

Statement on Teaching

As a dance educator, I strive to pass on my knowledge of dance and all of its compliments to my students with the hope of inspiring them to become performers, artists, collaborators and educators who will become the future of the dance field. My goal is for my students to leave Agnes Scott with a comprehensive education, strong technical skills, and a deep-rooted respect for the art form. This inquisitiveness will encourage them to pursue further opportunities and studies in the field of dance.

Technique

The task of teaching dance techniques in ballet and modern require a great deal of preparation and observation. Without a background of formal training, an instructor can't provide their students with the information necessary to ensure a safe classroom environment and prepare them for a career in the dance profession. I have been very fortunate to have studied and trained at some of the most renowned dance institutions and universities in the world including two established and distinguished college dance programs; Southern Methodist University, where I received a BFA in dance, and Florida State University, where I fulfilled my MFA in dance. In addition, I have also spent a year at the Laban Centre in London and was a scholarship student at the Martha Graham School and the Alvin Ailey School in New York. It is this formal training that provides me with the technical, artistic and historical context that allows me to bring a well-rounded approach to each student that I teach and mentor.

For me, the excitement of teaching dance technique courses lies in the fact that one course is never similar to that of another, even when teaching the same level or style. The material I present to a class is always original, challenging the dancer both intellectually and physically. I acknowledge that this material must be tailored to suit each particular group of students I am faced with. While some forms of classical ballet technique are codified, this documentation allows for variance in movement material presented while providing a syllabus for terminology to be covered. I prepare my lesson plans with an understanding that in each particular class there will be many different levels of students with varying degrees of experience. Some students enrolled in a higher level course will have had many years of consistent training while others will come to the course with less technical skill but have surpassed the number of times they can take the previous level for credit. It is my responsibility as the instructor to provide a safe environment for each student while balancing the difference in levels with variations to the material prepared.

As a dance educator I am continuously reinventing my approach to the material covered in class. Many dance instructors have their principal philosophies and beliefs about how to teach technique and rely on others to give alternate approaches. This simply wouldn't benefit the students at Agnes Scott since I am the primary instructor they study with over the course of their 4 years as dance students. My goal is to give the students the level and variation of training that they would receive at a larger institution while they also benefit from the personal attention and experiences that a smaller program has to offer. I am constantly reevaluating the methods I am employing to present technical material.

Understanding that each student processes material differently, I strive to bring alternate ideas about approaching movement concepts to the classroom. I do this both physically and analytically, as both types of understanding are integral to achieving a higher level of skill. Improvisational games, video excerpts, props, photographs, readings and of course movement material are presented to the class with specific goals of broadening the technical experience and giving the students many ideas about movement.

With the goal of having each student take on the responsibility of performing as an active participant in class, one curricular requirement in my technique classes is to create short-term goals. These goals are presented by each student to the class and serve to focus the student on their individual progress as they are learning the concepts I am teaching. This added focus helps the student continue to work on the achievements they are looking to make while increasing their physical and intellectual capabilities. These goals are then assessed by peer observation and evaluation. I believe that hearing a correction in class is not always enough stimulus for a student to make the changes necessary to produce proficient technique. The student may feel that they are executing the movement correctly and sometimes they have to identify a problem on another body to truly understand how to make the change in their own. For this kind of reflection, I use a technique created by a former educator, Muska Mosston which allows the student to act as instructor to one of their peers, analyzing and correcting movement objectively and constructively. Prior to allowing the students this freedom they are coached in proper constructive delivery of feedback. This technique of observation and review proves successful in assisting each student in their own technical conquests and I will continue this practice so the student is fully engaging themselves in their technical evolution.

Attending the American College Dance Festival each year really helps me to self evaluate my progress as a technique teacher and fuel my creativity to keep making revisions to my approach. I spend the conference observing my students taking class with other professional instructors to evaluate the level of dancer I am producing in relationship to the other college level dancers attending the conference. I also look to other approaches to technique and artistry being utilized in classes by other instructors that my students are connecting with. The students and I also have conversations about what they found to be their strengths and weakness in the classes they take and I take that into account for future lesson planning. In the many years I have taken students to the conference I have been validated by a panel of adjudicators offering feedback on performance. Each year we get stunning reviews about technical skill and artistic achievements in our classical and modern dance performances.

