

ACTIVITIES AND TEACHER PRACTICES FOR THE HIGH SCHOOL DANCE  
CLASSROOM TO PROMOTE THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNERS

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## INTRODUCTION

As a fifth-year public-school dance educator in the Dallas Independent School District, I have often noticed the ways in which some students are self-directed learners in the dance classroom while others are not. When I see a self-directed learner, I notice their ability to ask questions, engage in content-focused dialogue with the teacher, participate enthusiastically in classroom discussions, diligently work on their own to practice and review, and take ownership of the movement practices and techniques that are being learned in class. I believe that students with these self-directed learning skills are better able to excel in a high school dance program. Further, I propose that self-directed skills learned in dance can be applied to a student's life beyond school and into their future career.

My belief in the importance of these skills led me to become curious over the years about the ways in which high school dance educators can support students in becoming self-directed learners. What kinds of dance teaching practices, activities, and classroom environment can support student development of self-directed learning in the dance classroom?

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In this professional project I create and explore dance teaching practices and classroom activities that seek to support the development of self-directed learners. I implement, reflect upon, and analyze these created teaching practices and activities in my high school dance classroom at varied dance levels. Through this approach, I identify and evaluate the quality of the varied teaching practices and activities. As an end result, I evaluate and edit the resultant activities and practices in order to share this research with high school dance educators as a contribution to the field of dance education.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

What activities and teaching practices can I develop for the high school dance classroom in an effort to promote students becoming self-directed learners?

## METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

This qualitative research employs teacher self-study methodology. The specific teacher self-study procedures I used were written journal reflections about my teaching practices and student/classroom reactions. Through the extensive use of reflective memos, I evaluated and analyzed the activities and practices. The procedures I used in order are as follows:

**Summer 2019**, Drill Team Training Camp, July/Aug

**Teaching Self-Study - Written Journal Reflections:** During my summer teaching I wrote down moments in which I noticed positive or negative reactions from my students in relationship to the way in which I communicated with them. This included, for example, moments in which I was encouraging, communicated doubt to them, or joked with them. I was particularly interested in how the effect of my tone, gestures, attitude, body language, words, clarity of instruction, and volume affected my students and their learning process. I considered this first round of observations/reflections to be the stage in which I learned more about how my students were learning in relationship to my teaching practices before I began to implement new activities and teaching practices.

**Analysis of Past Lessons/Activities -** Next, I reviewed lessons from 2015-2019 to see what self-directed activities I had done in the past. I then reflected on what activities I perceived to be successes or failures. I made notes of these reflections on the lessons themselves and looked for activities that provided opportunities for students to lead, to question and to suggest their opinions, while actively participating in, and taking ownership of learning. From this step, I chose specific activities that had positive outcomes in the past, edited them further, and then prepared to teach these improved activities in the fall.

**Fall 2019**, Academic Year, August and October/November

**Teaching Self-Study - Written Journal Reflections:** During the fall semester, with an absence in September, I enacted a teacher self-study during three high school dance classes ranging from beginner to advanced. I wrote journal reflections throughout my day when breaks would allow. At the beginning of the semester, I implemented new activities or edited existing ones, as well as teaching practices that I felt might support students in developing self-directed learning skills. In this written journal I reflected on student engagement, behavior, reactions, and demonstration of commitment to dance learning. Along with observations of the classroom, I also took note of my teaching practices and

language and how I build relationships with students. I then made note of ways colleagues' practices differed from my own.

**Reflection and Analysis of Activities** - Daily, after teaching, I would analyze the activities taught in relationship to my classroom observations and restructure as necessary in preparation for my next class. My goal was to continually teach, reflect, and revise in order to create and find activities that seemed to promote self-directed learning in my students. Particularly, I was looking for activities that provided opportunities for students to lead, ask questions, openly make suggestions, actively participate, and take ownership of learning. From this step, I edited and prepared to teach improved activities to each class with the intention of promoting self-directed learners.

After completing these procedures, I analyzed the self-study reflections and classroom observations, as well as the created activities and teaching practices that I had developed and explored. My goal was to look for findings that might allow an understanding of how to support self-directed learning in the dance classroom.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While developing my research question, I had to ask myself what exactly a self-directed learner is, what a self-directed learner looks like in action, and how might self-directed learning might be demonstrated in a dance classroom. Through a literature review I was able to answer these questions and define these terms. In this section, I provide for the reader information from three areas that served as a foundation for this self-study: self-directed learning, student-centered teaching practices, and the distribution of power and authority in the dance classroom.

