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Why every college student should take a dance class

If the idea is to educate global citizens ready to improve the world, then learning more awareness and empathy in a movement class can help.

by Veronica Allen

I have been a dancer my entire life, and I can confidently say I would be a completely different person without dancing. As I near the end of my college career, I am stepping into the *real* dance world and reflecting on what this art form has given me. While another dancer could relate to my list of what dance has taught me, a non-mover might be surprised at how far-reaching it is. As dancers, we don't just learn technique, we also learn how to build real-life skills in ways that are advantageous for everyone. These ways include, but are not limited to, having spatial awareness, emotional intelligence, embodied knowledge, and a mind-body connection. These things are deeply integrated with one another, like a web of knowledge. What about students who have never had the chance to learn through movement? What are they missing out on?

Over the years, I have spent countless hours in the studio, and one of the most prominent skills it has taught me relates to the mind-body connection. A quick google search explains mind-body connection as “the link between a person's thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors and their physical health” (Wing). In studio classes, we use various techniques of movement, mindfulness, and breathing exercises to reflect on what we are feeling that day and how to respond in our work. For example, we might start modern class with a one-word check-in to make ourselves present in class. This simple activity not only helps to establish where I am that day, but also gives me the chance to hear about other's experiences and learn to support them. Our way of learning creates a sense of community and connection as we listen to collective bodies, identify emotions, and respond to our needs. It's one of the ways dance has taught me how to have empathy for others inside and outside the studio.

Related to this, dance has given me a strong sense of spatial awareness. In class, I have to be aware of others in the space to move fluidly between people while executing expansive movement. This translates to everyday life when I am able to sense those around me in public spaces and make room for others in a crowded elevator, for example. Similarly, I have gained embodied knowledge. Dr. Celeste Snowber, a dance and arts educator, gives an example by describing how movement classes can result in the ability to read a person's body language to know their confidence level or mood. Embodied knowledge is another way to develop empathy for others through dance.

Another value that dance has instilled in me is being able to invest in my inner-child. As we grow up, we often lose touch with the playful and curious side of ourselves. Embodiment classes however, thrive on and encourage a sense of play, explore creativity, and provide an opportunity to find personal expression, hopefully while free of judgment. Janice Steiber-Rous, a student of Embodiology® (a movement exploration program developed by Dr. S. Ama Wray) testifies that it has allowed her to “further [her] own capacity to be an explorer, to be curious, to find new solutions” (Embodiology®). It is through movement that people can learn to let go of

expectations and find joy.

Due to the expressive nature of dance and its connection to emotion, I have been able to understand and manage my emotions through movement, as well as learning how to be vulnerable. Since classes are communal, others are also working through these ideas, and it allows you to be empathetic to what they could also be experiencing. Being vulnerable and in touch with your emotions sometimes has a negative connotation associated with being weak. However, according to Harvard Business Online, the “Global leadership development firm DDI ranks empathy as the number one leadership skill.” In this way, dance has given me the tools to connect with others on a deeper level and learn how to better give and take direction.

These are some of the skills I think everyone should have the chance to access through movement classes. Just imagine how different public situations might be if everyone had a little more spatial awareness and empathy for others? If students in university were required to take an embodiment course, whether ballet, jazz, or a form of social dance, these ideas could be explored with creativity and fun. It could also spark engagement with dance in those who have never had prior experience, and it would give non-dancers more perspective on what dance majors are studying. This could even lead to a better understanding of the arts and help develop dance audiences, so one day we might not have to work so hard to defend our choice to major in dance.

There are even more advantages to having students engage in embodiment. Dance is being incorporated into therapy and it has shown to improve brain function and help those struggling with their mental health (Berrol 28). It could have the power to create a happier and more productive student body. It could also connect students to the global world of movement. Snowber’s *Dance As a Way of Knowing*, begins with the bold statement, “Dance is our birthright” (53), and goes on to explain that movement is a universal human experience and connects us all. There are traditional dance forms found all around the world that can be studied, and knowing their roots can provide understanding for other cultures. For example, Embodiology® incorporates aspects of rhythms and dance found in Ghana. In an increasingly global world, the body is something often left out of the discussion of being a global citizen. What are the steps we can take to change this and embrace movement?

What I have learned from dance has made me a better human. I believe that more people should have the chance to access what I have learned through dance. One way that this could be fulfilled is by making one of UCI’s General Education (GE) requirements be an embodiment class. As undergraduate students we are all required to enroll in GE courses, which, according to UCI’s Catalogue, “are designed to cultivate the skills, knowledge, and understanding that will make students effective contributors to society and the world.”

I believe that dance extends beyond the studio walls and builds well rounded humans that are empathetic, passionate, driven, creative, and intelligent in many ways. The skills it has given me are invaluable, and I encourage everyone to let go of past judgements to see what an embodiment class can offer.

Veronica Allen graduated from University of California, Irvine in June 2023, with a BFA in Dance Performance. She has since moved to New York City to pursue dance interests motivated by collaboration and authenticity.

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