

Intro to Modern Dance: *Planning a Well Rounded Curriculum*

By Shallom Johnson



Dance Exchange company members Ben Wegman and Elizabeth Johnson, in rehearsal for "Genome: Ferocious Beauty", at the Dance Exchange home studios in Takoma Park, MD.



Student in adult modern intro class at the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, during a composition exercise

Setting the curriculum for any dance class is by no means an easy task. Not only do you have to tailor the course to fit the needs of your organization and your students, but the majority of the preparations have to be done before you face your students.

Many dance studios offer courses for the beginner adult dancer. Typically these programs attract a wide range of students, with varying levels of ability, experience, and mobility. This situation has great potential, but also presents extra challenges for the instructor – trying to satisfy such a variety of needs in one class can be tough!

Preparing for an introduction to modern dance class can be somewhat overwhelming. From the works of Loie Fuller and Martha Graham to Jose Limon and Twyla Tharp, the term “modern dance” covers such a broad range of dance techniques, concepts and theories that it can be difficult knowing exactly where or how to begin.

If structured effectively, introductory dance courses can provide a great way for adult participants to stay active and be creative in an open, supportive environment. Tying your modern dance class in to a historical and theoretical overview provides a strong through line and gives the students a contextual basis for the technical aspects of the course.

Beginning with the early twentieth century pioneers and moving forward to present day, spend at least one or two classes focusing on each major choreographer - discuss their work, and place it into the relevant social and cultural context. Highlighting the lineage and evolution of modern dance will give students a sense of continuity within the art form, revealing the ways in developments and departures made by each choreographer.

This background information can be supported with assigned readings from a textbook. Two good options are Deborah Jowitt’s *Time and the Dancing Image*, or *Prime Movers: The makers of Modern Dance in America*, by Joseph H Mazo. Both of these books are widely available, and provide an effective overview of the development of modern dance in the twentieth century. Depending on your location, you may also want to bring in guest artists from the community who can provide a personal perspective on a particular choreographer or technique.

Daily classes can be composed of a brief discussion period, a warm up, and technique exercises in the centre and across the floor, ending class with a composition assignment in which students are challenged to use the highlighted choreographic principles to create a short movement phrase.



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CELL film shoot, on location at the Baltimore Science Centre with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. Dancers: Meghan Bowden and student.

The technical portion of class must be tailored to the experience and ability levels of your students. Many techniques in the modern dance canon are extremely physical and can be dangerous if done without the proper training or support. It is important to explore methods of introducing the basic concepts while maintaining a safe environment. Emphasize that each student is in charge of his or her own body, and is free to modify any movement as they see fit.

Daily composition exercises can be a great way to introduce beginner dancers to the world of choreography. Modern dance can sometimes be intimidating to watch – many audience members leave shows disappointed, thinking that they “just don’t get it.” Learning how to create, watch and analyze movement is an integral element in building an appreciation for modern dance in dancers and non-dancers alike.

The key here is to start simple, and encourage open discussion. Give the class an assignment and split them into groups, with a short time to collaborate in the creation of a brief movement phrase. Working in groups allows those less comfortable to hand over some of the responsibility to others, while remaining involved in the process.



Dance Exchange company members Ben Wegman and Elizabeth Johnson, in rehearsal for "Genome: Ferocious Beauty", at the Dance Exchange home studios in Takoma Park, MD.

Bring the class together and show each group’s work one by one. Ask the viewers to pick out “shining moments” for each group – anything that stood out to them, for any reason. Emphasize that nothing is too small to notice, and no comment is unwelcome. These quick discussions may begin tentatively, but should blossom as participants become more comfortable with sharing their thoughts and reactions.

If your studio has multimedia capabilities, it is often rewarding to capture these compositions on video and watch them together as a class at the end of the year. This showcases not only the changes in modern dance as the class has progressed through the historical content, but also the growth of each individual, and of the class as a whole.

A great dance class always depends on good planning, and a successful introduction to modern dance will give students a multi-layered education. This format not only provides a foundation in technical movement, it helps contextualize the work, leaving students with a deeper appreciation for the rich history of modern dance, and how it continues to influence dance to this day. ■

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Leaping onto the Web

By Taylor Gordon

In the twenty-first century the Internet is to business what music is to dance: essential for creative growth.

