It is my work to create this space and continue to offer challenging material for the students to experience. Incorporating tools to be applied to the work, rather than striving for an ideal body/choreography, they develop as individual artists with an opinion that matters. The students gain a toolbox to be autonomously inspired artists, not depending on external sources of inspiration as they engage with the dance community and move beyond the classroom into the field of dance.

My goal for the students is to have them build appreciation for the process of learning rather than end gaining.² My aim is to stimulate their curiosity in investigating where artistry lies in dance and performance rather than making shapes or trying to impress others with tricks. The techniques I teach, Countertechnique and Double Skin/Double Mind, are designed to help dancers manage or prevent injuries. Through the process, they learn to appreciate and accept their bodies while simultaneously demanding more from them and see that in order to achieve a goal, one must create smaller goals/steps along the way. Goals driven by process, or mastery of a skill, place value on effort rather than demonstrating an ability or seeking validation.³ This approach increases a communal support rather than a competitive environment as the work lies in one’s personal process rather than comparison.

¹ Manson, Mark (2016). *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, San Francisco, CA: HarperOne

² Brophy, Jere (2010). *Motivating Students to Learn: Third Edition*. New York, NY: Routeledge.

³ Elliot, A.J., Dweck, Carol & Yeager, D.S. (Eds.) (2017). *Handbook of competence and motivation, theory and application: Second Edition*. New York, NY: Guilford Publications.

I incorporate note taking into my dance classes as I feel breakthroughs and tools are often lost when we have no time to document these moments. The students are required to have notebooks ready and are free to leave the dance floor to document these aha moments when an individual feels it is necessary for their development or to track their progress. Through this process, I help to make the students aware of how their efforts, even what they initially see as ‘failure’, reveals new possibilities. I want the dancers to value *improvement* rather than *prove* their technical and artistic abilities. At the beginning of the semester, students complete psychological and physical profiles to help them get a better understanding of how they engage in all three areas- training, rehearsal and performance as well as reconnect to why they dance.⁴ In one-on-one meetings, we review these profiles and discuss their personal goals for the semester.

My evaluation method does not stem from students demonstrating or executing a successful combination of movements. I evaluate them on their progress and participation. How are they executing what is required of them? Are they putting in the effort? Are they present physically and mentally? Have they grown as a dancer? Alongside the physical participation, the dance student is required to verbally explain the tools they have learned. As a collaborative evaluation process, I meet each student privately to discuss how they progressed in relation to their initial goals as we review the notes and aha moments recorded throughout the semester. After they communicate their reflection, I express my view on their engagement in class and give specific feedback for them to focus on in the following semester. Students communicate their surprise in how the act of documenting their progress makes them more aware and focused in their work.

In order to accommodate different ways of learning in my classroom I try to involve the students in multiple ways. I first demonstrate the movement material they are to learn supporting the visually oriented student. While demonstrating, I offer verbal information and details of the exercises to keep the auditory students focused and engaged. I employ repetition in practice so that the experiential learner has time to digest and execute. The structuring of a class and the week’s development is carefully constructed so that the movement phrases develop to alleviate boredom, but also sustain familiarity so less time is needed learning movements. This allows more time for practice, reflection and observation. Students have expressed that I am a caring teacher that is available to assist as needed but also holds them accountable. They explain that class time is used efficiently and effectively and that my preparation and organization helps them approach more difficult content.

Though the ultimate goal of a professional dancer lies in the execution of the performance, my teaching method encourages dance students to value the entire process and build a deeper appreciation for learning. With dance’s historical reputation of functioning in a highly critical and competitive environment, I aim to create a fun learning environment in which students create incremental goals that are specific and moderately challenging as these often lead to higher performance outcomes.⁵ I am influenced by how the cyclical nature of the relationship between the person, environment, and behavior are considered within the dance studio and aim for this to be reflected in my teaching practice.

⁴ Taylor, Jim & Estanol, Elena (2015). *Dance Psychology for Artistic and Performance Excellence*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

⁵ Schunk, D.H., Meece, J.L. & Pintrich, P.R. (2013). *Motivation in Education: Theory, Research, and Application: Fourth Edition*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill Prentice-Hall.