

Classroom Management Challenges in the Dance Class

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The dynamic atmosphere of dance, and even the particular style of dance, influences how a dance class or unit should be conducted.

Teaching dance can be challenging because of the unique “classroom” management situations that often arise from the dynamic nature of the content. Management is a delicate navigation of advance planning (Franklin, 2006); rule setting; the establishment and implementation of daily protocols, routines, and interventions; and the teacher’s own presentation (Baker, Lang, & Lawson 2002; Freiberg, 2002). In a study by Marzano and Marzano (2003), of all “variables affecting student achievement...classroom management had the largest effect...” (p. 2).

Different forms and styles of dance may require different management strategies. For example, in recreational forms of dance such as folk and social dance, students often need to demonstrate appropriate interpersonal behaviors such as a willingness to work with all classmates as partners. In forms of dance such as modern, jazz, and ballet technique, students need to learn stylized and codified movement skills as well as demonstrate appropriate audience behaviors. Creative dance content presents additional management challenges because of its emphasis on greater student freedom and problem solving. This article will examine a variety of classroom management strategies relevant to the dance class during the various instructional phases, including planning the lesson, preparing the environment for maximum management efficiency (the lesson “preset”), greeting the class as it enters the dance space, introducing the material (this includes the focus, review, and the statement of objectives), presenting the learning experiences, closure of class, tips for transitions between tasks or activities, and finally, strategies to handle unexpected events. Throughout, the word “teacher” will be used rather than “dance educator” or “physical educator.”

Planning the Lesson

According to Perron and Downey (1997), it is important to be “preactive” rather than reactive in establishing effective management strategies in the dance class. Ideally, adopting a preactive attitude means planning the dance class well before the school year commences. According to Freiberg (2002), becoming familiar with the school, the community, and the students is a necessary first step in planning. Successful classroom management then continues with the conception of a unit or lesson idea. Content (that is, what is taught) is a fundamental “domain” of management (Froyen & Iverson, 1999). When planning, the teacher needs to consider issues such as how familiar students are with the content; how the community, administration, parents, and the students feel about dance as a subject; and what facilities and resources are available for the lesson. For example, facilities for dance vary from a specific studio space, to multi-use auditoriums, to trailers. The nature and size of the space will affect lesson planning



Take care to clear the dance space for freedom of movement.

and management.

The teacher learns quickly that every class is different in terms of demographics, learning styles, kinds of intelligence (Gardner, 1985), developmental ages and stages, prior experiences, and student expectations. Each of these factors influence planning and, ultimately, successful classroom management. Some specific strategies include the following:

- Be clear about the class content. The teacher needs to make certain that the educational objectives and learning experiences are congruent to the content.
- Work backward from a unit of instruction to determine the best way to structure and pace each individual lesson (Freiburg, 2002).
- Rehearse the lesson content before teaching it if it is unfamiliar.
- Take time to reflect on the transitions between tasks. Planning the events' organization and transitions so there will be minimal down time will produce efficient management in the dance class.

Presetting the Lesson

Presetting the environment for maximum efficiency helps to create effective classroom management. In order to move students into the lesson quickly and efficiently, it is important to preset lesson materials and equipment in advance while paying attention to classroom constraints (Baker et al., 2002). Preparing the dance environment for optimal management involves a few basic considerations.

- For many children, the wide open dance space is an inviting place to burst into running, sliding on the floor, and careening about. While the teacher strives to create a nurturing and responsive environment for childrens' energies, it is critical to ensure safety. Delineating very large dance

spaces (such as in a multipurpose room) with some markers or physical boundaries serves to create a smaller and more secure dance space.

- Dancers of all ages are easily distracted by extra props, and equipment. Therefore, clearing the dance space of extraneous materials that impedes safe work adds to a sense of physical security.
- A comfy area for taking off shoes may also be used for the pre-lesson review of rules and procedures as well as the lesson introduction, focus, review, and so forth.
- Preparing large posters of class rules, daily protocols, and procedures in easy-to-understand language and posting them at students' eye-level sends a clear message to students about expectations. Creating posters outlining levels of consequences is also helpful as a management strategy.
- Establishing intervention strategies, discussing them with students, and explaining them at the beginning of each lesson prepares students for work (see also the following section, "Transitions"). Young children may respond well to a poster of a traffic signal explaining that red indicates this activity is a listening-while-moving activity, whereas green means "collaborative talking" is permitted.

- Posting the lesson progression on the board may give students the sense of lesson structure. For example, in a technique class, the lesson progression may be as follows: "Warm-up, learn today's content, practice sequences, perform."

