

CREATING PEAK EXPERIENCES: CONTEMPORARY DANCE STUDENT-CENTERED
PRACTICES FOR USE IN A STUDIO SETTING

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my daughter, Emory Austen, whose quiet yet constant support goes beyond what words can express. All this I do for you.

ABSTRACT

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This research investigates holistic and student centered teaching practices for use in a contemporary dance studio setting. With examination of published literature in the area of dance curriculum, general education curriculum studies, and holistic and student-centered learning approaches, this project culminates in the development of creative questions and discussion prompts for the dance classroom. While initially the author set out to create activities it was discovered via a teacher self-study that in order to facilitate holistic student centered practices collaborative languaging and planned moments for discussion were needed for students' self-discovery. The author concludes this paper with an infographic which illustrates goals of holistic learning along with student-centered discussion strategies and prompts. From this undertaking, the author hopes that dance teachers can utilize this research and its findings to create concrete and cooperative learning experiences in their own classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

To be a dance educator in the public school system, one must first be certified to teach in Texas; classes are taken, tests must be passed, and continuing education is required each year to stay in good standing. For better or worse, the success of a teacher is measured by the success of their students, whether that be determined by test scores or a team's winning record. Where I work in the private dance sector, however, there are no such requirements. Anyone with the desire to own a dance studio or teach a class may do so. Dance studio and national dance convention teachers are often measured by their success as professionals; the most sought-after instructors boast their greatest personal accomplishments in their bios and resumes. As a studio owner, director, and teacher I have hired these "celebrity" teachers for master classes and have begun to notice a disconnect between teacher and student, especially for the dancers that need more individualized instruction. This disconnect is most obvious when I see a teacher disregarding students unless they are able to replicate movement efficiently and quickly without deep description, breaking down of sequence, or discussion of movement quality and timing. I identify this as a teacher-centered "banking method" pedagogy, one in which the instructor deposits information for the student to passively remember and repeat, and from my observations this seems to limit genuine connection in the classroom for my students.

As I continually observe, I become frustrated with this kind of disconnection and teacher-centered practice. This frustration arises out of my belief that in order to deliver a high quality dance education, one must strive to design educational experiences that speak to the whole learner. Recently during my graduate studies at Texas Woman's University, I have been introduced to various teaching approaches and theoretical frameworks, and I have come to understand that my own values as a teacher align with holistic and student-centered learning

philosophies. Since this discovery, I have become curious about ways to deepen my personal teaching practices and intention to embody and enact a more holistic approach that nurtures the learners' body, mind, emotions, and spirit while providing "peak" or interconnected, synergistic experiences for both teacher and students. In this project my intention is to explore this interest by creating student-centered teaching practices to use in my own studio as well as offer them to the field of dance education through published research.

PURPOSE

- To develop a theoretical framework to guide the creation of holistic student-centered teaching practices for the dance studio setting.
- To explore and create teaching practices and strategies for use in an intermediate contemporary class for ages 12-15 in a dance studio setting.
- To practice and reflect upon the implementation of teaching practices to assist in editing and preparing them as a contribution to the field of dance education.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can I create holistic, student-centered teaching practices and strategies for use in an intermediate contemporary class for ages 12-15 in a studio setting?

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

1. I completed a **literature review to identify holistic educational trends and practices.**

Based on my own values as an educator and the goal of this research, I particularly looked for theoretical writing on holistic learning that addressed collaborative learning, active involvement, and self-discovery. I chose these areas of concentration because I identified them as areas for improvement in my own teaching practice.

2. Next, from this literature review, I **created a guiding theoretical framework** to direct the development of studio dance class activities that align with holistic and student-centered approaches. Based on my experience teaching in a studio setting, I chose guiding principles I perceived to be generally underdeveloped in studio dance education.
3. Then, using this framework as a guide, I **created four holistic and student-centered activities** for use with students ages 12-15 in a contemporary studio dance classroom setting. My goal was to create activities that each developed collaborative learning environments, promoted active class involvement, and encouraged self-discovery. I started in what I considered a basic way by creating activities that corresponded to holistic goals collected across holistic learning literature, and which I identified as areas of interest in my own teaching practices:
 - a. nurturing the whole student
 - b. teaching through peer interaction
 - c. considering life experiences
 - d. promoting active involvement
4. Next, I implemented the activities in my intermediate contemporary dance class and **employed a teacher self-study** in order to reflect upon the implementation of these activities. I reflected upon my perceived ideas of the success of each activity, challenges I encountered when implementing the activities, general student response and engagement, and ideas about possible improvements. The self-study methods I used were:
 - a. video recordings of me teaching four selected classes
 - b. taking self-reflection notes while teaching
 - c. post-class journal reflections

