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# Body Image and Mirror Use in the Ballet Class

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**M**irrors have long been used as teaching tools in ballet instruction and have proven to be a potent element in affecting perceptual attitudes toward body image. Body image is the perception, thoughts, and feelings we have about our bodies.<sup>1</sup> A dancer's personal vision of her body image is an important part of her psychological health and well-being and can help or hinder her dance performance in the studio.<sup>2</sup>

Several dance studies have shown that heightened self-consciousness can contribute to the development of negative body image.<sup>3,4</sup> Mirrors have the ability to entice individuals to see themselves externally as objects, and imagine how others view them in comparison to other dancers. This heightened self-consciousness may have a positive or negative psychological influence on the dancer, depending upon other individual and classroom factors such as technical difficulty of the dance phrase, experience level of the dancer, and degree of stress experienced when learning a phrase. Overall, researchers have concluded that mirror reflections of self, teacher, and other students affected students' body image and level of distraction.

In a series of studies, Radell and colleagues set out to answer the following questions about mirror use: 1) How does the use of the mirror in dance class affect a student's body image? 2) Does the technical level of a dancer affect how a dancer perceives his or her body image when using a mirror? 3) What are dance students' preferences and opinions regarding the use of mirrors in the studio?

In a 2002 study, Radell and associates<sup>5</sup> compared changes in body image of women college ballet dancers who trained in front of mirrors with ballet dancers who trained without mirrors. The study used the Cash Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ)<sup>6</sup> to measure changes in a dancer's body image. For dancers

taught without mirrors, there was a significant increase in satisfaction with the appearance of different parts of their bodies. The dancers taught with mirrors, on the other hand, experienced significant dissatisfaction with the appearance of their body parts. In summary, these results show that the use of mirrors in the ballet studio may negatively affect dancers' body image.

In a subsequent 2004 study, Radell and colleagues<sup>2</sup> looked at the relationship between level of performance of dancers and their use or non-use of a mirror in the classroom. Technical performance skills were assessed using the Radell Evaluation Scale for Dance Technique (RESDT) which involved a videotaped evaluation process of dancers performing two phrases at the beginning and end of the semester. Two ballet teachers independently viewed the videotapes to evaluate the dancers' rhythmic accuracy, ease and flow of movement, and mastery of steps and alignment, and rated the students' skill level on a scale of 1-5. For analysis purposes, students whose scores averaged three or higher were categorized as "high performers," and those who averaged less than three were "low performers." These teachers had no knowledge during the evaluation process of which dancers were from the mirrored or non-mirrored class. They reported that higher skilled students performing without mirrors experienced a significant increase in body image scores, while similar higher performing students taught with mirrors had decreased body image scores. Overall, it appears that the effect of mirrors on dancers' body image may be dependent on varying factors such as performance skill level, comparison of self to others, and level of material taught. The effect is fluid in nature, with various factors overlapping and potentially influencing each other.

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## Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to further explore the dynamics of the interaction between body image and the mirror by using a research design that included the body image questionnaire (MBSRQ) and the Radell Qualitative

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Questionnaire(RQQ).<sup>2</sup> This qualitative questionnaire was used to assess dancers' perceptions of dancing with and without mirrors, and to elicit additional perceptions of the ballet experience that may have influenced the dancers' class participation and affected their perception of their body image. In addition, technical performance skills were assessed to identify students as either high or low performers.

This study utilized two classes of twenty-three females enrolled in beginning ballet classes. One group was taught using mirrors, and the second group was taught without mirrors. Both classes were taught the same movement material by the same instructor. Students completed the Body Image Questionnaire during the first and last classes of a 14-week semester. In addition they completed the qualitative questionnaire on the last day of the course. The questionnaire was designed to gain further insight into how the use or non-use of the mirror affected each dancer's body image, grasp of concepts presented, and enjoyment of the class. Sample questions included: "Was your body image affected by not having (or having) a mirror in the classroom?" "Did the absence (or presence) of a mirror in the classroom affect your enjoyment of this class?" "Did the absence (or presence) of a mirror affect your grasp of the concepts taught?" and "Do you prefer having class taught without (or with) a mirror?"

