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Integrating Somatics and Meditation into Dance Curriculum

It can feel impossible to add moments of healthful relaxation to an already crowded schedule, but it's something that definitely enhances a dancer's body and mind

by Emeline Lotherington

As dancers, we are skilled in molding our bodies to another person's vision. To do this, we often place our needs and desires to one side, which can result in physical and psychological tension. Although training can instill resilience and open-mindedness, it can also lead to the habit of ignoring your instincts. Throughout my own journey of dance, I have found that productive rest and thoughtful insight enhanced my artistry, performance, and health more than repetition and untimely conditioning. When I overexert myself with a crowded mind or misaligned structure, I end up with painful strains and poor muscular habits. What helps? I propose that a series of educated rest, stretch, and conditioning classes be integrated into dancer curriculum in order to give tools to look inwards and make healthy decisions, according to what's needed for a dancer's body and mind.

I have researched the dance curricula at the following schools: The University of California, Irvine's Claire Trevor School of the Arts; The University of Southern California's Gloria Kaufman's School of Dance; The Juilliard School of Dance; and Point Park University's Conservatory of Performing Arts. The Claire Trevor school, which I currently attend, offers a limited amount of Pilates for conditioning and Laban Movement Analysis, which is a technique of viewing movement without opinion. Juilliard teaches courses in Alexander technique, which uses imagery and physical cues to maintain alignment and reshape movement habits; and also has a course in Gaga dance, an approach to movement that is improvisational and exploratory, with a focus on releasing held tensions and connecting to one's effort. Gloria Kaufman's program requires several years of improvisational classes and one conditioning course. Point Park University's conservatory offers a class on body alignment and a separate one named "somatic preparation."

All of these somatic and internally-based classes are only required for a limited amount of time, and in the case of UCI, there is a restriction on the amount of retakes allowed. I have taken classes where teachers like Alana Isiguen, Dante Puleio, Chad Michael Hall, and Tong Wang, guide a body scan meditation, direct partner bodywork (massage), or give yoga poses. When these prompts are presented in class, I feel more grounded, appreciated, relaxed and focused. My desire to learn grows and my movement effort feels more genuine and purposeful.

I propose a series of daily classes consisting of Improvisation or Gaga Technique, Stretch and Conditioning, Mindful Meditation, Yoga, and Foam Roller coupled with Self and Partner Massage. These classes would be held regularly, and the students would have a required number of hours they would need to attend, but freedom of class choice based on their personal needs and interests. This would encourage the students to listen intently to what they need, which is important in the mindset of an artist. In meditation, the students would learn how to connect to alpha brain waves to facilitate focus, relaxation and, some studies show, compassion and interpersonal connection (Bergland). Awareness of bodily and emotional messages would increase, preventing injury, and enhancing mental health and community. Meditation increases blood circulation and integrates deep breathing, maximizing energy, overall health, and stamina. Similar to high-performing athletes that use imagery to reach their goals, this would be beneficial for recollection of detailed dance steps.

One class would be a time of deep stretching and light conditioning where there can be hands-on corrections that are suited for the individual's needs. There would be a yoga class for alignment, balance, and conditioning. As I partake in yoga, I become aware of any misalignment

and imbalance in muscle usage. A Gaga or similar-styled improvisation class would be a space for creativity, non-judgement, and self-exploration. Gaga dance is based on the idea that “dance is a sensation, not an image of yourself” (Gittings, 15). Lastly, dancers could learn how to physically release tensions through physical pressure and bodywork in a foam roller, self-massage and partner massage class.

When I was introduced to meditation, I was going through an emotionally tumultuous time. Dance, which was once my savior and sanity, had morphed into an impossibility. My body was too numb and mute, and my head too crowded to feel, as though I could move at all. Once I began practicing meditation and integrating thoughtful introspection into my life, my mind became more clear. I have witnessed a significant difference between the times I meditate before class and when I do not. Connecting to a peaceful mindset provides space for me to absorb information completely and quickly. I hear the music in detail and my movement has a relaxed, grounded and expanding energy to it. There is a sense of decreased judgement of my own physicalities. Non-judgmental improvisation and Gaga dance classes have provided catharsis for me, releasing held tensions. I discover new and innovative ways to use my body. Massage and stretching are important to me for they are the physical approach to relaxation. There are some tensions and habits that are difficult to unlock without physical pressure and touch. I believe our being responds to practices differently depending on what they need in the moment. Having the freedom of choice will encourage us as artistic movers to listen closely to our bodies and have the confidence to act accordingly.

Overall morale and motivation will increase with the introduction of these methods. I have witnessed this heightened sense of community and engagement in some classes, when there is genuine attention to the dancers’ personal needs and mental location. The teachers of these courses would have experience in somatic techniques, the use of imagery and deep breathing, and perhaps physical therapy for the stretching class.

Self-care is crucial for our souls, especially as artistic athletes. I hope that dance programs will increasingly be able to support the dancer as a whole being. I believe that learning and practicing methods like meditation, stretch, improvisation, and massage, will give dancers valuable tools for self-care, ultimately expanding creativity and empowering dance artists.

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Emeline Lotherington was part of the 2017 graduating class at the University of California, Irvine with a B.F.A. in Dance Performance. She hopes to continue researching the relationship between consciousness and dance movement to use as a healing modality.
