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Reflective Writing/Reflective Practice

Promoting Engaged Learning and Student Confidence in the Beginning Ballet Class

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ABSTRACT Reflective writing can be an effective means to learn more about how students approach learning, not just what they understand, but perhaps more important, what fallacies or misunderstandings exist that might be having a negative impact on their learning and self-image. This article addresses the incorporation of reflective writing assignments into a beginning-level ballet technique course at a large public university. Student writing informed the content and trajectory of teaching and learning within and outside of the dance studio, blurring the boundaries between transmissive (formal) and transitional (self-directed) learning pathways. An analysis of student writing portfolios demonstrates that reflective writing promotes engaged and coparticipatory learning, fosters a metacognitive approach to dance training, and spurs a positive shift in students' perceptions of themselves as dancers and learners. The writing assignments included in this article are readily transferable to higher levels of ballet training, as well as other dance forms and instructional settings.

For many dancers, locating one's "voice" necessitates more than the exploration and discovery of individual artistry. It entails being an "engaged" learner: the ability to devise individual learning goals, to strategize their implementation, and to assess progress toward meeting those goals. Further, engaged learners develop metacognitive abilities, become involved in an interactive exchange with participants in the classroom, and are responsible for regulating the pace and direction of their learning (Jones et al. 1995). As a teacher of ballet technique at a large public university, I encounter students transitioning into the college setting from a variety of backgrounds: some have studied at small local dance studios; others are conservatory trained; and many have had little or no exposure to formal dance training. Despite the disparity of their experiences, many students display a similar attitude in their approach to learning dance; they have been acculturated to be silent and obedient participants in the studio. Their attentiveness to corrections and feedback often stems from a desire to please the instructor and win approval. Although I encourage and model an open classroom dialogue, I find that only a portion of the class becomes involved in these exchanges. Inevitably, there is a cohort of students that remain on the periphery. Their silence in class might stem from a host of reasons, including insecurity, shyness, or passivity, but ultimately their lack of engagement in the studio works as an impediment to effective teaching and learning.

Effective teaching calls for a curriculum that extends beyond the content knowledge in the discipline (Shulman 1987). It requires an understanding of how students

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learn, a mechanism for discerning what they are mastering and struggling with, and understanding how their abilities and their self-perceptions impact their learning. In an art form where many students strive for perfection and an ideal body and crave positive feedback for a sense of self-worth, it is all too common to hear students speak in a self-denigrating tone—focusing and commenting on what is wrong with their bodies and their dancing. Rarely do they articulate what they do well or discuss how or what they have learned or improved on. As former New York City Ballet dancer Dr. Linda Hamilton (2003) notes, “Given the relationship between low self-esteem and depression, it is safer (and more productive) for teachers to focus on learning goals, where the dancer’s self-worth is not tied to being perfect. . . . Taking a positive approach in dance training can also help dancers manage their own perfectionistic tendencies and set more realistic goals” (52–53).

Learning in the dance studio is complex, in part, because of the traditions in place. Ballet training, in particular, typically occurs in highly formalized, hierarchal settings where the teacher as expert is the authority figure, and the student as novice is often the passive recipient of information. Initiates to the art form understand the rules of studio etiquette, the class structure, and the discipline-specific language at work in the studio. Gaining entry to this world can be daunting. Novice learners, in particular, are often intimidated, all too aware of what they do not know and cannot yet embody. My experiences as a professional dancer and educator prompted me to conceive of a strategy for shifting the teacher–student dynamic in the studio such that students would become more cognizant of, and present in, their learning, and through those processes become more fulfilled, confident, and independent learners. As a result, I became a more informed, responsive, and resourceful teacher.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My project to promote engaged learning and improve student confidence through the use of writing is informed by research in the learning sciences, specifically theories that examine learning and teaching through models of social interaction, and address how social processes can accommodate the development of personal growth, agency, and transferable knowledge. Linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath (2006) describes three discernable pathways to learning—transitional, transformative, and transmissive—that, rather than operate in isolation, “cut back and forth across all kinds of situations in which experts and less experienced and knowledgeable learners come together” (6). Most types of formal instruction, including the direct instruction and skill acquisition occurring in the dance studio, are examples of transmissive learning. Although it might be the most obvious type of learning because it occurs during set hours, with specific tasks in mind, codified bodies of knowledge, the inclusion of expert guidance, and a means of assessment, in reality, it consumes no more than 25 percent of the learner’s day (Heath 2006, 10). Most learning is transitional