### Results from the Radell Qualitative Questionnaire (RQQ)

The student's own perceptions of mirror use from the qualitative questionnaire ranged widely. The following points include both summarized responses and individual quotes from students in the mirror class:

- 85.7% of dancers commented that the use of mirrors influenced their understanding of the concepts taught.
- 90.5% of dancers preferred having class taught with mirrors.
- Many students felt the mirror helped them see their alignment, thus aiding them in correcting it.
- Some students reported that the mirror helped them understand movement concepts better.
- Two dancers acknowledged that they used the mirror to compare themselves with others in the studio, including the instructor.
- Four dancers reported that the mirror made them feel badly about their body image, or that it led them to the perception that they were fat.
- "Sometimes you don't want to always look in the mirror.... It's [use of mirror] essential for ballet to see if one is improving and doing everything properly."
- "It was fun seeing myself look like a ballerina."
- "A mirror shows what I can't see or feel."

The following are both summarized responses and individual quotes from students in the non-mirror class, which were more varied:

- 55% of the dancers reported that the absence of mirrors

- influenced their understanding of the concepts taught.
- 47.6% of dancers preferred having class taught without a mirror.
- Several students acknowledged that visual feedback would have allowed them to see themselves dance, and thus correct their mistakes or evaluate their alignment and progress.
- One student (who had studied dance previously with a mirror), commented that the mirror would have helped her with "grace and flow."
- Two students reported they had no preference regarding the use of the mirror in class.
- Several students remarked that the absence of a mirror allowed them to "feel" the movement in their body.
- "I was looking forward to dancing in front of a mirror. However, it [lack of a mirror] does offer more freedom for expression and enjoyment during the class because I'm not self-conscious."
- Several students commented that mirrors can be distracting, and there was less self-criticism and stress in the studio without mirrors.
- "If I were serious about learning ballet, I would want a mirror."
- "I'd rather not look at my body. The instructor's comments were probably more accurate than my own critiques."
- Several students commented that while they preferred a non-mirrored environment, an occasional use of one would be helpful.

It is clear that the student's experience in a mirror versus non-mirror class is different and varies between individuals.

### Results from Body Image Questionnaire (MBSRQ)

Three findings of particular interest are presented here and are discussed in terms of the students' technical performance levels and perceptions of mirror versus non-mirror use.

*High performing dancers in the non-mirrored class made significant increases in body image satisfaction, as compared to those in the mirrored class who noted smaller increases.*

These findings corroborate our previous work,<sup>2,5</sup> which found that students performing without mirrors experienced increased satisfaction with body appearance. Therefore, it could be that dancing without the mirror, for the high performers, encourages them to be less self-critical and thus feel more satisfied with their bodies. There were some comments from the non-mirror class (by students who had used mirrors in previous dance classes) that reinforced the negative aspects of using a mirror. These students indicated that mirrors can be distracting, and there was less self-criticism and stress in the studio without mirrors.

*Satisfaction with overall appearance decreased for high performing dancers in the mirrored class.*

Perhaps the mirror drew attention to the high perform-

ers' sense of awareness, or self-consciousness, to the extent that they became critical of their body image. This finding is reinforced by several comments from students in the mirror class, including an acknowledgement from some that they used the mirror to compare themselves physically with others in the studio. Several other students stated explicitly that the mirror made them feel badly about their bodies.