5. Then, I reviewed the video recording and journal entries to **analyze and identify what was happening in the classroom when it came to class participation, engagement, and depth of student reflection in relation to what and how I was teaching**. I made changes as I went and was able to identify pedagogical maneuvers and actions that were successful and/or that assisted me in delivering the outcome intended. To do this I made a chart of details and characteristics concerning my implementation of the activities, student engagement, and reflection for each activity. I divided the chart into two categories, organizing information based on what I believed either supported or prohibited the goals outlined in my framework.
6. Then, I **edited the strategies** in relation to the findings from the self-study and the theoretical framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature review below I outline select studies, concepts, and theories which support me in this project of developing dance teaching practices that align with a holistic pedagogical approach. It is important to note that while gathering published research in the areas of dance curriculum analysis, curriculum studies, student-centered and holistic educational philosophies, and contemporary dance, I found far fewer resources in the areas of curriculum design for dance studios versus public schools, as well as a general lack of cohesion across published literature when authors defined present day contemporary dance.

Curriculum Studies

In order to understand curriculum design, I explored a variety of philosophies and approaches to curriculum. Considering the scope of my research, I resonated the most with *The Sage Handbook of Curriculum and Instruction* that defines curriculum as: “the plans made for

guiding learning in the schools, usually represented in retrievable documents of several levels of generality, and the actualization of those plans in the classroom, as experienced by the learners and as recorded by an observer; those experiences take place in a learning environment that also influences what is learned (Fassat & Warren 2010, 4). I perceive this definition of curriculum design to suggest that intentional planning creates a tangible learning experience that serves the student long-term and could potentially be used as a tool to develop a curriculum framework in alignment with the scope of this research.

Educational theorist and arts activist, Elliot Eisner, advocated for the implementation of sophisticated arts curriculum with the same rigor as core subjects like reading, math, and science. Contending that the arts serve a greater purpose than just boosting test scores in core classes, Eisner (2015) suggests that art education is a necessary part of cognitive development for young students. Moreover, Eisner's work offers the need for education to part from a rationalized approach to learning and instead cultivate a student-centered philosophy that requires continuity of moral purpose, "the purpose of caring, appreciating human connections, and respecting people and ideas from a historical, multicultural, and diverse perspective" (Eisner 2015, 76). I consider Eisner's words to convey that through holistic art education, children will learn to think critically and better understand the relationship between themselves and the world around them.

Another advocate for progressive curriculum, Jennifer Borek, describes the importance of using strategies that target different learning styles in a study based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. She first identifies which of Gardner's multiple intelligences (MI), or learning styles, her students relate to by creating a matrix of activities for each intelligence, using different approaches for the same task. Borek concluded that planning differentiated strategies that worked for each student's preferred learning modality empowered students and created a

collaborative classroom where students were able to understand themselves and felt free to experiment (Borek 2003). For the purpose of this study, it is important to note critics of Gardner who suggest the research into MI theory lacks empirical support to prove humans are predisposed (either genetically or socially) to specific types of learning styles and feel it waters down the curriculum (Armstrong 2018). Despite these critiques, and because I am not interested in designing an entire dance curriculum around MI theory, I feel there is significant data to support the value of differentiated approaches and their role in understanding individual differences and learning styles in the classroom. Within this narrow sampling of writings from Eisner and Borek, it appears important for these two theorists to create an educational environment that supports a holistic learning approach while providing a rich and inclusive learning experience. The ideas offered in this section contribute to my project by indicating that holistic learning aids the creation of a mutual understanding between student and teacher in the classroom, as opposed to the “banking method” that is generally used in dance studio settings.

In an analysis of dance curriculum literature, dance educator and researcher, Anu Sööt, Performing Arts Doctor of Philosophy, and her research partner, Ele Viskus, suggest that generally, dance education has used a “transmission model” in which students are expected to imitate movement demonstrated by an expert teacher (Sööt & Viskus 2013). As they analyzed the data collected from literature across dance education, Sööt and Viskus also noticed a 21st century trend where dance curriculum redirects its practice towards holistic approaches “by taking the distinctive features of students as human beings into account, and by introducing their personal human plan”. In my experience as a studio dance practitioner, I perceive this to be a missing piece in competitive dance studios as many instructors are performing artists with little formal pedagogical training, and in turn they may not understand or believe these pedagogical

ideas as fundamental in their practice. In a case study examining pedagogical practices of four dance faculty members, Meredith Sims and Heather Erwin identify several key themes, including the necessity for instructors who are talented dancers to transfer their content knowledge into pedagogical formats that fit the individual student (Sims & Erwin 2012). In reviewing these studies, I take away the idea that one way to perceive effectiveness in teaching dance is to utilize a variety of pedagogical approaches to meet the diverse needs of the learners.