in nature. It occurs over the passage of time and is largely dependent on an individual’s physical and mental development. Transitional learning is more self-reflective than transmissive learning, fostered by a knowledge of self (or a curiosity to know more), a sense of agency to self-direct learning, and an environment that allows individuals to determine the pace and goals of their learning. Heath (2006) states that transitional (and transformative) learning needs “the structural and curricular contributions that come from formal study to help build and sustain confidence, conviction and the wisdom of democratic learning” (7). Heath’s discussion of lifelong learning and the intersections of learning pathways prompted me to ask how I could introduce, and make explicit, the essential features of transitional learning within the transmissive learning environment of the dance studio.

Cultivating an interconnectedness and fluidity between transmissive and transitional learning can be facilitated through coparticipation (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999). Coparticipation in learning calls for an open exchange of ideas with students so that they can teach me about themselves as I teach them. When I acknowledge that students are experts in some areas in which I am a novice, for example, in their own learning and in their goal making, it affords students some agency in the pace and direction of their learning. This process rearranges learning; it disrupts the hierarchical structure at work in traditional ballet training as participants move in and out of teacher–learner roles, within and outside of the studio setting. This shift in roles leads to more reflective and responsive teaching (Warburton 2004) because I am more knowledgeable about the characteristics of the students and their needs as learners.

PUTTING THEORIES INTO ACTION

Setting up learning in the studio so that role shifting and sharing can occur begins with transparency and explication—making teaching objectives, conceptual thinking, questioning, and problem solving visible and tangible for students. Employing a metacognitive approach to instruction allows students to see and experience components of effective teaching; for example, fluency in the discipline; an analytical and objective eye; the ability to demonstrate and give feedback verbally, visually, and tactilely; and the benefits of reflective practice—the capacity to reflect on teaching practices in the moment and after the fact so as to determine what works best for students (Schön 1983, 1987; Loughran 1996; Mainwaring and Krasnow 2010). Students become more involved in their learning when the teacher hat gets passed around, for example: students are invited to offer feedback and corrections to one another, to remember and demonstrate a combination from a previous class, or to create imagistic language to help explain an anatomical concept or describe the movement qualities of a newly learned step. The transition to self-reflective and self-directed learning is fostered (and in some cases accelerated) when the roles of teacher and learner get tossed back and forth.

There is a strong body of evidence from research in the learning sciences demonstrating the value of being reflective about learning (Bransford et al. 2006, 69). Reflection helps students to weave experience and knowledge together to “produce new learning, to apply theory to practice, encourage critical reflection, gain insight into personal development and manage their emotions through the learning process” (Kathpalia and Heah 2008, 301–302). Further, reflection assists in their cognitive development through a variety of pathways: practice in metacognition, practice in self-assessment and problem solving, and through critical thinking (Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn 2000, cited in Kathpalia and Heah 2008, 307). Metacognitive activities are most effective when taught in situ, in this case, within the discipline of dance and in the context of studio training. Practicing these types of activities in context can improve the competency level of a recurrent set of tasks—for example, taking ballet *barre*—but they can also help “develop characteristics of adaptive expertise that include the habits of mind of reflecting on situations and actions with the goal of trying out new ideas, moving away from existing comfort zones and actively seeking feedback in order to test new ideas” (Bransford et al. 2006, 70–71).

HOW CAN REFLECTIVE WRITING HELP?