- When preparing the equipment or materials, teachers should remember that there will be more time on task and fewer disciplinary interruptions if every student has immediate access to the materials (such as an instrument or prop to manipulate) and does not have to share one prop or item of equipment with several other students. The teacher benefits from planning how the equipment will be distributed, and students benefit if this procedure is consistent from class to class (Baker et al., 2002).

- Presetting the learning environment by placing the lesson materials in several piles or sites throughout the dance space eliminates wasted time. Rather than waiting for equipment, students have more immediate access to it. This speeds up the lesson pace, thus diminishing the potential for management problems.

Greeting the Class

As students enter the dance space, they need to be acknowledged in a positive and inviting way. The success of the class often depends on that "first impression" with students. The teacher needs to observe students as they come in to try to get a sense of how their day is going. As much as possible, greet each student by name and through eye contact. A pleasant facial expression sends an inviting message even if this is the eighth class in a row and it is the last period on a Friday before holiday break and a hurricane is brewing outside. It is critical to remember that *these* students deserve the best. The teacher needs to remember that dance class is the highlight of that day for many students.

- Meeting and greeting verbally and with eye contact is a

way of acknowledging each student as important and helping to establish (or maintain) a sense of personal connection with the teacher.

- Maintaining a pleasant expression and body language is also vital. An inviting, lively countenance will inspire students. The teacher needs to be alert and exhibit a sense of happy “with-it-ness.” Comments need to be positive. It is an unfortunate reality that elementary students are often delivered to the teacher accompanied by a complete narrative and play-by-play of his or her antics. Rather than being influenced by potentially negative comments, the teacher must remember that he or she lights up the students’ existence. Students deserve to feel wanted in class.

- Entrance procedures need to be established before the first day of class and practiced with consistency. Students need to learn the appropriate way to enter the dance area, how to get ready to dance, and the importance of paying attention to the introduction. For the younger dancer, these specific routines need to be learned and practiced like any other skill. Established and practiced routines contribute to overall management effectiveness and help students develop self-discipline.

- Explaining the class procedure for the start of instruction sets the stage for efficient classroom management. For example, the teacher might say, “After you have taken your seat in the circle, we will get started.”

The Introduction: Focus, Review, and Statement of Objectives

The introduction is just as critical to a lesson as the greeting phase. It is here that class procedures related to the dance lesson may be taught or reinforced for management purposes. The *lesson focus* states what the students will learn that day. The *review* addresses what the students learned in the previous lesson. The *objectives* (psychomotor, cognitive, and affective domain objectives) clarify what the students are expected to do and learn, and how they are expected to behave. The teacher may opt to do a movement warm-up with the students. To enhance lesson pacing, clarify the content, and eliminate wasted time, the teacher may introduce the lesson content (that is, specific concepts of the day’s lesson) during the warm-up. This means the teacher may use the warm-up for the focus, the review, and the statement of lesson objectives. This management strategy is useful for helping students focus on the content while maximizing learning time. When students are engaged in the content, they are less likely to become disruptive.

During the class introduction, it is crucial for the teacher to take care of business (“housekeeping”) as quickly as possible. This would include the following strategies:

- Keep announcements as brief as possible.
- Take attendance *while* students are at work rather than wasting their precious instructional time at the beginning of class. An alternative would be to take attendance while students are taking off their shoes in the “comfy zone.”
- As stated previously, having all lesson materials preset is



Bring students in close when explaining new material.

important for management. For example, the music is cued and ready and the instruments or props are in place. The class rules and the lesson sequence have been clearly stated and posted for easy reference. Visually oriented students find this structure helpful, and they will have a clear agenda for the day’s lesson.

- Very social classes may need one or two minutes for socializing. Social time may also be used as a reward for successfully completing a specific number of minutes on task. Using an egg timer can indicate the time frame for activity. For example, the teacher may state, “Today we are working on X lesson idea, and if you work appropriately for X minutes, you may chat quietly afterward for one minute with your friend. Then we will get back to work.” Stating this policy during the introduction will give students a sense of structure.

Instruction

Once the lesson is underway, the dynamics of the dance lesson present constant management challenges. With (one hopes) all students moving at once, the teacher needs to be observing, identifying, and preventing potential problems.

- When introducing the content, the teacher needs to explain the activity or task, followed by the organizational formation. This prevents “wobble words” or phrases that encourage students to stop paying attention. For example, saying “find a partner. Now we are going to work on X,” leads students to engage in active partner-seeking without hearing the content. Saying instead, “Today we are working



Management challenges may be alleviated by altering proximity to students.

on X. Find a partner and begin,” ensures closer attention to the task.

