

RESOURCE PAPER FOR DANCERS AND TEACHERS

Technique Class Participation Options for Injured Dancers

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INTRODUCTION

Dance teachers assume responsibility for creating an educational environment that encourages a constructive and informed approach to the injuries that inevitably occur during training. While injuries can be frightening and frustrating to students, they also provide opportunities for students to learn about their bodies and tools for self-care, fostering responsibility and agency. Teachers can help injured students cope with the emotional and physical challenges of their injuries while assisting in their return to full dancing by offering flexible options for class attendance and participation.

Injured dance students frequently turn to their dance teachers for advice about technique class participation. Teachers may encourage students to treat their bodies with respect and take the necessary time to heal by advocating pain-free dancing and by helping students decide how fully to participate in class. With the shared goal of full recovery, students and teachers can collaborate on maximizing the student's participation while injured.

In designing class participation options, it is important to acknowledge the emotional ramifications of injuries. In addition to experiencing anxiety and frustration, injured dancers may suffer from loss of the social identity and peer support that they gain in technique classes and rehearsals. Finding ways for injured students to maintain their connection to peers and to feel valued by instructors contributes to their emotional well-being at a stressful time.

Useful class participation strategies vary depending on the severity of injury and phase of recovery. Some injuries may permit partial class participation while others require complete rest. The guiding factors should be the amount and type of dance activity permitted by the injury. With advice from medical practitioners, teachers can determine which movements should be avoided and which may safely be executed while accommodating an injury and supporting recovery.

Guided by the injury severity and recovery stage, teachers can select from the following class participation options: class modifications, alternative forms of participation, and alternatives to class attendance.

MODIFYING CLASS PARTICIPATION

Some stages of injury recovery require only modifications to class exercises. Exercises that frequently must be modified include impact movements such as jumps, deep knee flexion such as grand pliés, and spiraling movements of the spine.

The teacher's goal should be to help students avoid the "too much too soon" syndrome, which prolongs recovery unnecessarily. If medical advice is not available, teachers can recommend pain free range of motion: students may perform any movements that can be executed with no pain at all, both during and following the class. Given the tendency of dancers to ignore pain and their desire to dance as fully as possible, it is also helpful to suggest that students do less than what they think is possible. For example, students can participate in class, but stop early or reduce their expected range of movement, height of jumps, and exertion levels.

When modifying class activities for injured students, teachers should try to optimize participation and learning. This requires creativity on the teacher's part. One approach is to permit students to participate in all class activities that are not affected by the injury, eliminating only the actual movements that cause pain or delay healing. For example, students who are not allowed to jump may perform a jumping combination without leaving the floor. Dancing at the back of a group, they can work on use of the upper body, coordination of arm and leg movements, visual focus and quick directional changes, while marking the leg movements.

A second approach is to modify movements to accommodate the injury restrictions. Often this involves reducing the range of motion and level of difficulty. Examples of accommodations include keeping legs close to the floor rather than at full height, working from first rather than fifth position, doing demi-pliés rather than grand pliés and reducing the range of spinal movements.

A third approach is to modify standing exercises by moving them to the floor, eliminating the weight bearing demands on the lower body. For example, ballet students may be able to complete floor barres, while modern and jazz students may be able to participate in the floor portions of a warm-up. Dancers can also execute class exercises while seated on a chair or an exercise ball.

Regardless of approach, it is important for teachers to treat injured students as full members of the class, providing feedback, and acknowledging efforts. In doing so, teachers send the message that injured students are still a valued part of their dancing community.

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF CLASS PARTICIPATION

When students are not permitted to execute any class material, teachers can create alternative ways for them to participate in technique classes. These alternative methods offer opportunities for students to explore new modes of learning and gain new perspectives on their dance training. Some alternative participation options include visualization, written observations, and assistant teaching.

MENTAL PRACTICE OF MOVEMENT

Visualizing movement, known as Mental Practice of Movement, is an effective way to maintain neuromuscular connections, analyze personal habits, and refine movement planning. Mental practice is accompanied by nervous system activity that can improve the dancer's coordination on return to full physical participation. Students can choose between visualizing themselves experiencing the movement from the inside (kinesthetic practice) or observing themselves from the outside as if viewing a video (visual practice).

Teachers can instruct students to observe combinations, then close their eyes and visualize executing the movements while noticing the instructions and cues they give themselves. They can also visualize correct movement execution and analyze how that differs from their customary experience. With knowledge about habitual patterns, dancers can mentally experiment with finding new ways to approach familiar movements, thus contributing to their improvement upon return to class.

