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Modern Dance, *Step by Step*



How to fine-tune a modern/
contemporary curriculum for all ages

By Ann Murphy

When teaching modern dance, it's easy for teachers to feel trapped between tradition and what might be an edgy 21st-century art form. There is little consensus on how to train students in modern dance, when to train them, or even what to train them in. Should you start youngsters with contemporary, or is a codified technique, such as Graham or Limón, appropriate? Can you let teenagers perform release technique, or does "releasing" require something to release from?

And is that "something" a quality most teenagers have or don't have?

What's a teacher to do? One answer is to look at what others are doing well.

A developmental approach

Katie Kruger, a Limón-trained dancer with a dance degree from UC-Santa Barbara, has chosen to ride the edge between tradition and modernization in exploring ways to update the modern-dance curriculum at Shawl-



TOP AND BOTTOM: The Center for Modern Dance Education emphasizes alignment, physical tool building, and creativity at all levels.



Center for Modern Dance Education teachers adapt to students' needs while maintaining their modern-dance rigor and experimentation.

Anderson Dance Center in Berkeley, California.

Now the director of the Youth Program at the Center, Kruger, along with administrative manager Abigail Hosein, and managing director Rebecca Johnson, has taken an approach that not only aligns with the venerable modern-dance values of the dance space and its founders, Frank Shawl and Victor Anderson, who danced with May O'Donnell (see "When Frank and Victor Met May," August 2009), but also with principles of child and teen development.

One of the first things Kruger did was to "separate the youth division by age," she says, a developmentally appropriate step that let the team examine what each age group needed. "We now have it divided between youth and teens, and we have been improving what we do in their classes."

The youth curriculum emphasizes creativity, which influences the spirit of all the classes offered. In the 7-and-under age group, teachers avoid identifiable techniques and instead concentrate on structured play in which stories, games, and

props dominate. The point is to let the young mover get ready physically and cognitively for later technical work.

As director of teaching and learning at Luna Dance Institute in



At Shawl-Anderson Dance Center, modern-dance values are aligned with principles of child and teen development.

Berkeley, California, Patricia Reedy says that such a creativity-based approach is the most desirable way to train dancers in the fundamentals of space, time, and energy. Young dancers learn about their bodies and how they move through explorations suited to their intellectual and physical capacities that also do what the playground does—combine physical and social learning with fun and fantasy. This becomes the bedrock of

Unlike in ballet, in which perfect execution of highly codified movement is the goal, modern dance promotes individuality, novelty, and difference.

future training.

Reedy's template for young dancers articulates movement concepts for each stage. Beginning at age 5, for example, children are communicating, initiating, and negotiating in a social group. This makes it a good time to discover bodies in motion, to enter space with others, acclimate to the needs of the group, move big and small, stop and start, and watch their peers dance without disrupting them.

At 6, children are able to bring flow, shape, and collaboration to the process. This is the moment for teachers to introduce words that denote

energy and ask young dancers to explore contrasting states like melted/frozen, collapsed/exploded, soft/hard, silly/serious, and sad/happy. This is also the time to explore the zone between those states, when something frozen starts to melt or someone sad begins to feel happy. First-graders are also ready to learn how to move their bodies in parts and as a whole, and to use partners to practice this, getting ready for the next stage.

At 7, the children are able to add mathematical concepts to patterns—addition, subtraction, and fractions and wholes—and they can build structures that have rhythmic structure, directionality, and a beginning, a middle, and an end. Dividing the body into parts, keeping more than one rhythm going in the body, and playing with quick changes of direction combine the spirit of the playground with physical and conceptual strategies.

Seven is also a good age to introduce the BrainDance exercise series developed by Anne Green Gilbert, designed to activate the neurological system in the order in which it develops in infancy. The series begins with breath, then moves on to tactile, core-distal, head-tail, upper-lower, body side, cross-lateral, and vestibular actions. Breath might be embodied by the arms mirroring the expanding lungs, like a growing bubble that then bursts only to form again. The tactile dimension is activated by the dancers tickling themselves all over as though spiders were dancing on their skin, or patting themselves awake. A core-distal activity among 7-year-olds could include expanding and contracting like a starfish, or miming a bear huddled in hibernation that stretches itself awake. BrainDance can meet the skill set of any age (including tired, overworked adults).

By 8, young dancers can solve problems through movement, remember and revise dance phrases, and create space maps, which might introduce two-dimensional floor design and three-dimensional movement



Maurice Charriere concentrates on structured play instead of identifiable modern techniques with the 7-and-under age group at Shawl-Anderson Dance Center.

goals. If modeled after a treasure map, the dance might have start and end points with a movement pattern that zigzags across the studio floor. A big city dance map, in contrast, could become a complex movement maze with many right-angle turns and stops and starts.

Nine-year-olds are ready to memorize and synthesize movement. They can make use of basic geometry (planes and angles), play with momentum and weight, and look critically at dance. Door and table dances are a

The point is to let the young mover get ready physically and cognitively for later technical work.

fun and graphic way to explore these concepts. The table dance examines right angles that can be created in the torso, legs, and arms; they communicate a bound and linear quality, suggestive of Graham or Cunningham technique styles. The door dance investigates what it means to swing from a pivot point, letting students discover the ease and momentum of the body as it arcs, evoking Humphrey and Limón technique.

At 10, dancers start to think from the viewer's perspective. They are able to make dances for small groups and apply literary and musical forms to choreography; for example, an exercise might ask them to explore what a dance about the life of a flower organized in the form of a haiku, with its traditional pattern of 17 beats, looks like. What happens to that same dance when qualities like adagio and staccato replace rhythmic structure?