Student-Centered and Holistic Education

Scholar and educational reformer John Dewey (1997) believed that students were less likely to learn through isolated exercises and instead argued that presenting content in a way that allows students to relate their prior experiences yields greater understanding. Furthermore, Dewey discusses aspects of both traditional and progressive methodologies in his book, *Experience and Education*. He explains that although when used in isolation, neither is ideal, progressive philosophies utilizing holistic methods that facilitate and promote outward and inward freedom allow teachers to “gain knowledge of the individuals with whom he is concerned” (Dewey 1997, 62). Fostering a connection among teacher, student, and content is a pillar of the holistic approach which seeks to address students as whole beings and works to unite the intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, creative, and spiritual elements of a learner (Sööt & Viskus). Scholar and professor of holistic education, Dr. Andrew Johnson, describes this connection as the essence of holistic education theory, stating learners “are not empty vessels to be filled with a predetermined body of knowledge. And they are certainly not circus seals to be trained to perform certain academic skills on command. Instead, humans are thinking, feeling, emoting, creating, intuiting beings that use all these traits to come to know and act upon the

world (Johnson 2019, 2). Dr. Johnson goes on to describe four characteristics of holistic education:

- It seeks to nurture and develop the whole person.
- It seeks to make connections among learners, teachers, and the community.
- It is concerned with life experiences.
- It enables learners to critically examine their values within a personal, cultural, and political context.

These characteristics of holistic learning theory provided by Dr. Johnson are essential in this project because they provide a sense of interconnection in the classroom while enabling students to identify and internalize their own views and values.

Student-centered strategies seek to promote learning in both formal and informal context through nontraditional, active, and relevant experiences. Neuroscience research exploring the brain's activity during learning shows "changes in the brain's neuronal connections that underlie learning occur only when experiences are active; passive activities do not affect the brain in the same way" (Hinton, 2012, 3). In educational terms, this suggests traditional schooling where students repeat information given by an instructor's lecture will not necessarily lead to learning. In his development of a holistic curricular and pedagogical approach to early childhood education, Sankar Prasad Mohanty (2014) identified holistic classroom interaction strategies should aim to:

- Provide concrete experiences
- Teach through peer interaction
- Encourage cooperative learning
- Work for the active involvement of children

Pointing to the Reggio Emilia approach, Mohanty (2014, 60) emphasizes the importance of creating a learning environment that “enhances and facilitates children’s construction of their own thinking through combination of communicative, expressive and cognitive languages as they actively engage with people, material and the environment.” In the Reggio approach, teachers redefine their role in the classroom, transitioning from leader to co-learner and collaborator by planning activities based on the interests of the students, asking questions to further understanding, and being actively engaged from within the learning process, as opposed to sitting back and observing the child learn.

Using open dialogue in guiding students to self-discovery and critical thinking led me to look into Benjamin Bloom’s *Taxonomy for Teaching, Learning and Assessment*. The revised taxonomy uses action words like ‘remember,’ ‘understand,’ ‘apply,’ ‘analyze,’ ‘evaluate,’ and ‘create’ to describe the cognitive process by which students encounter knowledge and work to make meaning (Armstrong 2010). Using this taxonomy, many educators have created question stems and higher-order thinking prompts that can be used for class discussions, prompting, cueing, and assessments. Bloom’s taxonomy provides a framework for structuring questions from lower-order to higher-order thinking, responding to each level of the taxonomy, using both closed-ended questions to check understanding and recall and open-ended questions that generate discussion. Encouraging critical thinking and self-discovery through the use of Bloom’s taxonomy, students are given the opportunity to assemble pieces of knowledge that form whole concepts and apply this skill in new situations (Mcnulty 2021). Even though Bloom and his collaborators created the original framework in 1956, before holistic and student-centered theories began to gain traction in the United States, the practices his work inspired align closely with holistic and student-centered theories used today.