Reflective writing practices have been readily integrated into dance technique, composition, and history and criticism courses in higher education settings (see, for example, Oliver 2010). Common uses involve helping students to delve into creative processes, develop analytical and critical tools, and explore phenomenological aspects of their training. From a teaching perspective, reflective writing operates as an effective means to learn more about how students approach learning—not just what they understand, but perhaps more importantly, what they are confused about, and what fallacies or misunderstandings exist that could be having a negative impact on their learning and their self-image. Reflective writing can be used to chart student progress over time, helping connect a student’s cognitive processes to what occurs during studio practice, thus creating a more comprehensive picture of the student’s learning and growth.

Importantly, writing affords time for reflection outside the hurried pace of the dance studio where the codified idiom (in the case of ballet), class structure, and kinesthetic nature of the art do not accommodate the time for extended discussion and strategizing. Reflective writing assignments afford students the opportunity to return to, and reflect on, the numerous and ephemeral teaching moments that occur during class, allowing them to determine the focus, direction, and value of their learning (Fink 2004, 97, cited in Kathpalia and Heah 2008, 302). Although I create and assign the writing prompts, I drop out of the equation for a while. As writers, the students speak with authority. As the reader, I step into the shoes of the learner; I use their written statements to assess my teaching objectives and practices with the aim of augmenting my effectiveness.

At times I become a writer in the class. I use the whiteboard to jot down ballet terminology as I teach it, and to connect terminology to physical intent and the biomechanics of movement. For example, I demonstrate a *chassé en avant*, write the term on the board, and draw a diagram beneath the term indicating the pelvic shift and undercurve intrinsic to the step. When I act as a writer in class, I see the results in student writing. Students use the discipline-specific terminology in their papers with more confidence and frequency. A number of students commented that the informal writing in class helped them memorize and make kinesthetic sense of the vocabulary; it provided another means of knowledge acquisition in addition to the verbal instruction and demonstration I offered.

BACKGROUND TO COURSE AND PARTICIPANTS

Twenty-nine participants enrolled in an advanced beginning ballet course, meeting twice weekly for ten weeks. With the exception of one student, all course participants were nonmajors, primarily from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. A few students were considering completion of a dance minor. The course presumed a minimum of one year of prior ballet training. All class participants met this requirement, but many students had trained more extensively in ballet at an earlier stage in their lives, had left off training for a number of years, and were eager to regain previous knowledge by enrolling in this course.

WRITING PORTFOLIOS AND DATA COLLECTION

Students were asked to complete four reflective writing assignments during the ten-week quarter: (a) an initial goals statement assigned during the first week of the quarter, (b) an assignment about anatomy and alignment in ballet technique, (c) a midterm goals statement in which they assessed their goal progress and revised and refined their initial goals, and (d) a final reflective essay at the end of the quarter. All written assignments were completed outside of class. Students included their first assignment (with my comments) when they handed in their midterm assignment. Commentary was also made on the midterm assignment and handed back to students prior to completion of their final reflective statement. The complete written portfolio was handed in at the end of the term.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

This section provides a brief narrative of how reflective writing was implemented and utilized within the course, including how writing helped to shape teaching and learning within and outside the dance studio. Each of the four assigned writing prompts is included here in italics, along with excerpts from 11 separate student portfolios (related in block quote format).

First Goals Statement

In a one- to two-page paper, please tell me something about your dance background and the reasons you are taking this course. Please identify your strengths as well as your personal challenges. In particular, I would like to know what you hope to accomplish in this class—your personal goals. Lastly, I would like you to lay out a strategy for achieving your personal goals. I will ask you to write two follow-up assignments to this one; one at midterm and one near the end of the quarter.

Putting Student Reflection Statements to Use as a Teaching Resource

After reading the first goals statements, I catalogued the main goals outlined by students as well as their concerns, questions, and previous experience in dance. I referred to this information throughout the term; it helped shape my lesson plans, guide teaching concepts, and determine which class material necessitated further explanation and practice.

