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Is studying dance technique enough?

The argument for cross-training includes being fit enough to survive in today's athletic professional dance companies

by Jessica Richards

Audition season is here...and I'm not ready. I showed up to one company audition and knew within minutes I was not at the level I had in mind when I decided to major in dance four years ago. I am a graduating senior. I should be ready—not wishing I had more time to train. I wish I knew in my freshman year that I needed supplemental training to enhance the dance I was receiving in my technique classes. I take ballet class every day but in no way is that enough to build the strength and stamina companies need for today's evolving choreographic demands. If collegiate dance programs are going to claim to provide prestigious training to prepare students for the professional world, cross-training should be incorporated into course requirements.

The reason I beg for another class to add to my hectic weekly schedule is because I was successful in improving my physical and mental health when cross-training was presented as a required assignment. In Spring Quarter of 2018, the Modern III students at my university were required to complete at least two hours of supplemental training every week instead of the Friday class period. Some took it seriously and others probably lied and took advantage of one less 8 a.m. class to show up to. Speaking for myself, I wanted to explore new ways of keeping my body in check. I went to the gym, hiked, swam, and took several hot yoga and Pilates reformer classes. I even began to experiment with body weight exercises at home and before ballet. The extra five minutes here and there every day added up. I found myself exceeding the weekly two hour minimum of supplemental training all because it was a required assignment that counted towards my grade.

At the end of quarter, my data proved that I reached a higher level of stamina, strength, and mental health. At the beginning of the quarter I could do thirty-two push-ups in a minute and hold a forearm plank for two minutes. By the end, I could do thirty-nine push-ups in a minute and hold a forearm plank for four minutes. Because of my success and my peers' success, I believe dance majors who are pursuing an emphasis in dance performance should be required to take supplemental training classes throughout their college education.

Both Pilates mat and Pilates reformer are offered in my dance program at the University of California, Irvine. However, the courses are offered as an elective option and students may only take the mat class twice and the reformer class once. Olga Smirnova from Bolshoi Ballet confirms after using Pilates to recover from injury that it is a practice that helps further understanding how logical and sensible the way our bodies function really is. She says, "It becomes possible once you get familiar with your body and understand what it needs at any given moment." I agree that this practice can make a dancer's career last longer. I have arranged my schedule so that I can take full advantage of the practice offered in my program, but not everyone does. It may be because they do not realize how helpful the extra muscle fine-tuning enhances alignment and execution in technique classes.

Yoga is also a popular practice that can benefit dance training. Taught by certified instructors, it encourages a state of a peaceful mind, body, and soul. Jessica Innes points out in a *Dance Informa* article that the “standing poses focus on balance, concentration, alignment, and stamina,” while “the seated poses allow for deep stretching in order to improve flexibility, as well as clarity of mind.” All of the focal points target valuable qualities dancers work on in their training. Yoga could also appeal to dance majors as a therapeutic outlet, especially when their school work load becomes overwhelming.

I discovered my love for hot yoga because of the supplemental training experiment I did with the Modern III class. I took various classes, doing free-week trials at three different studios. I went every day, sometimes twice, to make the most of it. The classes offered different intensities that met my body’s needs. If I felt extremely fatigued, I would take the class that led me through multiple stretches in an atmosphere that cleared my head. If I felt ready work hard, I would take a class that would flow through the poses at increasing rates and incorporated weights and extra cardio. In her *Pointe Magazine* article, Jennifer Stahl shares that yoga taught her to find an awareness in her body to make her “really *feel*.” She goes on to state that: the emphasis on intention and being present helped [her] find greater focus in the studio, and more importantly, onstage.” This is what BFA Dance Performers need. College dance programs should offer these types of classes.

What if exercise class sessions were simply presented as co-course to daily technique classes? Similar to how a weekly discussion nurturer further understanding of lectures in academic classes, a conditioning class could be a fifty-minute session where students are walked through a series of cardio and body weight exercises. Or a one-unit biweekly cardio session could be added. Students can be taught how to correctly execute push-ups and hold planks. They can learn exercises for hamstrings, inner thighs, triceps, and other areas of the body that dancers may find difficult to engage in class. Some exercise could be to provide students with purely aerobic benefits. Ballet class is tough, and some people break a sweat, but stamina is not really challenged until the end of class when allegro is incorporated.

I can attest that it is difficult to find time, energy, and motivation to commit to improving your stamina and strength—especially for stressed-out college students. But if supplemental forms are included in dance classes, they may discover that the discipline pays off. Many students cannot afford additional classes outside of school, and it’s hard to lead themselves through a practice at home. Popular forms with certified teachers often cost at least \$20 or more a class, especially because Pilates, yoga, and even spin classes are huge SoCal fads. As much as I encourage the Groupon life, I still struggle to afford the extra classes. I know plenty of peers in the same boat. Classes incorporated into dance major curriculum would save students the financial strain.

I am not at the level of fitness I want, especially at this time when I wanted to be ready to enter the professional world of dance. I believe I could have been closer to achieving my goals if I had the time and money to cross-train. But my course load has had me so stressed and tired that I turn to late night snacks to get me through my homework when I should be eating a balanced home-cooked meal at least three hours before eight hours’ worth of a night’s sleep to restore the body for the next day. I know that many other students struggle the same way, because we share our frustrations on a daily basis. We only get more and more exhausted instead of stronger throughout the school year.

Success in the professional concert world is attainable. People do make it after graduating college programs, and I believe students would not burn out as often if they had access, motivation, and understanding that supplemental training is necessary to enhance their performance in technique classes and performances year round.

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