In contrast to the above mentioned theories and approaches, established literature suggests that traditionally classrooms are teacher-centered (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Authors David Miller Sadker and Karen Zittleman discuss types of teacher-centered and student-centered philosophies in their book *Teachers, Schools, and Society: A Brief Introduction to Education*. Sadker and Zittleman explain that most Americans were taught in teacher-centered classrooms that generally praise the authoritative role of master instructor, emphasis on excellence, discipline and tradition, and the strict and rigorous foundation within the teaching space. The authors go on to explain that in these settings, instructors typically teach the way they were taught, passing accumulated knowledge onto the next generation while putting great effort into preserving and perpetuating the techniques of the past (Sadker & Zittleman 2009). This commitment to the rigorous adherence of traditional techniques reminds me of psychologist and scholars, Robert J. Sternberg and Todd I. Lubart's (2015), warning that the more expertise we acquire and the more automatic we become about our content, the less we are able to see new avenues for action. This warning guides my research purpose to continue informing my own practice and help develop my personal and professional repertoire to include student-centered practices that are adaptive and progressive rather than rigid.

In a chapter discussing student-centered philosophies, Sadker and Zittleman (2009) explain that current trends in education at large are experiencing a shift where holistic, student-centered philosophies that focus on “individual needs, contemporary relevance, and preparing students for a changing future” are becoming much more popular. This growing trend towards student-centered education is also supported by many in the field of neuroscience. As students continually adapt to new learning situations, these experiences gradually sculpt the architecture of the brain. Research on brain plasticity indicates the brain is constantly learning, in

both formal and informal settings, suggesting that traditional schooling through teacher-centered practices is only one of many potential learning experiences (Hinton 2012).

The need to design a curriculum that is student-centered for a holistic learning experience is congruent with similar ideas across the works of Saker and Zittleman, Borek, and Eisner, while also present in *The Sage's* definition of curriculum explored earlier in this review. It is worth considering how the application of these educational theories might complement and enhance the study of dance by placing the individual needs of the students at the center of curriculum development. Likewise, these connections across established literature make me curious about how these approaches can inform the development of a holistic framework for use in a contemporary dance class.

History and Definition of Contemporary Dance

Because my goal is to fill a void that I perceive to exist in contemporary dance curriculum in the US, specifically in my region of Texas, by developing holistic pedagogical strategies, it was important for me to define the word 'contemporary' as it applies to competitive studio dance. Among many dance historians, the terms contemporary and modern dance are interchangeable, but as contemporary dance continues to evolve along with dynamic cultural and societal changes, it becomes more distinct against the codified techniques of modern dance. Arising in the mid-twentieth century, modern dance emerged as a "liberation from the structures and aesthetics of ballet" (Clark 2020, 11). Modern dance pioneers like Martha Graham, Ruth St. Dennis, Ted Shawn, and Isadora Duncan worked to break away from the stringent and confining nature of ballet. I feel it is important to distinguish this time in modern dance history from what we are experiencing today as contemporary dance. Contemporary dance historian Maria Naranhjo (2010) states that ballet and modern dance are ancestors of contemporary dance, but

much like modern dance rebelled against ballet, it too can be considered the “anti-reference” or “kind of mother-in-law” to contemporary dance. According to Naranhjo, the ‘postmodern’ era of dance began in the 1960’s, a time when art and culture in the United States grew more experimental and radical, with artists like Lucinda Childs, Twyla Tharp, and Trisha Brown (Naranhjo 2010). Defining features of postmodern dance include an emphasis on observation and analysis (notions of good and bad, right or wrong loose importance), importance of improvisation, exploration of daily life and pedestrian movement, and intentional lack of vocabulary or codified technique (Naranhjo, 2010).

One could argue that present day contemporary dance has evolved into something altogether different than the contemporary artist in the postmodern era that we are now experiencing dance in post-postmodern times. Contemporary dance is now performed not only by professional companies in a concert setting, but in dance schools, public schools, in national competitions, on television, and even in shows from Vegas to Broadway. Mia Michaels, an Emmy award winning contemporary choreographer, is attributed with bringing contemporary dance to the commercial world, “making it accessible and relatable” (Hilton 2019). The commercialization of contemporary and its growing popularity in competitive dance has caused it to morph into a genre of its own, one that has distinguished itself from modern.

There are a multitude of national dance competitions and conventions with contemporary categories, and upon searching their websites for definitions of the style, I was met with short, vague descriptions. JUMP Dance Convention (n.d.), an affiliate of Break the Floor Productions and one of the largest dance convention producers in the industry, simply states the contemporary category is a “fusion of many jazz styles with a strong emphasis on modern technique”. Likewise, national talent competition Hall of Fame (n.d.) describes contemporary as a “style that

