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Dance is unique as an art form because it leaves no tangible record of its existence. It is real as long as the dance lasts, and then it is gone. At the same time, it is one of the oldest forms of expression. Even primates and animals perform their own kinds of dance rituals, and today for humans social dancing is the norm. Because I have a passion for dance, I am driven to share this with other people. Because I have experience with performing dance myself, I wanted to share this with students. Working with the extended day program at the School of Arts and Sciences, I taught a group of young girls dance, and helped them compile a performance, showing of all they’d learned.

The School of Arts and Sciences is not a traditional school. There the emphasis in on the arts and the students’ own contributions and ideas, so my class fit well. I wanted the girls to come up with their own movement ideas, and in the performance piece I left room for their own improvisation. In her innovative methodological teaching book *Brain-Centered Dance Education*, Anne Green Gilbert acknowledges that “movement is the key to learning” (5). One fact that is too often overlooked today is that we, as people, are our bodies, and our bodies are not just boxes for transporting our minds. Just as it is true that movement is the key to learning, so is the opposite true, that learning movement is key. Activating and coordinating the body to music involves the brain and whole being on another level than sitting in class does. At the same time, anything learned in dance class extends to all of life, because all life is an open space through which a person moves.

The Royal Academy of Dance style, or any structured program, takes a different

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direction from what I did with the girls, because most of them had little if any, dance experience. The more we played games, engaging the students in ways patterned after Gilbert’s suggestions, the better they focused and enjoyed themselves. It is always inspiring for me to read about great masters of dance, and to try to learn something from them to pass along. As Bill T. Jones told Rose Eichenbaum in her book *Masters of Movement: Portraits of America’s Great Choreographers*, “the artist should be the freest individual in our society.” That sense of freedom, a disregard for the impossible, is what I tried to instill in the girls. When we played games I loved seeing them come up with their own movements, from using props like scarves or discs to working in small groups with contact to acting out different verbs in space.

The composition of the group shifted over the months, just as my expectations and lessons did. Because parents came at their convenience to retrieve their children after work, I had to be flexible with the order of exercises, and make sure we practiced their performance piece before the end. From the group at the beginning, some students ended up having other commitments or pursuing other interests, and others saw what we were working on and wanted to get involved. The dancers came up with a name for their troupe, the “Fabulous Flames,” and they were. When we had class, although the core group was the performers, we always opened up the floor to anyone. Dance is an inclusive art form, useful for building teamwork and bringing people together. One of the students’ favorite parts of class is free dance at the end, coming up with their own movements to music. Students of all ages always asked me if they could join in.

Teaching is a learning process on both ends. As Florida State Dance Professor Sheila Humphreys puts it, “when you start to teach you have to break down everything that you have learnt so that you can teach it to the students.” At times young people are unfocused when it comes to dance, or don’t see the point to moving in a controlled way when they could be outside throwing balls. Working toward a performance gave them a concrete goal and marker. Enjoying all movement, presenting oneself in class, in performance, and in life, are all skills the student practices each lesson. Rather than
simplifying movements to the most basic and rudimentary, I made them interesting enough that dancers would be challenged, with the idea that they would have something to work toward. For beginners, which most were, Artistic Director of Pas de Vie Ballet Natalia Botha says the most important thing is that they “enjoy what they’re doing” and know “that every part of what they’re doing is important and they can enjoy it, definitely.” Enjoying dance, such a simple and fun activity, helps students enjoy their bodies and their capacity for movement for all their lives.