Artistry/Delivery of Movement

In each course I teach, I am constantly reminding my students that dance is a performance art. This means that while some are enrolled only for the purpose of fulfilling a physical education requirement, they will be expected to use their minds and emotions as well as their physicality in my courses. My beliefs are rooted in the notion that when performing movement, the body is the instrument for conveying an idea or story of which physical movement alone will not portray. I believe that when a student is engaged in the practice of being present both physically and emotionally, they can further

connect to their training. The technical training the students are receiving in my classes is deeply rooted in understanding where the movements originated. For example, in classical ballet technique the codified positions were derived from the stance of the fencer that was considered fashionable. When learning the many positions we refer to photographs that date back hundreds of years which aide in memory, artistry, and technical articulation. Often in the classical work, the dancer is portraying a character that will require specific gesture and nuance to the movement. This characterization is important to fulfilling the movement correctly and is referred to in class. When teaching the codified Martha Graham technique in modern class, I introduce the students to imagery passed down from the legend herself through dancers who trained at the Martha Graham School, including myself. This imagery is necessary in properly executing the technique of the movement with the correct energy. Without this artistic component the execution of the movement wouldn't be accurate. Working with this artistic focus not only benefits the student as they see progression in their technical level, but also helps the student to have a release of energy that is healthy and emotive to their daily lives, deeply connecting them to the art form.

Choreography

I approach my choreography classes as an environment for students to find their artistic voice. No longer confined by the constraints of learning material created by others, I encourage my students to find their own way to express ideas through movement. Throughout the progression of two semesters, Choreography I and Choreography II focus on the tools and concepts necessary to create and vary their choreography as well as the necessary applied practice in directing their own work.

Choreography I begins by exploring time, space and energy with the use of Motif writing. Motif is a systematic way of developing, documenting, and describing movement based on Labanotation symbols. Lessons include analysis of these concepts through the use of the motif symbols and lead to creation of simple movement phrases with the guidance of the motif score. I have found that this guidance really aides the student who is self-guessing their choreographic choices as the motif score provides a structure in the beginning stages of the course. The class then progresses to practice concepts such as rhythm, dynamics, and spatial awareness. Using these concepts, I challenge the student with improvisational exercises encouraging them to derive original movement. This practice of creating smaller movement exercises, experimenting and analyzing each idea, opens the students mind to new ways of moving and creating. Ultimately these experiences will help the student to texturize and inspire larger choreographic works. Students in this course each create a final piece of choreography utilizing the tools learned in class and documenting their choreography in motif writing.

I approach Choreography II as a vehicle to deepen the knowledge gained in Choreography I by challenging the student with lessons that encourage the discovery of choreographic identity. The sensory stimuli are channeled; bringing a new layer of description to the movement the students are creating from concepts learned in the previous semester. By working in spaces that are not traditional dance spaces, the students are encouraged to move differently, responding to obstacles. I also include

lessons about Merce Cunningham's Philosophy of chance. Chance is a tool used to encourage spontaneity in creation. Incorporating chance encourages the student to be open to the surprises that happen in their bodies when they are not overanalyzing what each specific movement looks like from the perspective of the observer. I have found that this freedom allows the student to make work that is more inspired and innovative.

Collaboration is another key component to the Choreography II course as I feel strongly that interactions between disciplines enrich both the value of work created and each collaborators experience greatly. The unique fusion of sound, image, and movement expands the traditional aesthetic modes of expression and establishes a new concept of shared artistic experience. In spring 2014 alongside professor Nell Ruby, Choreography II (DAN 317) and Three dimensional thinking (ART 243/343) were implemented as a combined course called *Complex Mammals Moving and Making: Collaborating in the Creative Arts* of which the creation was a result of the Mellon Cohort 2 grant. The course offered in 2 parts served to engage and awaken the senses which led to a larger collaborative project. Through a series of collaborative ventures, discussions brought upon several approaches to a topic that revealed new ways of creating work. Students were greatly impacted by these collaborative ventures as they took part in the discussion and directly shaped the direction of the larger work. This kind of experience is directly engaging the student in the experience of liberal learning which they will continue to value and incorporate in the work they do in their student and professional lives.

Throughout these courses my goal is to provide the student with a learning environment that is safe for exploration. I prefer to utilize games in replacement of exercises that encourage the student to make new choices about movement of which they can begin to find their choreographic voice and identity. It is most rewarding as an instructor to see that a challenge you have provided has enlightened a student to find their own way of communicating an idea with the clarity of a seasoned choreographer.

Labanotation and Providing a Historical Context

Description of Labanotation from the Dance Notation Bureau, Inc.:

Labanotation is a symbol-based language used to analyze, describe, and document movement. For over 70 years, the Dance Notation Bureau has committed itself specifically to the preservation of dance. Labanotation scores, in the form of manuscripts, preserve not only the choreographic work but vital directorial and production information as well.