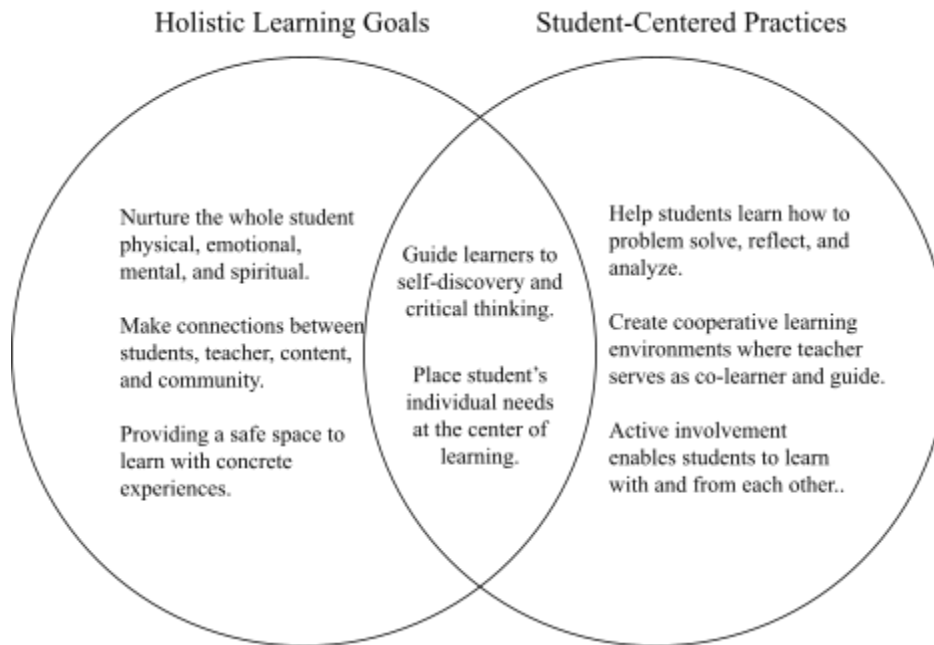
fuses lyrical, jazz, and contemporary elements.” Alternatively, Jennifer Archibald, founder of Arch Dance in New York City, seems to disagree with the idea that contemporary dance is simply derived from multiple genres, while adding it is also “a cycle of shedding techniques we've learned in favor of personal expression of movement. Where modern dance moved against the grain of ballet, contemporary moves against the grain of classical modern techniques” (Looseleaf 2019).

Archibald’s quote begs the question of whether contemporary dance is a genre or a technique. According to Archibald, “contemporary is not a technique, it's a genre associated with a philosophy and exploration of different natural energies and emotions” (Looseleaf, 2019). CLI Studios (n.d.), an online instruction resource also casts a wide net when defining contemporary dance while identifying several identifying features of the genre including improvisation, intention, expression, breath, intention, and dynamics in relation to flow, space, time, and texture. Regardless of how it’s labeled, contemporary dance has grown into one of the most popular genres among competitive dancers. For purposes of this project I will define contemporary as a combination of modern, ballet, and jazz dance techniques and movement philosophies that includes an emphasis on connection, improvisation, expression, and dynamics. This definition was helpful in designing the activities because it pushed me to articulate what skills and techniques were essential to contemporary dance which then guided me in choosing what to include and teach in my activities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of this research, the following framework was created after I completed the literature review. It focuses on specific aspects of holistic learning I identified as growing edges in my own pedagogy and I wanted to expand in this project, as well as aspects of holistic

and student-centered learning approaches I felt were central in creating meaningful experiences. This framework guided the creation of the strategies and I kept it in mind as I made changes while teaching and when editing the strategies.



LIMITATIONS

This research utilizes a holistic approach in the pedagogical framework and strategies created. While this kind of holistic approach may not be suitable for all situations and learners, I consider these resultant strategies as offering a practical tool for dance instructors to use based on student needs. However, I recognize this may not be a useful approach for all instructors and may not be appropriate for all dance genres, dance styles, locations for teaching, or all cultures.

It is also important to note that holistic learning is an expansive and complex process in that it seeks to cultivate a learner's physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual attributes. The practices and strategies I outline for the reader only represent a small portion of this theory in practice which also encompass my own values as a teacher. For this reason, my own experiences and bias concerning dance, dance education, and learning in general, may shade this

research and the strategies created. While I attempt to approach the work in an unbiased way, true objectivity is not possible. However, throughout this study I work to highlight for the reader where I rely upon and build from my own teaching experience in a studio setting. And lastly, I paid particular attention to the way in which my values of holistic practices are centered in this work and do my best to define them as such throughout this project and paper.

CREATING THE STRATEGIES

To begin, I created activities that I perceived to deliver contemporary dance concepts through holistic and student-centered learning. These activities varied and included improvisation exercises and activities exploring connection, dynamics, performance quality, and expression. I implemented these activities during dance classes with intermediate level, middle school students and each activity took up approximately 15 minutes of class time. Normally, the contemporary classes I teach include a warm-up followed by learning new movements, or combinations of movements, rather than focusing solely on the concepts listed above.