The music for the Fabulous Flames performance was the song “She Moves in Her Own Way” by The Kooks. Age-appropriate, bouncy, and with fitting lyrics, the song did not distract but added to the performance. When putting together their steps, I tried to give them variety, and make interesting patterns on stage. Although they had some difficulty grasping the various forms and groupings, they got a chance to try many new steps. I followed what Botha recommends when choreographing their piece, that is, bringing out the individuality. “You can bring out something in everybody,” says Botha. “They can show something that they have, to make it entertaining for them to do and also for the audience to watch. You just find everybody’s strong points and if they’re enjoying what they’re doing then the audience enjoys it.” The dancers performed three times, but even after the first time I already saw the signs of their appreciation. One parent told me her daughter’s dream is musical theater, but it is only with me that she has begun to acquire the dance skills. Keep teaching, she urged me, and my daughter will stay with you as long as you do.

To give their performance a legitimate feel, because it was very much a real event to me, I made programs and painted a backdrop with flames, foliage, and two figures. The school where I was serving was so taken with the backdrop they asked if they could keep it to use again and again. In keeping with the evolutionary nature of dance, after the first two performances we reevaluated, and decided against using the hats as we had planned. To make the show the best it could be, we used the first two performances as trials, with the last being best of all, as it should be. Once you have danced for an audience, future tasks like giving an oral presentation seem not at all
daunting. Lynda Davis, Director of *Dance Repertory Theater* and Florida State dance professor, understands the value of working with young dancers in that they have been less hindered by society. Most important when working with young people is “that they never lose the joy and the love for motion,” says Davis. It’s important “not to box them in too early, but to give them the opportunity to really breathe the movement and understand the dynamics of the movement phrase. And at the same time, give them those skills about rhythm, time, and using space and dynamics, body mechanics, the instrument becoming strong and flexible and agile.” From seeing how they enjoyed freestyle dancing and the creative steps they came up with, I knew these girls enjoyed movement, and emphasized they keep that at all costs.

Of course, in any work with young people, some time is spent conflict-solving. Sometimes one dancer can get her feelings hurt, or two people want the same prop. At times I took dancers aside to say a few encouraging words, and made sure things were fair by establishing rotations of desirable items or duties. I tried to instill in them a sense of camaraderie, and for the most part, they were all good friends and formed a caring bunch. One thing dancers learn in class is that everything counts. As Humphreys says, “every single piece, from beginning to end” is important. “For me there’s not one particular piece that’s more important than another. It’s like when somebody says to me, ‘What should I work on?’ Well, you work on everything. Like if someone comes up to me and says, ‘What can I work on to improve?’ Then what you hear me say is everything. Now I may be alone in that, but I always say everything.” More likely than not, though, Humphreys is not alone. Working on everything is a lesson that extends to any facet of life. Success never comes in short cuts. True diligence, paying attention to details, is something I help instill in dance students, with hopes that they carry over some of these positive messages to anything they do.

No one said putting together a dance is easy, but no one said hard work isn’t fun. My ultimate goal for the students is that they enjoy themselves, and reduce any performance anxieties or stage frights they might have. People often comment on how they can tell a dancer when they see one. It may be the posture, the grace, the gesture,
or the quality of movement. Somehow, though, dancers are special. So are the girls I worked with, very much. One of the great things about volunteering is you can take skills you have or something you enjoy and share that. I love dance and would dance anyway, but it means so much more to share this with young people. In the future this is something I would like to continue, and I have future visions of establishing my own non-profit dance group. With all of the arts struggling for their survival, some work is necessary to keep dance alive, and I see my service as helping to contribute to an art I care about with all my heart. To keep the art of dance strong, it is necessary “that it be acknowledged as the language that it is and that it should have the opportunity to be practiced and to grow and be shared,” says Davis. “There’s nothing that replaces actually having a really motivating movement experience to keep one interested in having that as a possibility in their life.” And so too, I hope to have shared with the dancers and the school community at large, that dance is not a closed art form, but perhaps the most open. If you only practice dance in your bedroom, with a few toe-taps, or in a party corner, it still counts. Dance connects people, and I am so thankful it connected me to the wonderful young people at the School of Arts and Sciences.

Works Cited


Humphreys, Sheila. Interview. Karlanna Lewis. 23 March 2011.