Throughout my professional life I have been actively staging choreography from Labanotation score. I find this to be a vital component in educating the dance student both in movement analysis and in history. By staging/reconstructing from score, dancers get to travel back into the body and mind of a choreographer and perform in dances that have shaped the art form. This takes much research and investigation on the part of the stager as well as the dancer. Reading a Labanotation score and dancing in a reconstruction is researching dance history, as the intentions and movement must be accurately transferred into the body of the dancers. In addition, all of the components of the production must remain true to the original integrity of the dance as indicated in the

Labanotation score. Just as a history major would be expected to spend hours researching a topic for a research paper, the dance student and stager must research and investigate in the same way. The only difference is the history major will present the research in the form of a paper while the dancer presents her findings in a fully invested performance of the dance that is otherwise only read about in text books. Readings, photographs, and video footage become an integral part of the rehearsal/class process to supplement the movement with the essential raw emotion and dynamic quality. The Labanotation score allows the student to look at movement from an analytical perspective, giving students tools to more clearly understand the intention of movement through their readings of the clusters of symbols known as dance notation. This analytical approach allows the student to more clearly articulate their observations about movement and draw observations about the choreographer's original intent for the dance.

As an instructor of both technical and theoretical courses in Dance, I find the most exciting connections made by the students are those that support one another. Once a student is exposed to Labanotation, their questions in technique class become much more articulated resulting in a more rapid physical understanding of the concept. By connecting the historical context, they learn in both Labanotation and technique classes, students are drawing parallels between the technical material they experience today with the codified techniques of the past. This information is helping the student to draw connections and find influences in new repertory; drawing conclusions about how it may be affected by choreographers they have been introduced to in their historical lessons.

Appreciation

I believe that teaching the student to appreciate dance is just as important as learning to move in a technically correct manner. All of my courses include a viewing component which serves to inform the student of the many different styles and approaches to dance and choreography. Students are encouraged to form their own opinions about what they are seeing and to respect the work that they are not typically drawn to. My technique classes all include 2 video showings per semester. During a video viewing class students are exposed to dance of choreographers that may create work that is different from what they are used to seeing. Between each piece of choreography, I lead the students through a discussion about what they saw and how they processed it. The conversation becomes very exciting as there are usually varying opinions and ideas about what the work was trying to say. Throughout the discussion I encourage the students to be respectful of the opinion of others and respect the artistry of the work they have just witnessed. My hope is that these experiences will encourage respect and appreciation of new ideas that will carry into their professional lives.

In addition to the video showings, I require my students to go out into the community and see and respond to one performance per semester. With the critical experiences they have experienced in video class sessions, the students are expected to write a formal response paper to this concert that contains a constructive review of what they have seen. While this is certainly another exercise in movement analysis, this is also an effort to get the young public interested in the arts and forming the habit of going to the theatre.

Progression of Student to Professional

My job of instructor goes way beyond the classroom experience and I continue to be a mentor to my students even after they have long graduated from Agnes Scott. My goal is not only to engage and train a student during their college career, but to truly invest myself in them so that they can be successful professionally. I never look at a student's work and think it is for the benefit of the course but rather for the benefit of their own personal continued success. Whether that means preparing a student for a professional career in dance or for a professional career in nursing, I am committed to teaching lessons that will sustain the student for the long run. I am a believer that habits are formed in college and I strive to pass on habits that will prove successful in any career path while holding my students responsible for each action they take in my presence.

For those students wishing to embark on a professional career in the dance field I try to prepare them for their first auditions by assisting them in the process of creating a dance resume and cover letter. This is integrated into the curriculum via the Dance Performance course. Together as a class we look at many different types of resumes required in the dance field. The student then compiles all of the work they have done to date and creates a draft resume that the class as a whole discusses and critiques. By the end of the semester each student has a working resume that they will continue to adapt and refine throughout their careers.

In addition to writing recommendations, acting as a reference, assisting students in making contacts in the community and giving them experiences that will help build their resume, I also put a great deal of significance on the topic they choose to study for their senior project requirement. Before they make a decision about what they want their final course of the Dance Major to entail, we have much discussion about the path they are looking to travel and how this culminating course will help them professionally. Recently, I have taught senior projects in teaching dance technique, choreography, research in dance as a method of healing, classical ballet, and Labanotation. Each course was specifically tailored for the student to give them the experiences that will serve them in moving forward in their careers.

I truly believe that it takes more than a strong series of lesson plans to be an influential teacher. Throughout all of the varied courses I teach my approach is constantly rooted in the notion that I am supplying the students with the experiences and guidance necessary to provide them with ideas that will promote growth. Always intertwining theory and technical practice, I am strongly committed to challenging students to become successful and driven in their professional lives.