The activities that were most different for my students revolved around improvisation, working with a partner, and exploring their emotions in relation to movement they were learning. I noticed that even though I felt the activities presented were holistic in nature, they did not lead to self-discovery and many students did not participate at all. As I was teaching and becoming aware of the class's struggle, I began to make small changes to how I presented the activities and facilitated classroom interaction. I now call this teaching maneuver an "agile teaching response," or the ability to analyze in real-time and deal with uncertainty by adapting and responding to change. It was here in these moments of adaptation that my project veered from the further development of activities to a process of reevaluation. Next, I analyzed the video recordings and journal reflections to identify specific teaching practices that would lead to the following

findings, and eventually the creation of an infographic on holistic interactions and student-centered discussion strategies that promote self-discovery.

FINDINGS

By following the analysis steps outlined above, including reviewing video recordings and journal reflections pertaining to the teacher self-study, classroom observations, and guiding theoretical framework, I identified the following findings.

1) When I implemented the activities without active discussion, I felt the goals of student-centered learning were not met. During the activities, I observed low levels of class participation, lack of student engagement, and shallow post-activity reflections, revealing what I perceived to be an absence of deeper levels of understanding. Evidence of this lack of understanding was identified when I saw that students were hesitant to move, giggling nervously, or not participating at all. Furthermore, when I asked students to reflect on the activity, they were either unable to provide feedback or gave short responses like “I didn’t know what to do,” that indicated they did not have a meaningful experience throughout the exercise. These observations are in direct opposition to the goals of holistic learning which, when consulting published literature, would be understood as being reached if students reacted with active participation and thoughtful reflections.

2) When I posed reflective questions and used discussion prompts, student engagement increased. When I gave the class instructions for an improv exercise using emotions to guide movement, 5 out of 15 students participated and the other 10 stood still in their space. Next, I began the same improv activity by asking questions like “What are some emotions you have felt this week?” and “What would it look like to feel excited, anxious, hungry, or silly?” When I facilitated this discussion about the content and allowed the class to respond using specific language and movement examples, I noticed 13 out of 15 students engaging with exercise and exploring movement qualities that related to emotions. This distinct increase in participation revealed that framing the activities with questions, prompts, and discussions appears to be a necessary precondition for students to put their own skills and abilities into practice.

3) When discussion prompts were used with the activity, I was better able to check for student understanding. Listening to students’ discussion responses allowed me to learn what intrinsic knowledge each student brought with them to the lesson, making it possible for me to adjust the learning pathway. For example, one of the activities asked students to dance like they were in an open field and then like they were in a crowded bus stop. The first time I presented this exercise without first checking in, I noticed some students moved with hesitation or not at all. Then, when I framed the exercise by asking the class to describe how a field and bus stop might look and feel, I realized after listening to their responses, some of them had never been on a bus and therefore could not relate to the activity. This indicated to me a need to account for the differences of each student using a more personalized learning approach. We then discussed bus stops as a class and students offered words like busy, smelly, cramped, and loud, some even

demonstrated how people move and act on a bus. When we tried the activity again, I noticed the students who did not participate initially were dancing around the room using similar busy, smelly, cramped, and loud gestures which suggested altering the learning pathway to include peer interaction and group discussion helped to increase active involvement. This engagement was frequently accompanied by lively reflections, a constant stream of feedback that allowed me to tailor instruction, in real time, to meet the needs of each student.

4) When group discussion strategies were used, student reflections increased in frequency and students shared deeply about their experiences. Before using questions and prompts I perceived student reflections to be shallow when they responded with answers such as, “I don’t know,” and, “It was ok.” By contrast, when discussion strategies were used during the activities followed by questions like, “What happened?” or, “What did you notice?” students offered reflections such as, “I was focused more on responding to what my partner was doing than worrying about what I had to do next,” “I remembered that we could use feelings and levels and directions in our movements and not just shapes. Then I could think of more ways to move!” The detail and enthusiasm with which students were able to recall and discuss each activity suggested a deeper understanding of concepts.

5) When I used a student-centered approach I felt like a guide rather than only a director. I found when I presented the students with questions rather than instructions, I felt my role in the classroom shift from expert instructor to co-learner and collaborator. Asking questions to further understanding and participation in activities alongside the students made me feel more like a partner to the students, engaging with them from inside the lesson. This collaborative effort made it possible to build upon each student’s discoveries without requiring me to hand feed the information. For example, while teaching, I would ask, “How else can we use this knowledge?” and, “What might happen next?” After taking a moment to think, students would begin to offer ideas. “I think this alignment is similar to when we prepare for pirouettes,” “I think if your chest is that far in front of your toes, you will fall forward out of your turn.” These comments indicated to me that students were not depending on me to lead them through the lesson, but were co-constructing their own interpretation and analysis.