- Giving students a signal to stop before they get to work, or establishing the signal to reconvene before allowing the students to disperse to do group-oriented tasks, sets up a clear structure for transitions into and out of dance experiences. For example, the teacher may say, “When I tap my drum and say ‘pause,’ you will stop traveling. Okay, now off you go.” Another example may be to say, “When the timer chimes, gather here by me.” For effective classroom management the teacher also needs to have a preset signal for the unexpected classroom event (as further explained below in “Dealing with Unexpected Events”).

- Simple, clear, and consistent signals need to be taught and rehearsed, especially for younger students.

- Students are eager to get dancing! Lengthy explanations or demonstrations waste active dancing time, and students become restless and unfocused. The teacher can increase learning time and decrease management challenges by remaining concise. Beginning teachers tend to want to explain every contingency along with suggestions. The result? Students become bored as they wait to dance. For maximum learning time and maximum management success, it is beneficial for the teacher to avoid long-winded explanations or demonstrations.

Observation is the key proactive strategy for a successful class. It is only by carefully observing students that the teacher knows what is going on in class (Clark, 2003). The following observation strategies will improve class management:

- The teacher needs to keep moving about and throughout the class. Staying in motion while observing sends the message to students that the teacher is really paying attention to everyone, not just those in the front line.

- There are several management strategies relating to teacher placement. These include altering proximity to off-task students, going near the offender, shadowing the

offender, and standing between the offenders.

- Changing the front of the class frequently will eliminate the back-row “hidiers.”

- An environment of emotional safety is enhanced when the educator gives positive feedback in public, but gives corrections or admonishments in private. If students feel emotionally safe in the dance class, free from ridicule of peers, they are more likely to behave appropriately.

- If students do not want to hold hands, the teacher does not need to force the issue. For example, when teaching folk dance, a seemingly simple request to “make a circle and hold hands” may create unnecessary management challenges because, for whatever reason, the students do not wish to hold hands. The teacher may choose to use scarves or bandanas to hold instead. For management purposes, it is important to remember that any introduction of props needs some experimental play time. The wise teacher will not scold or chastise students as they momentarily create a fantastic costume piece (such as with their bandana).

- While the organizational strategy of sending students across the floor in lines when practicing or demonstrating locomotor patterns may make observation easier for the teacher, beginning or inexperienced students find this organizational pattern very intimidating because they feel exposed and put on the spot. Inexperienced students (regardless of age) tend to “herd” for protection and the feeling of safety. Alderman, Beighle, and Pangrazi (2006) note that such exposure may decrease student motivation because “an unsuccessful performance in front of their peers is likely to be an embarrassing experience and may have a detrimental impact on their perceived physical competence” (p. 43). It also slows the pace of the class and enables students to engage in off-task behavior while waiting their turn. The teacher may allow students to move in groups if they maintain a safe self-space.

- The teacher needs to be mindful of keeping instructions, including the extension and refinement of tasks (Rink, 1985) concise and succinct. Given the minimal length of class periods, it is critical to get the students up and dancing for as long as possible. Management challenges will be reduced by giving corrections (refining, feedback) while students are on the move instead of stopping the class every moment to give a tidbit of information, which will interrupt the pace of the lesson and invite off-task behavior.

- Students have an easier time grasping content when the teacher demonstrates correctly, with correct timing and tempo. It is confusing to the students and ineffective if the teacher provides a “ready, get-set” cue in a tempo different from the desired tempo for the performance of the skill. Any confusion caused by the teacher may create management problems.

- The teacher needs to communicate the task clearly. For example, if mirroring students, the teacher can clarify the procedure by saying to them, “I am going to mirror you while I am demonstrating. I will start right and you start left.”

As stated previously, the teacher must know the dance

content inside and out. It is essential to have combinations memorized, to know the music and tempo, and to be sure of the phrasing. The teacher must be able to count the music and cue the steps for the students in the correct rhythm and tempo. Not knowing the combinations and the music leads to a sense of disorganization and ill-preparedness. Students will perceive the teacher as being ineffective, and management problems will ensue.

Transitions

Transitions between tasks or between sections of class are often problematic for the inexperienced teacher. Moving students into the dance space, preparing them for the lesson, and shifting from task to task requires planning, practice, and patience. Developing classroom rules, transition procedures, and policies with student involvement during the first days of school gives students a sense of ownership. Practicing the procedures in a consistent way and having an implementation plan for management procedures smoothes management difficulties.

- Procedures for entering and exiting should be simply stated, posted for visual reference, and consistently practiced. As previously mentioned, the beginning of the school year is the opportune time to learn and rehearse the rules for all types of procedures. As new students appear in the dance class, rules and procedures need to be reiterated.