Learning about students' backgrounds, goals, strengths and challenges helps me get a fuller picture of who is present with me in the studio and their reasons for being there. I can utilize this information to match students who have articulated similar goals and challenges, and ask them to observe and critique one another during class. Or, I can call on their particular areas of knowledge to assist me in class (e.g., the French major struggling to recall her ballet terminology translates a ballet term for the class, the physics student explains the use of torque in the preparation for *pirouette*). These types of class interactions shift the locus of expertise in the studio. Passing responsibility to the students makes their knowledge visible and acknowledges that they are part of an active learning community.

Not surprisingly, goals outlined in the initial assignment were quite general; for example, to increase flexibility and strength, to improve knowledge of ballet terminology, to gain overall body control and awareness, and to improve musicality. The opportunity to return to the goals for revision was an important step toward engaging students more actively in their learning. Writing about their prior experiences with dance also helped students to acknowledge their personal progress in the course.

Shortly after the first goals statement was completed, students were required to read Chapters 4 and 5 from Grieg's (1994) *Inside Ballet Technique: Separating Anatomical Fact From Fiction in Ballet Class* and to respond to the following questions:

1. Explain in your own words how the placement of the pelvis affects all other body parts.
2. How does working in a neutral position of the pelvis facilitate maximum rotation at the hip joint?
3. How does the placement of the pelvis affect how your diaphragm functions (e.g., your ability to breathe)?
4. What questions or quandaries do you have with this material and how it relates to your ballet technique?

The anatomical principles outlined in the reading (neutral pelvis, maintenance of spinal curves, rotation of the femur at the hip joint) were discussed in class and reinforced by working with a skeleton in the studio, through physical demonstration, observation, and hands-on work. Although the focus of this writing assignment was on comprehension more than reflection, a number of students discussed this aspect of the course as crucial to their progress. They understood the basics of pelvic alignment and external rotation enough to venture into self-correction, to be more attentive to corrections given to others in class, and to consider how to apply that feedback to their own bodies. For example:

All the corrections you give others about their alignment has definitely made me more aware of what's going on in my body. . . . The article that we read about alignment had a big impact on me. At first I thought the information was interesting but I was not sure how it applied to me. As the class progressed and we discussed how pelvic alignment affected other areas of the body I began to have an understanding of how to correct my body It was not until now that I realized that my hyperextension is causing other issues in my body.

I not only learned about the anatomy of the pelvis, but it gave me an extra incentive to try to correct my alignment . . . to avoid back problems! It helped me focus in more on these goals and reassess my positioning while dancing.

It helped me with my own goals, because it helped me visually see how helpful it is when your body is performing the right way. It brought many important things to my attention about dancing and put it into a different perspective. This new perspective has opened a new outlook on my dancing and how to use this knowledge for my benefit.

Although anatomy for dance is a required course for dance majors in our department, rarely do nonmajors enroll in it. The anatomy reading and corresponding written work was a means to provide students with an essential working knowledge of pelvic alignment, spinal curves, and external rotation that could be applied to their technical practice. This new knowledge had a significant impact on the majority of students and in many cases led to a modification of their initial goals and strategies.

Second Goals Statement

Paper should be two to three pages. Please include your first goals statement when you hand in this paper.

For this assignment, I ask that you review your first goals statement, specifically the sections in which you discuss your strengths and challenges, and your strategies for achieving your personal goals for the quarter.

1. Please assess your personal progress in achieving the goals that you have explicated.
2. What modifications (if any) would you like to make in your goals statement at this time? Would you narrow your goals,

change them completely, or expand upon them? Please explain your reasons for modifying your goals or keeping them intact.

3. *Did the two chapter readings on anatomy affect your approach to working in class or your goals for the remainder of the quarter? Please explain your answer.*
4. *Some of you chose to use the word “weaknesses” in your first goals statement, rather than the word “challenges.” If you fall into this group, I would like you to reflect on your word choice. Are there any connections between using the word weakness and your sense of self, or your approach to learning and working in class?*

Student Progress Assessment

Although students expressed eagerness to improve and expand on their technical skills, they did not adopt a hypercritical attitude in their reflective writing. Instead, they wrote in an authentic and objective manner when assessing their progress.