From the above findings I understood that my focus for this project began to center upon the way in which I engaged students through creative questioning and discussions rather than the activities I had delivered. I felt I was most successful and student learning increased when I focused on these aspects. Because of this finding, I then dove into understanding more deeply the ways in which I had facilitated and created a new kind of learning environment and classroom climate.

ARTIFACT: STUDENT CENTERED TEACHING PRACTICES TO PROMOTE SELF-DISCOVERY

Here I outline for the reader the final artifact created in this project. This artifact includes 1) specific goals of holistic education and student learning identified in the above theoretical framework and 2) the student centered teaching practices I created, implemented, and then identified as essential in delivering the aims and goals of holistic and student-centered learning. The artifact is a guide for educators who are seeking to enhance and facilitate students' abilities to construct their own thinking through cooperative learning and communicative languages in an easy-to-read, printable infographic that articulates the what and how. These strategies may serve both new and experienced teachers, as well as their students, to create a cooperative learning environment that honors individuality while staying true to the foundations and principles of the genre. Below the created infographic, I further explain and describe each component of the infographic for the reader.

WHY STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING?

THIS FRAMEWORK PROVIDES FIVE GOALS FOR HOLISTIC CLASSROOM INTERACTION AND SIX STUDENT-CENTERED STRATEGIES TO PUT THESE GOALS INTO ACTION

1. Seeks to nurture and develop the whole person ;
2. Teaches through peer interaction;
3. Encourages cooperative learning and making connections between student, teacher, and content;
4. Provides concrete experiences through active involvement of students.
5. Guides learners through self-discovery and critical thinking.

SUPER SIX

STUDENT-CENTERED DISCUSSION STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE SELF-DISCOVERY

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 CHECK IN
Determine current understanding
All-class response system
What do you know about ...?
What do you want to know? | 4 ANALYSIS
How do you know?
What actions/choices did you make?
Can we use this knowledge in another way?
Is there anything missing? |
| 2 DESCRIPTION
What happened?
What do you notice?
What is similar/different/interesting? | 5 ADD ON RESPONSE
Who can add on to what they said?
Say it back to me in your own words.
How can you validate/confirm/oppose?
Would you agree? |
| 3 INTERPRETATION
What do you think this means?
Why is this important?
What is your point of view?
Tell me more about... | 6 REFLECTION
What did you learn?
What surprised you?
What questions do you still have?
What can you do with what you know? |

Why student centered learning?

1. **Goal: Nurture the whole person.** Taking into consideration that learning and emotion work together in the brain helps us prioritize a child's physical, emotional, cognitive, socio-personal, and spiritual needs in education and is fundamental to any holistic approach. Nurturing the whole child in this approach means recognizing their individual, collective, and cultural identities and planning for the many different ways in which children learn.
2. **Goal: Teach through peer interaction.** Help students collaborate to share ideas, understand each other, communicate meaning, and work together to achieve a goal (Adams & Oliver, 2019). Providing opportunities for students to interact can positively impact their classroom experience by allowing students to learn from each other.

3. **Goal: Encourage cooperative learning and make connections between student, teacher, and content.** Because learning is a participatory process, it is helpful to give students the opportunity to voice what matters to them personally; nurturing and expressing their own power and agency in the classroom.
4. **Goal: Seek to provide concrete experiences through active involvement.** Keep learning experiences active with reciprocal discussions, inquiry questioning, varying instructional techniques, and having the flexibility to adjust to individual student needs.
5. **Goal: Guide learners through self-discovery and critical thinking.** Use creative questioning and prompts to guide students to discover essential understandings on their own. Be patient and create a safe space for the awkwardness of unknowing. Normalize and celebrate mistake making and remind students that confusion, misunderstanding, and unknowing all are a normal part of the learning process.