- Transitions between tasks or sections of class need to be logical. The “stand up–sit down–stand up” way of organizing students is not only a waste of time, but confusing. An example of this is when children are expected to come into the dance space, go to their assigned places, and sit down, and are then instructed to get up and relocate to “the empty space.” The teacher’s mantra should be, “Time wasted is time to become off-task.” This requires having a lesson progression that is also logical, so that learning experiences flow from one to the next.

- The teacher needs to organize and pace the lesson to prevent waiting time. Waiting in line for a turn to do something is an invitation for disaster. For more efficient management in the dance class, the tasks, equipment, and groups can be structured in such a way that students are consistently and continuously engaged in learning experiences.

- Transitions into new content can create management problems. Giving new tasks with children in close proximity to the teacher is beneficial because it helps the students to focus their attention on what the teacher is saying. Alternatively, if students can adequately hear the teacher, new content can be explained with students spread out in the dance space *if* the new task is stated concisely and quickly. The management strategy is the same: less wait time results in not only more learning time but less opportunity to become off-task. Lesson pacing remains swift.

- If partners are working with props, materials, or equipment, have each duet chose a “materials manager” who will be in charge of the pick-up and delivery of equipment. This prevents the wild chaos of equipment distribution. Similarly,



Working collaboratively presents certain management challenges.

different roles in the class can be preassigned by colored stars or tabs. For example, the red star person in the group is the “recorder” who writes the idea, the silver star person handles the equipment, the green star person is the narrator for the group, and so on.

Performance Time

Applying learned dance material in a performance-like environment allows students to practice their skills noncompetitively. Furthermore, periodic application tasks, that is, learning experiences that have a performance-like situation, are useful for assessing students’ understanding of content (Rink, 1985). Such performance tasks present unique management challenges. An important aspect of dance instruction is appreciation, so this is an excellent opportunity to develop appropriate audience behaviors.

- Teachers can designate performing groups quickly by simply standing within the class with outstretched arms indicating half the class as the performing group by saying, “Everybody in front of me stay right where you are, and the rest of you are my first performing group.” This simple management strategy avoids the time-consuming technique of counting off. Counting off is a waste of time, and students are very adept at figuring out their most advantageous placement.

- As with other aspects of class work, the teacher must establish the expected behaviors at the outset by stating the rules for audience behavior in a simple and concise manner, and by posting the rules in a visible place.

Closure

Ending the class effectively is also important for classroom management. The content needs to be summarized, key points reinforced, and a lead-in to the next class delivered. Students need to leave class feeling positive about themselves and about dance.

- As with all other aspects of class, it is useful to post clearly

expressed procedures for finishing class. This may include sitting on the carpet (“the comfy zone”) while putting on shoes, or lining up at the door.

- Using centering or calming activities during closure is very important after a particularly lively class. Taking a moment to reflect on the lesson and to ask questions allows students to go to their next class in a calm state. Especially at the elementary level, the classroom teacher will appreciate these efforts.

Dealing with Unexpected Events

The inexperienced teacher very quickly learns that there is no such thing as a “typical” day. Examples of unexpected events include school-wide emergencies or drills, a student’s illness or injury, visitors, or having the instructional space usurped unexpectedly for other uses. Dealing effectively with these unexpected moments requires certain strategies.

- During an unexpected event, the teacher needs to turn off the music, give the prearranged signal to stop immediately, gather students in close, kneel down to them for eye contact (with elementary students), speak softly, and explain the situation calmly and without scolding.

- The experienced teacher has an emergency back-up activity in the plan book.

- If an unexpected dignitary arrives, the teacher may stop class using the aforementioned strategies, introduce the class to the dignitary, and explain the class content. The dignitary is then invited to watch the students complete their latest task (while referring to a copy of the lesson plan if possible).

Summary

More often than not, management challenges in the dance class are a result of the teacher’s behavior, not the students’. Ineffective or less-than-thorough planning, unclear expectations, confusing rules, and inconsistencies lead to management challenges. These arise when the content is unclear or inappropriate for the students’ age (or stage of development), learning style, or type of intelligence (Gardner, 1983). Successful management begins well in advance of the school year, and it is an aspect of every phase of class, from planning through closure. Both experienced and inexperienced teachers will benefit from reflecting on planning, greetings, introductions, instruction, transitions, performance times, closure, and preparation for unexpected events. The dance environment is energetic and exciting. It is hoped that these strategies will help the teacher successfully manage students in the dynamic content area of dance.

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