
Standing on the Shoulders of a Young Giant

How Dance Teachers Can Benefit From Learning About Positive Psychology

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Dancers often endure long hours of physical exertion and push their bodies to extreme limits in order to advance technically. The importance of physical health and fitness is not news to dancers and dance educators; however, psychological health and well-being are not discussed as much, yet play a crucial role in dancers' lives. This article will suggest ways in which dance teachers can help their students achieve optimum psychological well-being by utilizing research in positive psychology, a relatively new field that we believe has great relevance to dance.

Dance psychology typically looks to sport psychology for evidence and inspiration, but we suggest that a new emerging giant of a field, namely positive psychology, is another useful source. Therefore, this article will briefly introduce three positive psychology topics: *self-determination*, *creativity*, and *flow*. With an understanding of some key terms and how to apply them in class, teachers may be able to nurture healthy intrinsic motivation and thereby raise self-esteem and lower body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, by focusing on psychological factors that underlie excellence in performance, such as flow and creativity, instructors may be able to help their students reach higher levels of achievement.

Self-Determination: Nurturing Autonomous Dancers

Dancers often compare themselves to their peers. While such comparison may serve as motivation to work harder and promote friendly competition for some, it can also create unnecessary pressure.¹ Common psychological issues that dancers may face as a result include low self-esteem, high levels of anxiety (about their bodies and about performing), and problems with body dissatisfaction and eating.^{2,3} Fortunately, however, there are simple tools at our disposal that can help dance teachers minimize such problems. These focus on nurturing dancers to become **self-determined**. Self-determination is defined as a state of thriving reached when needs for *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* are fulfilled.⁴ *Autonomy* is experienced when a dancer takes part in dance out of free will and finds mean-

ing and purpose in the activity. *Competence* is when dancers feel that they have the necessary skills to accomplish tasks effectively—in other words, they do not feel incompetent. Lastly, *relatedness* occurs when dancers form social relationships and feel a sense of belonging.^{4,5} Research shows that dancers who feel that their teachers provide *autonomy support* (e.g., supplying rationale; being democratic) and *relatedness support* (e.g., treat dancers as people, not “performance machines”) are also more self-determined.⁵ In turn, more self-determined dancers report higher levels of self-esteem, as well as lower levels of worry and dislike about their bodies. Given that other research suggests that dancers often suffer from low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and eating problems,^{2,3} the dance environment could perhaps benefit from supporting dancers *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* more directly. What follows are some guidelines for how this might be done.

1. *Autonomy*. The first step is to help students feel in control of their learning so that they gain a sense of autonomy and link it to their individual goals. This starts *before* the class: it is important that dancers dance out of choice rather than because they feel like they must. Choices should also be incorporated into each class, further supporting autonomy. For example, after teaching a piece of choreography or a combination, let dancers decide on different ways in which it could be performed. The need to attach meaning and purpose to an activity is also crucial, so justify *why* exercises are done the way they are. Teachers could also try suggesting that the dancers perform small routines with an emotion attached to a memorable situation (“Remember a time when you were truly excited about something. Now, dance the piece with that same emotion”).
2. *Competence*. One way in which instructors can support a sense of competence for all students is by emphasising **effort** over **talent**. It is easy to praise those students who have mastered a skill; however, those who do not achieve mastery as quickly as others may feel left out, having received no recognition for their efforts.

Teachers should therefore emphasize the importance of effort; because effort is controllable, this will help all students feel that improvement (and competence) is within their reach.

3. *Relatedness*. Humans are social animals, and sensing that they are among friends will help dancers to feel good, take risks, and put in effort with a sense of joy and camaraderie. Thus, emphasize cooperation within groups that vary in size and nature, and give dancers a chance to get to know each other – and the teacher!

An emphasis on democracy over autocracy, effort over talent, and on collaboration over rivalry will encourage healthy forms of motivation whereby dancers are focused on the artistic process and on improving themselves, rather than on end results and on outdoing others. It is even the case that very talented dancers do better with feedback centered on factors within their control, such as effort.⁶ Why? This is likely due to feeling in control and in charge of one's improvement. Because the very word *talent* is typically seen as something we cannot control (i.e., "you either have it or you don't"), some dancers worry even in response to comments that are meant as positive feedback.⁶ Even if they feel flattered upon being told that they are talented, they may worry that the talent only goes so far and is something they cannot work to improve. All of this contributes to a dancer feeling out of control. Far better, then, to give all dancers feedback focused on what to work on and the joy of dancing, rather than on faults, problems and other people. This intrinsic focus is essential for allowing things like creativity and flow to occur.