You actually get to write what you feel and it helps you to get to know yourself as a person. While writing these papers I try to write as much of the truth as I know. I try to realize what I'm bad at and what I need help on. When reflecting on my goals statements it's easy to want to write that I've improved so much, but I honestly had to think about it and in most ways I've improved from where I was but in some ways I'm at the same place I was at. Self-analysis is very important as a new ballet dancer. I found that during class I would often picture myself as if I was looking from someone else's view and it would help me to really stand up straight and eventually learn to contract my abdominal muscles while standing up straight.

Within arts practice, an individual's stance toward a situation is reflected in his or her degree of involvement, cooperation, or observation (Heath 2004). In the preceding excerpt, the student, in stepping outside of herself, assumed the stance of the teacher. She acknowledges the important role that self-analysis plays in her learning and demonstrates how she put it to work through self-correction. Her reflection indicates that she is starting to develop a metacognitive and self-directed approach to learning. Further, she is able to see learning as an ongoing and dynamic process, recognizing that she is moving or not moving at different rates depending on the specified goal. She writes with an acceptance of her progress, rather than a tone of frustration or a denigration of her work.

Student Goal Modification

The development of a metacognitive approach to dance training is well documented in students' second goals statements:

One improvement could be in how I think about “improving technique.” I would like to revise my goals to be more specific and perhaps more effective. To work on “improving dance

technique” is just about as general as you can get, and that's probably not how it really works. All around improvement can only be attained through smaller specific corrections, such as . . . keeping the weight forward during preparation for a *pirouette*.

Students were methodical and strategic in their goal revision. As they refined and revised goals and strategies for implementing them, their writing reveals a transition from passive recipient of information to active participant in learning, as in the following excerpt in which a student lays out a plan for improving her *pirouettes*:

Each day, I am slowly working my way up to being able to do one completely. Before I was just practicing to get the preparation, but now my goal is to have my *retiré* position *en avant* instead of *en derrière*. The more I practice in and outside of class, I can challenge myself and add a new element until I can fully do a *pirouette*. Once I get my bent leg to the right spot on the side of my knee, I can challenge myself into doing the same thing, except on *relevé*. After I can do it on *relevé*, I can try and add the spin to it, along with having the right position of my arms in first position, at the right level of my last rib. There can be so many things I can improve on until I can do an actual *pirouette*, I know it will take time, but hopefully, I will get it sometime.

It was at this stage, and while reading the final reflective essays at the end of the term, that I observed how transitional learning can impact the efficacy of a transmissive learning environment. Given that this was a lower level course made up of nonmajors, I was surprised to learn the extent to which students were thinking about course content outside of class, and further, putting their new knowledge to work outside the studio.

I have been concentrating on my alignment not only in class, but as I walk in between classes and while sitting. This has made balancing much easier, but I have also developed a better posture.

I spent a while in front of the bathroom mirror watching the curves of my spine as I tipped my pelvis forward, backward, and then moved my pelvis to a neutral position. I did several *pliés* watching in the mirror to see if I could *plié* without spilling any of the water contained in my imaginary pelvic bowl. Focusing on my pelvic alignment has helped me engage my abdominals more, and even outside of ballet class I will often think about my posture and I find myself walking taller and sitting straighter [at] my desk.

The majority of students decided to refine and expand on their goals because they had developed a clearer idea of their alignment and technical ability and what merited further attention. Students' reflections indicate that they see learning to dance as an evolving process, and that, sometimes, the mind and body work at different paces. I noted a sense of patience and acceptance (not complacency) that I do not typically encounter at this level of technical experience.

I have tested my pelvic placement by releasing my hands from the *bar/re* occasionally to assure that I am not leaning or pulling on the *bar/re*. Sometimes I fail and sometimes I pass, but at least now I have become more aware.

The smaller and simpler center combinations allow me to focus on one step at a time. Only after I've mastered these will I be able to do more advanced ones. . . . Sadly, *frappés* are still beyond me, coordination wise. But I suppose that will come in time.