*Low performing students in the mirror class decreased in how much they worried about their weight and significantly increased in how satisfied they felt with their appearance. Low performers in the non-mirror class, on the other hand, reported significant increases in how much they worried about their weight.*

These results are inconsistent with our previous studies,<sup>2,5</sup> and may perhaps be understood within the context of the learning process investigated by Kimmerle and Côté-Laurence,<sup>7</sup> who found that learning among dancers is based on dance experience. Beginning dancers, for example, have a less developed ability to perceive, retain, and self-correct dance information than students with more experience in the dance studio. Because low performers had yet to sharpen their skills enough to perceive the full spectrum of their dance capabilities, they may have been less self-critical than higher level performers, and thus more satisfied with their overall appearance. The more experienced dancers have developed their abilities to observe, evaluate, and constructively use the “kinesthetic feedback” provided by their bodies, thus fine-tuning their performance over time. When they gaze into the mirror, higher performing dancers may become more critical of their performance than the lower performing students, who have a less developed ability to evaluate themselves technically.

Indeed, the less cultivated ability of the low performers to detect their technical mistakes,<sup>7</sup> coupled with perceived expectations about the mirror, may have influenced them to find the study of ballet incomplete without mirrors. The mirror may have induced them to perceive themselves as “living” the full ballet experience, and thus reinforced their illusion of the “perfect” ballet class, enabling them to feel more at ease with their bodies. Conversely, the absence of the mirror may have induced the feeling that the ballet experience was incomplete, resulting in negative body image. This perception was reinforced by comments from students in the mirror class, including: “It was fun seeing myself look like a ballerina,” and “...It's [use of mirror] essential for ballet to see if one is improving and doing everything properly.” Comments from students in the non-mirror class indicated that the quintessential ballet experience would have enhanced their skills of “grace and flow,” furthermore, “If I was serious about learning ballet, I would want a mirror.” This last comment clearly reflects the belief that the truly serious and legitimate ballet experience necessitates the use of mirrors.

## Summary and Conclusions

To summarize, there were differences between students at higher performing levels and those at lower levels. As high

performing students in the mirror setting were likely more able to detect errors in technique, they perhaps tended to become more self-critical because they could compare themselves to the other dancers in the studio. In this regard, we note that the mirror tends to serve as a negative influence, especially for higher performers, because comparison of the self to others may promote heightened self-consciousness and thus negative self-evaluation, which can be psychologically unfavorable for dancers.

Lower performing students, who perhaps had not yet developed a technical or critical eye,<sup>7</sup> reported a different experience with and without mirrors than did higher performers. The low performers with mirrors tended to decrease in how much they worried about their weight and showed significant increases in satisfaction with overall appearance, while the low performers without the mirror reported increases in how much they worried about their weight. Perhaps the use of the mirror positively reinforces the low performers' previous understanding of what constitutes the consummate ballet studio experience, and thereby helps them feel more comfortable with their weight.

Students accustomed to being taught with mirrors reported the mirror was useful for checking alignment and aided self-correction. However, several students acknowledged that mirrors can promote self-criticism and distraction. Perhaps this is because the use of the mirror can potentially distract them from fully trusting their kinesthetic feedback. The students who did not use a mirror did not overwhelmingly miss it; roughly half of them preferred not having a mirror.

The mirror can be an effective tool in the ballet classroom. It provides several benefits, including allowing a student to evaluate his or her technical growth and the ability to see the activities in the classroom from more perspectives, which can aid in the learning process. However, it is also a potent tool which can play a pivotal role in affecting how each dancer feels about his or her body image. Many overlapping factors come into play which influence the effect a mirror has on a dancer's body image, including skill level, years of training, level of material taught, comparison of self to others, degree of stress when learning a phrase, or previous expectations of or experience in the ballet art form. It seems clear that mirrors are useful for some aspects of dance training but detrimental to others.

Dance educators should be judicious in recognizing and utilizing the benefits and understanding the disadvantages mirrors pose in the classroom and learn to use them knowledgeably and selectively. This awareness can result in selective ways to improve the teaching environment so that dance students may improve their body image and overall well-being. Following this paper is a handout that provides some guidelines for teachers to consider when instructing students in the dance technique classroom.

## References

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