"Having an Internet presence is indispensable for dance studios of all sizes," says Doug Fox, a pioneer in establishing dance as an entity online. His collaborative website GreatDance.com continually provides innovative ideas that dancers, companies and schools can utilize to their advantage.

Though a computer-illiterate director might find the depth of cyberspace to be as daunting as an empty opera house, connecting with online tools is a necessary way to build and maintain audiences and students. "Many people do research for dance classes online," says Fox. "If you don't have a website, then many students simply won't know your studio exists."

One director, Veronica Moretti Niebuhr of The Studio in Savannah, GA, has gone beyond the assumed prerequisite of offering a website to find alternative ways of reaching the greater dance world through the web. She became a contributor to The Winger, a group dance blog with over 20 contributors from all niches of the dance world: dancers,

choreographers, directors, writers, photographers, doctors, and everything in between. By writing entries alongside some of whom she calls the "most interesting and inspiring people in the dance world," she keeps readers in the know with happenings from her studio.

In addition, she is an active participant in a social network for the dance community called THE (INTER) MISSION, spending about 5 hours per week communicating with students and parents. The site has over 900 members who initiate personal conversations, carry out forum discussions, post media, and share news about their dance lives. Registration is free and open to "individuals with a vested interest in the future of dance" according to its mission.

"Being online keeps me totally connected to my students," says Moretti Niebuhr. Through social networking online, dancers and moms often contact her. "I get a lot of advice oriented messages, as well students struggling with their emotions and trying to balance life and school with their dance commitments." She maintains an open policy in her corner of dance while simultaneously promoting herself as a teacher and her studio to the larger community.

Another studio, Tracey's Dance Center in Milford, MA, focuses its online efforts by using a website as an aide to enrolled students. Director Tracey Wright argues that her website "is my most valuable asset in both marketing and communication with my existing students and parents."

She updates it regularly to include class postponements or cancellations due to inclement weather, important dates and deadlines, and performance information as an easily accessible resource. "It is designed to be user friendly, informative, and creative."

Whatever the budget, time and internet familiarity restraints, any studio can make the shift to online with a little effort. If blogging and social networking better reflect the character of your studio, a few straightforward sites can set you up in minutes. Blogger.com and WordPress.com are 2 of the most popular blog platforms, with easy to learn tools to publish news or images. "The biggest benefit I get from blogging is exposing my students," says Moretti Niebuhr. Accomplishments can be announced conveniently through these content management systems.

Another option for social networking, articles, and news within the targeted dance community is My Dance Place hosted by Dancer Magazine's own DancerUniverse.com! The site allows users to create a profile, start a blog, include their studio in a national dance directory, join local dance groups and interact with many others involved in the various aspects of dance. You can use it for most anything-- to get connected, promote yourself or educate yourself.

Outreach through these networks is not always necessary, but a basic studio website can create an identity online for current and prospective students to search. The most effective homepages keep it simple and include all necessary information. "Current students want clear, concise information about classes and schedules," says Fox. He advises directors to keep an organized, up-to-date list of classes online but to avoid using time consuming PDF files that need to be downloaded.

My Dance Place
THE DANCER UNIVERSE BLOG

My Dance Place on danceruniverse.com

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Matthewneff
Matthew has a dance degree from BUNEL, and teaches in genres ranging from theater to classical ballet.

Lindsay Dreyer
Lindsay's blog is full of fun breaking dance news and intriguing perspectives on all things dance!

Wendy Garofoli
As a former professional dancer turned writer, she's spent the last 7 years translating her teaching, performing and choreographing experience to the page.

Shallom
Dancer, choreographer, visual artist. Each day she lives herself in the immediacy of the moment and finds herself in the joy of movement.

Dolly Dinkle
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To attract the new student market, he recommends providing a link that clearly leads to an explanation of how to get started. "Many newcomers to your website may not have taken dance classes before, or their children may not have. Take visitors to a page that walks them through the process of taking classes at your studio. Which classes? What's the order of classes? And other relevant information that will make dance newcomers feel comfortable with how process works."

Every studio website will be unique, but each should give the best presentation to your online audience, which will hopefully become your students' audience. Moretti Niebuhr's advice to teachers who want to build an online identity is "to play to your strengths. Build a simple website that shows what you do best. Show your students achievements -- this is the best example of what kind of teacher you are." ■