### **What is a Self-Directed Learner and What are their Behaviors?**

Within published research, there are many ideas about how schools, classroom structures, and teaching practices should be designed in order to provoke self-directed learning. Researchers have different ideas of what a self-directed learner looks like, how they behave inside of the classroom, and how one becomes self-directed in their learning experiences.

According to Rodney Skager, whose study focuses on naming characteristics of self-directed learners and schooling, a self-directed learner can be identified as one who exhibits seven specific characteristics: self-acceptance, planfulness, intrinsic motivation, internalized evaluation, openness to experience, flexibility, and autonomy. (Skager, 1979) A student who is confident about who they are in the classroom can be seen as a learner. Such a learner also takes initiative in their learning process by identifying their needs, setting attainable goals, and putting a plan in place to achieve the goals they have set.

While some students may need constant motivation from their peers and teachers to participate and move forward in their learning, a self-directed learner does not. This student has the ability to give themselves feedback and receive feedback from others. They are also often curious about learning and eager to participate in new learning experiences. A self-directed learner is also willing to explore new approaches to scholarship while governing their own learning. As Skager notes, “the essential feature of their behavior is a willingness to initiate and maintain systematic learning on their own initiative” (1979, p. 519)

### **What Teaching Practices Support Self-Directed Learning?**

Skager offers four different student-centered educational practices that will lead to the seven characteristics of self-directed learners. These include experiential learning, discovery learning, the open classroom, and structured individualization. Experiential learning has everything to do with experience – learning by doing. Discovery learning is simply experiential learning brought into the classroom. In an open classroom, students are able to make choices about their learning experiences, use resources independently, and interact with people in the classroom freely. Structured individualism is the idea of students structuring and managing their own learning (Skager, 1979)

Robert Curley, Amy Strage, and John W. Thomas (1988) believe that demands, supports, opportunity, and goal structure are four components of a student-centered classroom environment that encourages self-directed learning. The authors argue demands in the classroom are expectations set for the class that are slightly above the required standards. Supports for self-directed learning may include rewarding active learning behaviors that occur in the classroom which foster and maintain these behaviors. It also may include guiding and motivating students to engage in certain activities. In order to bring forth self-directed learning, the teacher must present the students with opportunities and activities that allow them to take ownership of their scholarship. It is believed that setting goals are set in the classroom motivates students to put forth the effort to achieve them. Overall, giving students greater responsibility of their own learning fosters self-directed and active learning in the classroom.

### **How Does Power and Authority in the Dance Classroom Affect Self-Directed Learning?**

Historically, dance educators are often considered to be the primary source of knowledge in the dance classroom. Many consider their responsibility to transfer knowledge to students, instill and enforce discipline, and serve as the one and only authoritative figure in the learning environment. One may find that in most classroom structures, everything in the classroom is set and determined by teachers. This includes, but is not limited to, the goals of the classroom, what is to be learned, what is to be tested and how it is to be tested, what problems are being had in the classroom, and the evaluation of how well or not so well a student is doing based on the teacher's own standards (White, 1982). This teaching practice can result in learners being passive, conforming, and dependent in their learning environments and can also impact the type of learner they become outside of school.

As we move forward in dance education and progress from studio to public schools, authors Becky Dyer (2010), Mary Fitzgerald (2017), and Tanja Råman (2009) see a need for change in the structures of power and authority in the dance classroom setting. Seemingly, the class is not intended to be a transfer of knowledge by one person, but of all who are involved. Traditional teaching practices in the classroom may create a cycle of developing dancers who are trained to only do, while more progressive philosophies call for educators to consider student knowledge and their ability to construct and build that knowledge together as a collective. Others share this goal to shift power in the dance classroom. Mary Fitzgerald, educator and researcher, has gone from authority figure to facilitator of learning. She states, “more and more, I have begun to see myself as a facilitator rather than an instructor in academia, which has resulted in subtle shifts in the structure of my classroom environment” (2017) It is the teachers’ responsibility to create a space where students know that their voices, experiences, and ideas are just as valuable as those of their teachers.

## FRAMEWORK

### **What are the behaviors of Self-Directed Learners?**

- Responsible
- Self-reliant
- Inquisitive
- Self-evaluates/Internalized Evaluation
- Openness to Experience
- Sets Attainable Goals

### **What teaching practices support Self-Directed Learners?**

- Builds Trust
- Encourages Problem Solving
- Provides Descriptive Feedback
- Plans with Students
- Asks Divergent Questions

### **What ways can power and authority be shifted in the classroom?**

- All Inclusive Learning Environment
- View Teacher as Learner



- Student-centered Lessons
- Student-lead Activities

## FINDINGS

Once I completed this teacher self-study and analysis, I implemented activities and teaching practices in relationship to the above framework. Specific findings that correlated with a student self-directed learning environment were identified.