In class, I've had to stifle my ego and realize that I have a lot to relearn, and the speed at which I learn is something that will redevelop. I have to meet myself right where I am and build from there. Writing has given me a chance to process all of these feelings, move beyond them, look at myself objectively enough to set reasonable goals and realize when I've achieved them.

Overall, students began to take on the role of teacher in how they discussed their goals and their work in class. They became skilled in functional language use, problem identification, strategy development, problem solving and self-assessment, written from a more objective and analytic perspective.

Final Assignment

Final Paper/Length: 2–3 pages (no longer than 4)

Over the course of this term, I think that many of you have come to realize that 10 weeks (20 classes) is really a very short time period with regard to the development of technique and artistry in dance. Many of you expressed a similar notion in your second goals statement and used that assignment as an opportunity to narrow and/or redefine your goals for the class. There has been a significant focus on learning goals in this course—both yours and those outlined in the syllabus.

Course Objectives:

- *To acquire a basic understanding of correct muscular-skeletal alignment within the framework of classical ballet technique and its aesthetic.*
- *To expand your working knowledge of ballet movement and terminology and to demonstrate comprehension verbally, kines-thetically, and in written form.*
- *To develop an awareness of musicality while dancing.*
- *To use your ballet technique as a tool of individual artistic expression and communication.*
- *To identify your talents and challenges and use this information to set personal goals for technical and artistic development and to assess progress toward meeting these goals.*

For this final assignment, I ask that you reflect once more on your accomplishments this quarter, specifically: (1) previously articulated goals as well as (2) those excerpted from the syllabus.

It might strike some of you as unusual to have writing assignments incorporated into your course requirements for a technique class. Why incorporate writing into a course dedicated to a kines-thetic and artistic practice? I have some of my own theories but at this point I would really like to know what you think of this practice.

Have these writing assignments affected your learning in this class, and/or your approach to learning dance technique? You might consider whether your learning in this class was different from other dance classes or other learning environments with regard to your level of engagement in the learning process, the clarity of your learning goals for the course, and the development of self-knowledge.

I would also like you to comment on your sense of self. Has writing had any effect on how you see yourself as a dancer/student/learner and your abilities in these realms?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

When I began incorporating writing into my technique courses, I started from the premise that through writing, deeper learning could be facilitated and that progress toward achieving individualized learning goals would result in greater self-worth and confidence in students. Learning to dance, however, is a slow and complex affair, in part, because our mental and physical processes do not always work in tandem. I know from personal experience that I often understand a concept well before I am able to embody it. This complicates how teachers and learners assess progress because physical ability is only part of the story; cognitive development is more difficult to gauge in the studio. Although I observed evidence of engaged learning during class, it was the students' responses to how writing affected learning and self-perception that provided me with resounding empirical evidence in support of my initial premise:

Because writing goals calls on reflection, it allows me to really think about what I am doing in class rather than mechanically producing movements. Reflections require me to step outside of myself and observe myself through your eyes, if you will. I believe that it has tremendously helped me to develop and hone my skills.

The tools we used this quarter have given me an opportunity to provide my own critiques, which has changed the way I feel about my own technique. Constructive criticism implies that someone with superior skill teaches someone with inferior skill, but these assignments this quarter have given me the opportunity to critique myself. I actually feel this has been really empowering because it allows me to own my mistakes and successes in class (to an extent—obviously there are a lot of things that contribute to what I have learned in class).

I have taken dance classes both as a young child and as an undergraduate, but I think I got much more out of this class than my previous ballet classes—and in a large part I attribute that to the way these writing assignments influenced my full cognizant participation in the course. Writing about myself as a dancer personalized the class; it allowed me to define what goals I wanted to focus on and it brought a new level of awareness to my dancing. (student excerpt cited in Oliver 2010, 35)

In my written responses I take a more objective approach, but I continue to view myself as an entire person and not just a dancer. When I think about the musicality of my dancing, I not only envision my grad student self dancing, but I also remember the younger, 7-year-old version of myself hopelessly lost in

tap class and not able to stay with the music. Knowledge of my background helps me define goals of personal importance—I yearned to improve my counting and my ability to hear the music. Being able to observe progress in this area was an awesome confidence booster. The writing assignments were an ideal forum to think about myself as a dancer, my challenges and goals, and to observe process and change over the duration of the course.