Super Six: Student-centered discussion strategies that promote self-discovery

1. **Check-In** An important part of customizing instruction to suit individual needs is understanding first what knowledge the students bring with them to the lesson. This discussion also provides specific language, concepts, or themes that might assist the class in navigating higher levels of cognition later in the lesson. Implementing an “all-class response system” and adapting it to a dance class helps teachers engage the entire class while quickly getting a sense of overall understanding. An example of this system might be a true/false response using movement. Begin by giving the class a movement that corresponds to a specific answer (touch your toes for “true” and touch the sky for “false”). Then ask a question, “The most important part of a leap is a deep plie” or “Improv by myself makes me feel anxious. True or False? Everyone moves on the count of three. 1-2-3.” The class will respond with the designated movement and the teacher is then able to use this information to adapt and organize the lesson accordingly. Additionally, asking students about their interest in the topic gives them voice and choice; assisting in keeping the lesson relevant while providing an opportunity for students to relate to each other and the content. Examples of questions that help us check in with students prior to a lesson or activity include:
 - a. What do you know about...?
 - b. What do you want to know about ...?
2. **Description** Allow students to identify what they see happening throughout the lesson. This is a great starting point in self-discovery because most students will be able to participate in this step. Take this opportunity to include students who might be hesitant or unable to participate in deeper analysis later on. Encourage students to only reply with what they *see* and not what they think it *means*. It is helpful to give students examples of what to look for prior to their observation. “Keep an eye out for any patterns you might notice.” - “Look for two things that surprised you or were unexpected.” - “Pay close attention to your weight placement as you travel.” The following are examples of

questions that activate exploration using basic cognitive skills such as observation, description, identification, and recall:

- a. What happened?
- b. What did you notice?
- c. What was similar?
- d. What was different?
- e. What was interesting?

- 3. Interpretation** In this step, helping students find connections is key. Use questions that aim to extend students' thinking beyond first impressions and consider their own understanding. This is a critical step in directing students to begin building their own meaning. Here, the role of the teacher is to continue asking creative questions that draw students into a deeper understanding of the work. Examples of questions that help with interpretation are:

- a. What do you think this means?
- b. Why is this important? Why do we care?
- c. What is your point of view?
- d. Tell me more about...

- 4. Analysis** This step is all about leading students to arrive at their own conclusions. This is a great opportunity for students to consider the implications of their assumptions as well as the possibility of multiple reasonable conclusions. "What is your point of view?" - "What is really going on?" - "Is it possible something else is happening?" In this step, raising questions becomes more important than providing ready-made answers. The goal is to use language that leads students on a pathway to self-discovery.

- a. How do you know?
- b. What actions did you take to complete the task?
- c. What choices did you make to complete the task?
- d. How can we use this knowledge in another way?
- e. Is there any information missing?

- 5. Add-on Response** This discussion strategy can be used at any stage in a lesson to promote cooperative learning and is an effective way to include students who might be hesitant to offer their own ideas. Strive to guide discussion in directions that allow students to share ideas, clarify the ideas of others, show support, extend thinking, and present multiple (different) perspectives. The following are examples of add-on response prompts:

- a. Who can add on to what they said?
- b. Repeat what they said in your own words.
- c. Would you agree?
- d. How can you validate/confirm/oppose what they said?

- 6. Reflection** Take a moment at the end of an activity to reflect on individual experiences with the content and facilitate equal discussion. This could be thinking about what they learned, how they might use this knowledge, or what could be improved upon. Practicing reflection encourages students to think critically about their learning practices and

reimagine the material or experience for future benefit (Dyment & O'Conner, 2011). It is helpful to let go of "either/or" logic during reflections and embrace more paradoxical thinking by accepting the possibility of "both/and" logic. The principle of complementarity (Radcliffe, n.d.) suggests the opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth, meaning it's possible that two different ways of looking at things may both be true. Considering the student's own point of view in their assessment allows the class to take ownership of their learning journey; so students find their experience engaging, relevant, and therefore memorable. Prompts for reflection include:

- a. What did you learn?
- b. What surprised you?
- c. What questions do you still have?
- d. What can you do with what you know?

CONCLUSION

A holistic approach to education challenges practices and concepts that traditionally emphasize the dominant transmission of knowledge from teacher to students. In doing this project, I was able to reflect on ways I can provide a more transactional or peak experience for all involved; one that supports learning as both a process and an outcome.

Therefore, my goal in this research was to create activities which promoted holistic education goals of self-discovery through cooperative learning. I found that without dialogue, creative activities alone were not enough to develop students' active meaning-making capacities. Implementing student-centered activities along with exploratory prompts and questions helps to increase participation, active involvement, and depth of reflection while working towards broader goals of holistic learning. I hope these goals and discussion strategies will help dance classrooms evolve into holistic communities where education is viewed as a valuable instrument for transformation, that knowledge holds the power to make things better. While the practices I created pursuant to this work proved to be valuable for my own teaching practices, they may not work for all classrooms, teachers, or students. I do, however, believe that these strategies may be applicable to many different learning experiences where there is a desire to broaden traditional

concepts of rationality. By offering this, it is my desire to bring a sense of connection and wholeness into an increasingly fragmented world of education.

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