- **When I participated in activities, student participation increased.** I found that when I participated in classroom activities, such as collectively constructing a class dance, most students, even those who were normally reluctant, participated. Additionally, students commented on my participation in numerous ways. For example, “Oh she’s choreographing on the spot!” - “Ms. Crockett is pregnant and she is doing it with us.” - “Oh, you’re showing out! Let me see if I can do it too!” - “Y’all we have to outdo Ms. Crockett’s group!” This palpable and clearly articulated excitement was always accompanied by their increased participation.
- **When I guided students to create original movement, their amount of questions increased.** I found that when I challenged beginner level students to create original choreography their amount of questions to me about their originality and creativity increased drastically. For example, students would ask me “Is it original?” - “Can I use this movement I learned in another class?” - “Ms. Crockett can I use the inversions we learned the other day but put my own spin to it? I want to bend my legs like this.” In many ways these were questions of approval; however, I find that they also demonstrated student engagement with making new discoveries, finding their way, taking control of the process, and meeting the challenge presented to them through inquiry.
- **When I offered suggestions or choices about the direction of the class, students offered their opinions.** While teaching, I would find moments to suggest ideas and welcome students to oppose and offer their own thoughts. For example, I would say, “We just completed the first phase of this project. We could continue on to the second phase or discuss what we discovered during phase 1, what do you all think?” After taking a moment to think, students began offering other ideas. “Ms. Crockett, I think we should get with another group and talk about phase 1. I want to compare what we did. Then we should move on to phase 2.” - “I think we should talk about it as a class really quick then move on.” These repeated moments of group choice-making continually helped us to decide the next step or solve a problem in a way that included student voice and opinion.
- **When I demonstrate vulnerability during activities, students share their personal stories.** During an improvisational activity, students were encouraged to share a memorable moment they have had with family or friends. They were instructed to share these stories with a peer. Some students were reluctant, so I decided to share my personal story with the entire class first. I made it clear that the story did not have to be personal and deep, it could be a happy memory (for some reason my students like to get dark). Students expressed their feelings about my story then turned to their peers ready to share.

During the class discussion at the end of the activity, students wanted to share their stories with the class. “Ms. Crockett, thank you for being vulnerable; it made me want to open up.”

- **When I gave students the opportunity to set clear expectations for our classroom, they held each other, and even me, accountable.** At the beginning of the school year, I led students in the development of classroom expectations. As a class, we sat together to write up these expectations and everyone signed in agreement. Throughout the year the students and I would remind each other of these expectations that were created and agreed upon by everyone. Students would reinforce these expectations, often referring back to the established list. “Guys you know she is going to say something if she sees you all sitting down when she comes in here. Let’s get up and stretch.” - “Uhm Ms. Crockett, why are your shoes on this floor? Isn’t that one of the rules we created?”
- **When students set their own goals for activities, they worked to achieve them.** During activities, I would occasionally check in with students and ask what their goals are if they seemed to be getting distracted, confused, or disoriented. “Our goal is to figure out this section within the next five minutes so that we can move on.” - “If we do not get this done before the class is over, we will be behind next class period.” - “Well that group is ahead of everyone right now. I would like to catch up so we can all be on the same page.” - “I am not concerned about other groups, I want us to have a good quality project.”

## ARTIFACT: TEACHING PRACTICES AND ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT SELF-DIRECTED LEARNERS

Here I outline for the reader, guiding principles developed from the findings which arose from the teacher self-study in relationship to established literature. These principles, or values, are intended to serve as a guide when seeking to support the development of self-directed skills in the dance classroom. Accompanying each guiding principle, except the first, is a classroom activity that puts the principle into action along with a chart to guide teacher language and response. It is also important to note that these principles are not only applicable to dance classrooms, but to many classroom settings.

- **Value: Teacher Language Matters** - What teachers say and how they say it affects the learning environment and students learning process. Strive for language that supports student involvement, inquiry, and exploration. The goal is to use language that encourages students to actively participate in activities, rather than shut down their ideas.
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- **Value: Establish Your Classroom as a Community** - Classrooms that promote self-directed learning have an open climate/culture and utilize a student-centered curriculum.

**Activity: Coat of Arms**

In this activity, the students and teacher individually create a large poster that encompasses information about themselves that they would like to share with the class. This poster includes an animal that represents who you are, a short term and long-term goal, a list of your strengths and weaknesses, and more. After the students and teacher take the time to create a symbol and strategically place the required information inside, share them with the class. As a collective, assign roles for your classroom with the information shared in mind. The roles include Facilitators, Time Keepers, Rule Enforcers, Organizers, and Attendance Trackers. These roles help hold everyone involved in the learning process accountable and helps to maintain an all-inclusive learning community.

