

Using the Artistic Process

Some Structures for Exploring Creative Dance

REMEMBER:

A clear structure encourages both freedom *and* self-control.

Dance uses the *BODY* in *SPACE* with *TIME* and *FORCE*; exploration of these elements leads naturally to physical expressiveness.

Ask the questions that will lead your students to explore and discover.

For Classroom Teachers:

Beginnings and endings are important. If the students learn to begin and end in a shape, they will have much greater self-control (and, therefore, freedom) within the activity.

Learn to count off or to have a student count off an introduction. This might be a rhythmic, counted phrase (e.g., “5-6-7-8”) or the same type of rhythmic introduction expressed verbally (e.g., “Make a shape & ready, begin.”)

Challenge the students to be clear and specific and to go to extremes in their movement explorations: “Is that as high as you can reach? Try to touch the ceiling. You’ve got the shape of that rock, but what about the weight? Can you imagine what kind of heavy steps it would take if it could move? Would its arms swing so easily? How do your muscles feel when you really do your work dance with effort?” Etc.

Use contrast. Trying a movement as quickly as possible and then as slowly as possible is both fun and instructive.

Make the space you’ve got work for you:

(1) If there is a way to create an open space in one corner of your classroom, you won’t have to spend time moving tables and chairs every time you want to try a movement idea. You’ll be much more likely to jump up and try something out in movement (even if it wasn’t part of the original plan!).

(2) A large gym can be divided in halves or quarters (use taped lines on the floor, an imaginary wall, traffic cones from the supply closet, or shoes and backpacks to define the space).

(3) Arm dances can be done at tables; path dances can be done around the desks; silent hallway dances can be done moving from one classroom to another.

A FEW IMPROVISATIONS AND COMPOSITIONAL STRUCTURES

Circle Time:

A circle formation lends itself to many movement activities. Making a circle (particularly for younger groups) is facilitated by the instruction, "Touch fingertips." By simply matching fingertips with neighbors, students easily form a circle and need not grab hands and get into "tug-of-war" struggles.

1. Warming up
 Students can take turns leading simple warming up activities around the circle: head side-to-side, shoulder circles, small knee-bends, stretching arms, balancing on one leg. . . whatever they come up with. The teacher should serve as a guide, setting rules ("No touching others; no cartwheels or forward rolls; careful with head movements; etc.") and helping simplify.

2. Name and Movement Pass
 One student says his or her name while looking directly at the person to the right. That person turns his or her head to the next person, saying his or her own name at the same time, and so on around the circle. The names can also be passed to the left or switched back and forth around the circle. The same can be done with movement: students might try to (1) pass the same movement around the circle; (2) pass very different movements around; (3) pass movements that are different but share the same quality; or . . .

3. Dancing Ground
 Each student has a certain time frame in which to move however they like on the circle or moving into the circle and back to place. The rest of the class might (1) keep time -- clapping or otherwise keeping the pulse going while staying on place and watching each dancer; or, (2) try to repeat the same movement back immediately after the dancer has performed their phrase once (call and response).

Away & Back:

Each student has a spot in the room to which he or she will return after moving through the space. A period of time is established (e.g., 8 counts; 16 counts; 10 seconds by a stopwatch; the length of time to read a haiku; etc.) and specific students are chosen to travel away from their spots and back in that time frame. Methods of traveling depend on the idea being explored (e.g., qualities -- sharp, smooth, etc. -- or expression/character; different body parts leading; levels -- low, middle, or high; tempo -- fast, medium, slow/accelerating and decelerating; etc.). Students not traveling

should hold their spots and observe the others to see if they meet the time, space, body, and force requirements. (This can also be done with students traveling to new spots, rather than returning to the same.)

Rhythmic Patterns:

Finding and playing with the pulse and different rhythms.

1. The Underlying Pulse

Students are asked to hear the regular pulse in a piece of music. When they think they have the underlying beat, they clap that beat with their hands. Next they “clap the air,” silently accenting the beat with their hands against the space around them. The students are led through different body parts (“Put it in your back; in your elbows; in your head; etc.”) and are asked to come up to standing, return to sitting on the floor, travel through space (“Away & Back”), etc.

2. Rhythms

After exploring the regular pulse, students can begin to play with and create rhythmic patterns with movement and body percussion. Rhythms are created when the dancers accent or emphasize certain beats, hold a stillness through some beats, essentially “add in” or “leave out” various beats. A call and response activity, in which the class echoes back a leader’s rhythmic pattern set to a count of 4 or 8, can illustrate patterns clearly.

3. Seeing the Rhythms

Students listen to a particular rhythmic pattern (either clapped out by a leader or clearly identified in a piece of recorded music). First they replicate the rhythm by clapping it. Then they translate the rhythm -- using percussive accents, stillnesses, and sustained movements -- into a movement phrase that displays the same rhythmic pattern. The rhythm can then be seen as well as heard.

Mirroring:

Students face each other in partners, either seated or standing. One dancer is designated the “leader” and the other follows or “mirrors.” The students should begin moving very slowly so that the mirrored movement appears to be happening simultaneously. As they become more adept, they can speed up and vary their tempos. Leadership can shift on a signal. Observers should not be able to identify the leader or to notice when leadership changes. Reminders:

Use the whole body, not just arms.

Look at the details: Is the toe turned in or out? Is that leg straight or bent? If you really were looking in a mirror, is that the arm that would be reaching? Etc. You can travel and you can change levels. Careful about turning your back on the mirror, though.

Move & Freeze:

“Freeze” is a very effective tool for gaining control and for challenging students’ abilities to be still and to balance. When you say it, mean it. A signal -- such as a drum -- can also indicate a freeze. Try having students move for different lengths of time and freeze. Can they move freely and still anticipate the stillness; or do they get so caught up in either the moving or the coming Freeze that the other aspect suffers?

Across the Floor:

Students move across the floor in lines of 4-6 across, leaving 1-2 phrases of music between entrances to allow students the most space and to give the observers more focused viewing of individual students. The teacher might have students simply turn around when they get to the other side (reforming the line in reverse order), or she might ask the line order remain the same throughout the activity. (In either case, students should be instructed to stay on the new side until everyone has arrived and the class is ready to return in lines to the first side.) Traveling (or locomotion) might be improvisational (such as “Planetary Excursion,” above) or might be structured in set patterns, including walks, runs, leaps, skips, gallops and using changes of direction and rhythmic patterns.

Qualities (Stretch & Melt):

Students begin in a low-level shape and take 8 slow counts to rise with a stretching quality (asking students to think of things that stretch -- rubber band, gag, elastic, etc. -- and to use those images when they move) to their fullest height. They then take 8 counts to return to low-level with a melting (ice cream, candles, wicked witch, etc.) quality. The same process is followed to the count of 4 (rising) and 4 (lowering); then 2 and 2; and finally 1 and 1 -- repeat 1 and 1. This structure lends itself to many contrasting elements and qualities: sharp with smooth, heavy and light, curved and angular, etc.

These materials are intended to be used in conjunction with ArtsConnection workshops. The activities have been developed by Jessica Nicoll. Reprinting of these materials is prohibited except with written permission of ArtsConnection.

ArtsConnection 120 W. 46th Street, NY, NY 10036 212-302-7433