Analysis of completed writing portfolios demonstrates that the incorporation of reflective writing into technique class helps students to become more cognizant of their learning and to put their newfound knowledge to work for personal benefit. The cognitive and physical processes involved in goal making, assessment, revision, and reflection point to several noticeable outcomes affecting student learning, all of which are interrelated and readily transferable to higher levels of training, other dance forms, and a diversity of instructional settings:

1. The ability to engage in and sustain a metacognitive approach to dance training (especially noteworthy given that beginning dance students are often unaware of the cognitive processes at work in skill acquisition).
2. The development and utilization of the “teacher stance” in the studio and outside of class—an analytic, strategic, and objective approach to problem identification, technical practice, and self-assessment.
3. The demonstration of engaged learning; students showed great interest in the process and progress of their learning, such that they could put new knowledge to work in a reflective and self-directed manner, within the studio and outside of it.
4. The demonstration of greater self-confidence as learners and dancers.

On an intuitive level, I thought that students would appreciate being asked what they wanted to concentrate on in the course and how they might put their ideas into action. In asking them to articulate personal goals and strategies for implementation of those goals, I acknowledged that I wanted to learn from them. Students’ reflective statements became an added teaching resource, which I was able to utilize in a number of ways: to help students work toward their individual goals in a focused and strategic manner, to point out the interconnectedness between their goals and the overarching goals of the course, and to highlight our collective effort in this work.

Within the course, reflective writing became a means to bring attention to coparticipatory learning in two significant ways: (a) through the personalized commentary I provided on their writing assignments, and (b) through verbal comments given during ballet class in which I referred to what I had learned from their reflective statements; for example, “We are going to spend extra time on *cambré derrière* because many of you noted in your writing that you are struggling with the alignment of the ribs and position of

the head and have been practicing at home.” In referencing shared (although individually articulated) concerns in the public space of the studio, the communal and collaborative aspects of learning to dance are emphasized, thereby lessening hypercritical and self-defeating attitudes, and setting the stage for a more extended dialogue than exists in more traditional dance training environments.

Reflective writing served as a highly effective and tangible means to promote a confluence between transmissive and transitional learning pathways. I would not have imagined that these beginning ballet students were practicing dance material and strategizing means of improving their technique and alignment outside of class meetings had it not been for their personal goal statements. Reflective writing spurred me to be a more reflective practitioner. The authenticity and specificity with which many of the students wrote informed the pace and direction of my teaching and made me more responsive to their needs throughout the course. In addition, their writing (especially the second goals statement and final reflective essay) communicated a vital and more comprehensive portrait of their learning trajectories as well as their commitment to mastering class material. This information had a profound effect on my ability to assess each student more holistically and objectively.

When students take responsibility for their learning, they take ownership of their successes along with their struggles and failures. They also come to realize that their abilities as learners are neither fixed nor finite, but rather constitute a holistic attitude toward learning that is transferable to other locales and situations in the future. The skills developed and practiced in reflective writing are requisite, not only to expertise and success in the dance field, but to lifelong learning. The shift from obedient and passive recipient of information to engaged, self-directed learner is a journey of self-discovery and self-confidence:

We are taught in school that things need to be done right, and if not, you wouldn’t succeed. For being college students, when things aren’t done in a way that we find acceptable we feel like instead of a “challenge” that we can overcome, it becomes a personal failure or a weakness in our life. I feel that with dance, these things that I have chosen to improve are only small corrections into getting my dancing ability to its greatest. Even if it doesn’t seem so great to someone else, I know that it is the best for me and I worked hard and thought out each thing I needed to fix. Each challenge makes me more aware of my capabilities and how hard I can work to get what I want out of my dancing and how far I want to take it.

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