**Language**

<b>What to Say</b>	<b>What NOT to Say</b>
Please let me know if I am not being clear.	Did you all not understand what I just said?!
Do not worry about your poster being perfect, I am interested in your poster being a reflection of you.	Remember, I want your work to look just like this.
Do you all mind if I go first? I would like to demonstrate projection and clarity while presenting.	I am going to go first.
When presenting your poster, think about ways you all can elaborate and express yourselves instead of reciting word for word. Tell me WHY or HOW.	Is that it? Okay, and..

- **Value: Student Voices are Valuable** - Providing students an opportunity to be verbally involved can create a sense of ownership of their learning process. Work to encourage students to share their experiences and ideas.

**Activity: This is You (3 Phases)**

In pairs, students will share an impactful life story with their partners and give their partner permission to create a 30-second to 1-minute dance that demonstrated what they heard. It is encouraged that the dance teacher participates in this phase of the activity as well, sharing a personal yet appropriate story with a student. After each group completes their choreography everyone will perform in front of the class. For fun, try to guess each other's stories then reveal the dance's true meaning. Allow partners to explain why they chose certain movements and movement patterns to demonstrate their partner's story. During the next phase, randomly place students into two separate groups. This will challenge them to compile their choreography into two minutes. Suggest different ways they could go about the task then let them work as you facilitate. After each group

performs, allow the audience members to suggest different movement dynamics, spacing options, and more. During phase 3, they would apply these suggestions or explore new ideas, then perform their edited choreography. This activity was done with an upper level dance class who had experience with improvisation and dance composition. These students also had a year of dance together prior to this activity.

### Language

What to Say	What NOT to Say
Here are some ideas; tell me what you all think.	This is how we are going to do this.
I cannot wait to see what you all come up with!	Let's see if you all come up with anything good.
What are we talking about?	Stop talking!
How about you all consider different ways to begin and/or end the dance?	Are you sure you all want to start like that?

- **Value: Disrupt the Traditional Model of a Dance Classroom** - Teachers taking on the role of facilitator rather than authority figure can create opportunities for students to be heavily involved in the learning process. Disrupt the idea of the teacher as all-knowing, training dancers “to do,” and demanding student submission.

**Activity: Our Class Dance**

This activity involves the students and teacher creating an original dance made especially and specifically for the class period. Stand in rows offering short movement phrases one at a time that will accumulate to one full class dance. During this activity, the students are encouraged to give suggestions, commit to ideas even when doubtful, and openly express themselves both verbally and physically. During this choreographic process, the teacher is able to teach students some of their moves and in turn, each student teaches the teacher a move that demonstrates their movement vocabulary. While learning the dance, let students pick Pandora stations in hopes to stumble across a song that the majority of the class will agree on. Once the song is selected, place the movement to the music accordingly and finally, you have your class dance. This is a dance that students will reference throughout the school year. It marks where they began as a class and how they develop as collaborative creators of original movement throughout the year.

## Language

What to Say	What NOT to Say
What did you all notice when I demonstrated the movement?	That is not what I looked like when I demonstrated the movement.
Nice! How about we add this to it?	I do not know about that one, let's try a different movement.
Hmm. That looks similar to this movement: how can we develop it into something like this?	That is not original; come up with something else.
What do you need? Would you like to do it with counts again or try it a few times with music?	We are going to do it with counts until I think you have the movement down.

## CONCLUSION

In doing this project, I was able to deeply reflect about the ways in which I approach the classroom as a dance teacher. Surely, I am the teacher of record, but I strive to create an environment where we as the teachers acknowledge that the classroom is a community of shared experiences and not a democracy. I believe that the learning process can be an engaging experience for all parties involved.

My goal in this research was to identify teaching practices that support the development of self-directed learners. While the resultant values, activities, and language for teachers proved to be important for my teaching practice, these items may not be applicable to all classrooms, or work for all teachers and their students. I hope the offering of the above artifact can help dance classrooms evolve into student-centered learning communities. By offering this, it is my desire to disrupt the idea that submissive students are seen as well behaved and disciplined, while vocally assertive or challenging students are seen as disruptive. Further, this approach supports students in taking ownership of their learning process rather than learning in preparation for an assessment. I value a learning environment where everyone, including myself, can take on the

role of both teacher and student. When supporting students in leading their own learning journeys we are teaching them to be thinkers, leaders, and people who value knowledge.

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