Creativity: Nurturing Freedom of Expression Within the Dance Setting

Traditional dance teaching has emphasized the importance of discipline and compliance with the instructor. Dancers practice and repeat the same steps and sequences time and time again in an effort to reach an ideal, and many schools implement set programs based on a specific syllabus, with rigorous examinations. But in parallel to this emphasis on discipline and rigor, *creativity* is a valued characteristic in dance, and the foundation for choreography and artistry. Creativity theorists suggest that talented young people are nonconformists and independent thinkers, with one author describing 'the creative personality' as "...*independent, nonconformist, unconventional, even bohemian, and they are likely to have wide interests, greater openness to new experiences, a more conspicuous behavioral and cognitive flexibility, and more risk-taking boldness.*"⁷

How can teachers reconcile the seemingly contradictory sets of attributes of creativity and discipline? Fortunately, we may not have to choose; it has been suggested that creativity is best nurtured within a setting that *does* provide rules and a domain with skills to be mastered – but it does so in an open-minded way, with a focus on learning over the achievement of a specific outcome, choice within the boundaries (e.g., of the syllabus), and avoidance of a strict authoritarian approach.⁸

To nurture creativity teachers may want to look at including more improvisation and choice of movement in their classes. Although dancers sometimes feel intimidated by improvisation, as though they are putting themselves on display, there are ways of making dancers feel comfortable while allowing them to explore creative movement. Specifically, you may want to use *structured improvisation*, setting specific guidelines and frameworks for the dancers to explore. An example is the simple idea of using a specific body part to lead you around the room, using different levels in the space. Similarly, the teacher may want to come up with a situation (e.g., getting changed in the morning; meeting a person you admire for the first time) and encourage dancers to explore the many ways this can be expressed, using different movement qualities and tempos, gestures and facial expressions. Such 'freedom within limits' complies with recommendations from self-determination research⁸ for how to support dancers' autonomy. By giving choice to the dancers teachers are respecting individuality and stimulating creative thinking. Having a clear knowledge of what is expected while also feeling competent and in charge of one's own expressions are concepts that are part of the *flow* experience.

Flow: Nurturing Dancers Toward Optimal Experiences

When dancing is at its best, dancers lose themselves in the moment, becoming one with the sensation and experience. This psychological state, called flow, is characterized by deep concentration and the feeling of going onto autopilot.⁹ This is a desired state for dancers because while in flow, movements are performed naturally and with ease, enjoyment is high, and there is no self-consciousness standing in the way of self-expression. It is typically what performers describe as the best moments in their activity.⁹ One of the main elements that must be present for flow to occur is that the *skill level* should match the *challenge level* for that specific activity. This means that dancers who are being asked to repeat skills over and over without specific feedback on how to improve or express themselves artistically are likely to get bored (*skill* being greater than perceived *challenge*), while dancers pushed too far out of their comfort zone are likely to get anxious (*skill* being perceived as insufficient for the *challenge*). Either way the flow experience is unlikely to occur, as is optimal performance. It may be difficult to create lesson plans that enhance the potential for every student to experience flow, as oftentimes dancers at a variety of levels are training together. Teachers who are faced with this challenge may want to include modifications for each exercise so that those who are not challenged enough have something more to work on while students who find some exercises too difficult may work at a more comfortable pace for their skill level. Teachers can also encourage their students to come up with progressions themselves, and get them to help each other by working in pairs. Clear feedback focused on *what to do to improve* (in learning situations) and on *the intrinsic experience of movement and communication*

with an audience (in performance situations) will also make flow more likely. Hence, try to tell dancers what to focus on in order to get things right rather than simply telling them what they are doing wrong. It is also clear that dancers will only achieve flow if they feel comfortable – that is, they have a sense of competence and self-esteem, and are not feeling overly anxious or self-conscious. Therefore, it stands to reason that more self-determined dancers (who dance because they want to, feel competent doing so, and have a sense of meaningful belonging) will be more likely to reach flow.

Acknowledgment

This article stems from a conference presentation made at IADMS in 2007. Nordin SM, McGill A. *Standing on the Shoulders of a New Giant: How dance teachers can benefit from learning about positive psychology*.¹⁰ However, while that presentation focused on how positive psychology may inspire research in dance, this article focuses on implications for dance teaching.

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