While these actions might seem removed from recognizable modern dance steps, the concepts underlying them prepare students for sophisticated work like contraction, release, fall, recovery, shape, theme, variation, and formal structure. By middle school, young dancers are ready to be introduced to increasingly codified modern dance ideas.

From play to structure

In the years between childhood and adolescence, a physical and intellectual explosion takes place in young dancers. Middle-schoolers who have been dancing since their early years have the movement, rhythmic, and energetic knowledge to begin to physicalize many different kinds of dance sequences, as well as to choreograph structured compositions.

At this stage, practicing autonomy becomes increasingly important. Kruger builds independence into her intermediate modern class for 12- to 18-year-olds by having the students learn a two-part warm-up that they perform on their own. The first section starts in parallel with the mid-back curving into a roll-down over



Breath work is a grounding principle in the teen/adult classes at the Center for Modern Dance Education.

the legs, followed by drop swings, hinging, releasing, and rolling up. This is repeated in turnout, then again in second position. Part two starts with a stretching sequence that includes a plank, downward dog, and sit-ups or sitting balances. This lets the teens begin class without constantly looking up or around to see what the teacher is modeling, Kruger notes.

Next Kruger turns to technical exercises for the group, starting with

plié. Students might start in second position, rotate into a wide fourth position with a contraction over the front leg, rotate back into second as they shift the contraction laterally, then return to upright.

In an attempt to expand what is taught in the teens' class, Hosein attempted to introduce release technique and found that they weren't ready for it; they were baffled and discouraged. Exploring this roadblock, Kruger discovered that the teens could absorb

some but not all of the principles involved. If she built release movement into a swing they already knew how to perform, the dancers experienced a momentary release as their bodies followed the swing's momentum. However, without this structured catalyst, the students lack the stability needed to allow them to let go.

The eclectic class

Not every studio has the means to define classes as closely as Reedy's step-by-step approach dictates or as Shawl-Anderson tries to do. Nevertheless it is still possible to emphasize developmentally appropriate learning while teaching modern dance to diverse ages and abilities.

The Center for Modern Dance Education in Hackensack, New Jersey, does so with a student population that ranges in age from 3 to 85 and embraces families, students with little prior training, and dancers with disabilities, as well as committed modern dancers who have been training for years. Under artistic director Elissa Machlin-Lockwood, the Center emphasizes alignment, physical tool building, and creativity at all levels.

With an array of mixed-age and mixed-level classes, the teachers are adept at adapting to the students' needs while maintaining their modern-dance rigor and experimentation. "It's a balance," Machlin-Lockwood says. "You don't want to stifle, yet you want to get the basics correct."

She and her faculty "like teaching multigenerational classes," Machlin-Lockwood says, "because they lend themselves to improvisation and simple choreographic instruction," as well as basics such as warm-ups, pliés, stretching and isolations, center, and traveling work.

Her modern-dance teen/adult class first focuses on breathing—inhalations are made on open movements such as lifting up, and exhalations on closed movements like a contraction or forward bend. In so doing, Machlin-Lockwood lays down not only the first somatic principle of

BrainDance but the most important fundamental of modern dance since Isadora Duncan: the inseparability of breath and expression.

Machlin-Lockwood brings this breath work into Graham core exercises on the floor, which include the contraction/release segment done with feet touching, the seated spiral in fourth position, and the second-position leg-stretch series. She also integrates breath work into the yoga movements she includes, such as the triangle, cobra, and warrior poses.

In a multigenerational or mixed ability class, CMDE teachers invite students to adapt a set phrase—say a relevé, fall, and recovery—to meet their skill level or ability. A dancer in a wheelchair might explore ways to lift her arms, let her torso fall to the side, then return to upright, while another dancer might drop into a fourth-position lunge with her torso and arms outstretched, then pull back into relevé. A new dancer with no physical impediment might forgo using the arms and focus solely on the legs.

Unlike in ballet, in which perfect execution of highly codified movement is the goal, modern dance



Teenage modern-dance students practice autonomy at Shawl-Anderson Dance Center.

promotes individuality, novelty, and difference, and because of this, being “wrong” can take on a radically different significance. Increasingly, dance educators are realizing that treating mistakes with creativity can unlock a gold mine of ideas and self-knowledge, and deepen danc-

ers’ sense of resilience and courage, regardless of age. In such a climate, “errors” become an important part of an investigation into how to explore movement and communicate through the body.

At CMDE this might manifest when Machlin-Lockwood assigns a “triplet, triplet, triplet, piqué turn” combination across the floor and then asks the dancers to make up the next phrase. The first half consists of known steps that must be performed in a set way, but the second portion has no “wrong,” only experimentation and play. When young choreographers come into CMDE with a “living room dance” that takes up only the three square feet they worked in at home between the couch and the TV, the teachers offer strategies to open up that tiny dance. Rather than criticize a student’s effort, they challenge her to use the entire studio space, alter the dynamics, increase level changes, or exchange a movement performed too often for something new.

At Shawl-Anderson there is a conscious effort to turn mistakes into a part of learning. “Embracing error lets students understand that you can only go so deep when trying to constantly be right,” Johnson says. Students learn that there isn’t one way to move; there are many approaches to the same problem. How does a dancer get to the floor? She can spiral down, do a Graham side fall, drop to her knees, arch into a backbend, perform a handstand to a stomach drop, or go for a baseball slide. Each has a different quality and meaning, and each is equally valid.

Creating a modern-dance curriculum with a developmental approach keeps the daring, boundary-breaking core of modern dance alive. With it, each new generation of dancers is encouraged to learn from what came before while expanding the boundaries of what is known in order to make the form new once more. ♦

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