WRITTEN CLASS OBSERVATIONS

Observing classes allows students to recognize their own tendencies, identify strategies for change, and set technical goals. Class observation can also foster a teaching perspective, encouraging students to analyze class structure and the teacher's choices, hence preparing them for a time when they themselves become teachers.

Teachers can invite students to observe classes, guiding their learning through assigned questions that students respond to in writing, encouraging reflective practices, and critical thinking. (A form can be provided.) Students can be instructed to observe the class as a whole or to watch a single peer. Sample questions include:

- Mention three of the teacher's general or individual feedback comments. How does this feedback apply to you?
- What do you see in your dancing peers that you can apply to yourself?
- Are there any students in the class who are inspiring to you? Why, specifically?

- What do you notice about the relationship between the music and the movement? How are individual dancers responding to the music? How do the musician's choices influence the way that the combinations are danced?
- How is observing this class a useful part of your education?
- How might you apply what you've learned today in your other classes?

Through guided observations, students can take advantage of the opportunities that injuries provide to find distance and perspective on their own work. In this way they gain valuable self-knowledge while remaining connected to their peers.

ASSISTING TEACHERS AND CHOREOGRAPHERS

Students may assist teachers in their own level or the classes of less advanced students. At the teacher's request, observing students can provide feedback to the class, identifying the challenges and successes they perceive in their peers. They may also be assigned an instructional role, assisting other students in correct execution.

Serving as a choreographer's assistant in rehearsals can help injured students feel that they are still valued members of the group, combating the isolation and grief they may feel over the loss of a performance opportunity. They can take notes for the choreographer, run the music, and assist the understudies.

ALTERNATIVES TO TECHNIQUE CLASS PARTICIPATION

There are limits to the length of time that class observation can be useful. When students experience acute injuries that eliminate dancing for an extended period, it is advisable to create alternatives to attending classes after the initial two weeks. Two excellent substitutes for technique class attendance are conditioning and somatic activities. These alternative forms of movement education provide the benefit of continuing students' technical growth at a time when injury prevents them from dancing.

Schools that have conditioning facilities can direct students to replace technique classes with global conditioning programs and injury-specific rehabilitation. Schools that lack such facilities can refer students to physical therapists as well as conditioning experts such as Pilates, Gyrotonic®, and personal trainers. Teachers can also refer students to practitioners of somatic techniques such as Bartenieff Fundamentals, Alexander Technique, and Feldenkrais Method to develop internal awareness of movement patterns while accommodating injury limitations.

Pedagogical analysis is another alternative to class participation. Students can develop their teaching skills by analyzing classes from a teacher's perspective. They can be assigned to observe different instructors, levels, and dance forms, comparing class content, structure, and instructional methods. These observations can be tracked in a journal or summarized in a more formal essay.

MEETING ASSESSMENT AND GRADING REQUIREMENTS

Injuries can create particular problems in educational environments such as arts high schools and colleges where students are required to earn credit for a stated quantity of technique courses in order to receive a diploma or degree. Usually these courses are assessed and graded with minimum grades and course completion required for graduation. In these circumstances, faculty often find it difficult to assess and assign grades to the work of injured students, while the students often feel pressured to participate fully in order to earn technique credits and make progress toward their degrees. This sense of pressure can lead to a premature return to full class, resulting in prolonged injuries.

The challenge in these situations is to provide teachers with assessable work without jeopardizing students' recoveries from injuries. Many of the options discussed above provide alternative, assessable work, ranging from class modifications to alternative participation assignments such as conditioning and somatic activities. If necessary, these alternative activities can be verified through letters of documentation from conditioning and somatic teachers.

In educational settings, research projects can also serve as an alternative form of assessable participation. Students can research their injuries, including common causes and suggested rehabilitation, documenting their learning through research essays. These research assignments can serve as yet another substitute for physical participation.

SUMMARY

Dance teachers serve as a resource for their students' recovery from injuries. By providing an adaptable learning environment that accommodates injuries, teachers encourage students to become educated, thinking dancers who assume personal responsibility for their bodies and dancing. Teachers and students can collaborate creatively on developing individualized participation plans that allow injured students to continue their dance activities to the fullest extent possible. This, in turn, permits students to maintain connections to their peer group and know that they are still learning and growing, albeit by a different path.

RECOMMENDED READING

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